

The cynical university: Gamified subjectivity in Norwegian academia

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abstract

Norwegian academia is increasingly subject to governance by numbers. A mixture of New Public Management, corporate governance and the power wielded by management-consultant firms underpins this 'triumph of numbers' intended to stimulate competition, productivity and excellence. Disillusionment, individualization, insecurity, anxiety and envy, have, however, become its products. Few believe that metrics are neutral, unbiased or objective. On the contrary, individual and institutional practices of gaming statistics and manipulating ratings and indicators are widespread, together known as micro-fraud. Predatory publishers, predatory journals and fake metrics markets are growing, considered a 'global threat' to science. Gaming in response to quantified control is symptomatic of the neoliberal moral economy of fraud and the criminogenic marketization of academia (Whyte and Wiegatz, 2016). While there may be 'true believers' in governance by numbers, this article focuses on what appears as the more common figure of the academic cynic, arguing that the triumph of numbers and the reproduction of governance by numbers *despite* mounting critique and critical awareness has to be understood through the notions of ideological fantasy, disavowal and pleasure and through a particular mode of subjectivation – namely, *gamified subjectivity*. Reflecting on (auto-)ethnographic observations and interviews with academics and trade unionists in Norwegian academia, this article offers a theoretical contribution to the function of cynical ideology and gamified subjectivity for organizational reproduction and its consequences for the possibility of resistance. Resistance, it is argued, would involve *externalization of disbelief* and *degaming* of the academic, and putting measure back into its proper place. Can politics proper emerge despite organizational cynicism?

An Act of Resistance that Recognizes its Own Impotence

Let me begin with a vignette. On the occasion of a colleague's birthday, a celebration at a university department was organized, with the usual polite offerings of cake, wine, and speeches. In a breach of the usual etiquette, the first speaker, instead of emphasizing the academic merits and personality of the celebrated, used his speech to deliver an incisive critique of the marketization and 'governance by numbers' (Supiot, 2017) of Norwegian universities. Passionately, he dissected the practices of 'quantified control' (Burrows, 2012): publication-based performance indicators (*tellekantsystemet*) and indicator-based funding; top-down authoritarian performance management and bureaucratization; strategies, audits, competitive rankings, KPIs, metrics; the pressures on academics to secure external funding, compete and perceive themselves as 'entrepreneurial' subjects; the valorisation of individuals in terms of how much money they bring; the quantification of success, excellence, and impact; the political governance of research priorities through the Research Council of Norway and EU programmes; the withering away of critical thought and academic freedom. Is marketization and governance by numbers killing the university, he asked? As he spoke, the audience was nodding in agreement with this critical stance, but also displaying signs of discomfort, fiddling with glasses and checking others' expressions. Unease could be felt as he spoke of the erosion of university democracy, the demise of collegial elected leaders and the rise of appointed leaders and professional managers – with the recently appointed head of the department standing next to him. After voicing the dissatisfaction of the many with the state of governance of Norwegian academia, he turned to the joyful occasion of his colleague's birthday. Praising her collegiality and witty academic spirit, he emphasized the enjoyment derived from her 'critical companionship' in their local 'club of the dissatisfied' (*misnøyelse-klubben*) which made working under the conditions of neoliberal governance bearable. In the absence of hope for collective resistance, this was already something.

His critical awareness and intimate knowledge of the mode of governance is a result of many years of helplessness vis-à-vis a system that cultivates self-interest, academic stardom and self-branding, which fosters insecurity, (status) anxiety, envy and other harms of competitive individualism in the cut-throat academic market. It is not the goal of this article to dissect the precise

nature of this governance. Others have already done this already, typically under the banner of critique of New Public Management (NPM) (Blekkie et al., 2011; Tjora, 2019). NPM has been largely understood as the introduction of market mechanisms, private sector management techniques and accountability systems into Norwegian higher education since the late 1980s, through a series of reforms and expansion of multi-level and network governance. These reforms have resulted in hierarchization, competitive individualism, marketization, the primacy of instrumental and economic values, and the ideological hegemony of NPM (Solhaug, 2011). For our purposes, NPM can be best understood as a hybrid mixture of approaches to financial, performance and human resource management, which relies on the logics of econometrics, sociometrics, psychometrics, and bibliometrics, and has been introduced with the help of big transnational management-consulting firms into the Norwegian public sector – in the name of increased productivity, efficiency, innovation, competitiveness, excellence, transparency and so forth. The critique directed at this mode of governance arises in response to the *harmful* effects of this ‘triumph of numbers’, where statistical needs trump human and academic needs, resulting in organizational, societal and civilizational *mismeasure* (Hummel, 2006). This triumph of numbers has created new ‘orders of worth’ (Mau, 2019: 6) that are replacing what remains of the humanistic values of the university, while foreclosing the possibility of politics proper through technocratic and instrumental algorithmic (un)reason. The concept of ‘governance by numbers’ best reflects this shift from ‘government’ relying ‘on subordinating individuals’, to ‘governance’, which, ‘in line with its cybernetic vision, relies on programming them’ (Supiot, 2017: 29). This mode of governance, as opposed to government, is at the core of what Mau calls the ‘metric society’ (Mau, 2019). Governance by numbers is reshaping academia at the systemic and structural levels and transforming academic *subjectivity*. It is the latter – the transformation of subjectivity – that shall be our subject here. While there may be ‘true believers’ in the governance by numbers, those who believe that this is the most rational and the best of all possible systems, this article interrogates only the figure of the cynical academic who has no belief in the system yet reproduces it like a true believer. In other words, how can the governance of numbers triumph, expand its grip and *subject* us, turning us into competitive neoliberal subjects, *despite* our critical *knowledge* of its harmful effects?

There are three crucial takeaways from this ethnographic vignette: (1) the precise *knowledge* of the conditions of one's own subjection, and of the systemic and organizational perversions and harms (Craig, Amernic, and Tourish, 2014; Lloyd, 2019), (2) the impossibility of this knowledge to effect organizational change and break with the *ideology* of the governance by numbers, and (3) the *pleasure* involved in cultivating an internal critical distance and disbelief in the governance by numbers. The playful neologism *misnøyelse* (*misnøye* = dissatisfaction) is modelled upon *fornøyelse*, which means enjoyment, and thus reveals the pleasure that lurks in this cynical position. Understanding the function of *cynical ideology*, desidentification, and pleasure (Žižek, 1989; Fisher, 2009) in organizational reproduction is key if we are to make sense of how a system with which so many are dissatisfied manages to reproduce itself and thrive.

'I know well, but all the same...'

While Norway likes to view itself as relatively shielded from the most brutal neoliberal forms of higher education governance, compared to Great Britain, the United States, Australia or New Zealand, concerns about the consequences of neoliberal governance by numbers increasingly feature in Norwegian public and academic debate (e.g. Tjora, 2019; Rasmussen, 2018; Kjeldstadli, 2010). Globally, many critical works have mourned the death of the public university and its zombification (e.g. Giroux, 2009; Whelan, Walker, and Moore, 2013; Wright and Shore, 2017; Sievers, 2008; Saltman, 2016). These works resonate with many in Norwegian academia; the recent edited volume *Universitetskamp (The Battle for the University)* testifies to this (Tjora, 2019). There is widespread discontent and cynicism vis-à-vis the performance university, while many academics are well aware of the harmful consequences of governance by numbers. In 2019/20, together with several colleagues, I conducted a qualitative study on behalf of a number of trade unions, including The Norwegian Association of Researchers (*Forskerforbundet*). Our study revealed that governance through quantifiable goals, targets and efficiency requirements has been normalized, permeating all levels of the organizations, creating more authoritarian workplaces and negatively affecting the working environment, eroding professional autonomy and discretion, and threatening academic freedom (Kuldova et al., 2020). The qualitative interviews conducted on this occasion pointed to organizational cynicism (Dean,

Brandes, and Dharwadkar, 1998), and a cultivation of individual critical distance towards the ‘spreadsheet university’ (Sørensen, 2010). What struck me was that *despite* the critique, all the academics we interviewed, myself included, were in practice performing as perfect neoliberal academic subjects committed to given performance requirements and delivering on quantified targets. In the following, I offer a theoretical reflection grounded partially in this material, which has been published as a report in Norwegian (Kuldova et al., 2020), and (auto-)ethnographic reflections on the experience of performing in a Norwegian spreadsheet university and being a trade union representative. The re-discovery of the pragmatic and ‘cynical academic’ in our material did not come as a surprise but deserves more serious engagement. What does this cynicism and ideology that consists in desidentification actually *do* (Pfaller, 2005; Žižek, 1989)? Does it serve organizational reproduction, foreclosing the possibility of change, enabling the neoliberal governance by numbers to be the only game in town (Fisher, 2009)?

This cynicism manifested itself in the widespread insistence on the need to be ‘pragmatic’ if one wishes to succeed – to strategically select publication venues, tweak projects to fit funding bodies’ agendas, engage in strategic self-censorship, craft one’s online persona – while ‘strategically ignoring’ (McGoey, 2019) and *disavowing* the knowledge of the harms that this ‘gaming’ of the system produces. As one of our interviewees put it,

People tend to be cynical. If you take it seriously, then you lack critical distance to what you do. (...) I would say very few [take it seriously], maybe people who are particularly successful then consider the system particularly brilliant because it seems to reflect on them. (...) You start streamlining things in order to have a chance, because what is the point of writing an application knowing that you are not fulfilling expectations and making it unlikely that you get the money in the end; that would be a subtle kind of resistance, but it would also be quiet of pointless. (...) I can sell myself in a certain way and what I do is a totally different thing; someone else would have to evaluate how much, nonetheless, of my application-kind-of-thinking filtered into the project in the end without me really thinking or being aware of it.

This is symptomatic of the neoliberal academic split subjectivity – the academic *knows* quite well and does not really (internally) believe in all this, but nonetheless plays the *game* (after all, it would be silly, and against one’s self-interest not to) and thus *objectively believes*. The common talk of the ‘academic

game' further serves this cynical distantiating. Numerous instances of such behavior have been documented across academic literature (Alvesson and Spicer, 2016; Ashcraft, 2017; Butler and Spoelstra, 2014; Kontos and Grigorovich, 2018; Brandist, 2017; Fleming and Spicer, 2003). Brandist has observed that 'cynicism towards such managerialism is evident throughout the system, but this does not directly undermine the effectiveness of the administration in directing researchers into what may be perceived as "safe" projects likely to yield publications in the most prestigious journals' (2017: 586). Ashcraft argued for 'inhabited criticism' as a response to the common predicament of *knowing* better but not how to *do* better, thereby drawing upon affective theory to challenge the reproductive neoliberal rule of excellence despite critique (Ashcraft, 2017). Butler and Spoelstra have shown how professional judgement is being actively modified as academics align their behaviours with managerial demands in order to succeed, while maintaining an internal critical distance towards these demands – as one of their respondents put it, 'although top-ranked journals tend to publish papers "that make you want to curl up and die", she continues to send her work to them because she recognizes that "it's a careerist game"' (2014: 545). Another remarked,

I hate thinking like that, I don't want to think like that, I want to publish where my work belongs. But I know . . . that whatever the REF panel says, my work will have more bang if I try and get it in *Organization Studies* [an ABS four-rated journal] than it will if I publish it in *ephemera* [an ABS one-rated journal]. (Butler and Spoelstra, 2014: 544)

Journal article submission becomes an act of *submission*. In light of this, it is legitimate to ask: why so little resistance and sovereignty, and why so much compliance *despite* critique and dissatisfaction? Why does critique not translate into resistance, but instead appears to *serve* organizational reproduction? Here we have to take Sievers' insight that 'the individual's and the organization's unconscious dynamics are interrelated' (2008: 241) seriously and connect the systemic to the structure of ideology and ideological subjectivation (Lloyd, 2019; Hall and Winlow, 2015).

Submission to the managerial dictates, despite better knowledge, can be explained through the logic of disavowal and cynical ideology (Kuldova, 2019). Cynical ideology refers to the instances where 'enlightened' subjects believe themselves to be outside ideology, by virtue of the aforementioned critical

distance, but are in fact immersed in it in their material practice (Žižek, 1989; Pfaller, 2014). The psychoanalytical structure of ‘I know well, *but all the same...*’ (Mannoni, 2003) reveals that the problem is not a lack of knowledge, but the habit of *acting as if* one did not know – of acting *despite* one’s better knowledge. Ideology, as Althusser argued, operates at the material level, it resides in *practice*, in our actions, in our behaviour, rituals, etc. – whatever we internally think and believe is irrelevant (Althusser, 1971). In this materialist conception of ideology, knowledge does not challenge or rupture ideology. A Žižekian analysis of ideological fantasy is not concerned with ‘consciousness’ or ‘false belief’ (knowledge performs a different function to that of ideology), but with people’s beliefs as manifest in their actions – ‘staged beliefs’. Or as Žižek puts it,

They know very well, how things really are, but still they are doing it as if they did not know. The illusion is therefore double: it consists in overlooking the illusion which is structuring our real, effective relation to reality. And this overlooked, unconscious illusion is what may be called the ideological fantasy (...) Cynical distance is just one way – one of many ways – to blind ourselves to the structuring power of ideological fantasy: even if we do not take things seriously, even if we keep an ironical distance, *we are still doing them*. (1989: 29-30)

In other words, ‘it is precisely our “subversive”, “cynical” distance toward a certain ideology which subjects us to this ideology and allows it to exert its social efficiency’ (Pfaller, 2005: 115). Therefore, our *internal* disbelief changes nothing – to any naïve, cursory observer our actions would appear as those of a true believer. Ideological reproduction can, in other words, take the form of ‘illusions without owners’ (Pfaller, 2014). Resistance, consequently, requires an *externalization of disbelief*. So, what prevents us from externalizing disbelief if not necessarily a lack of awareness and knowledge? We could (rightly) point to the role of structural constraints and *causative potential of absences*, such as the absence of security, protection, or meaning, as analysed by ultra-realist criminologists (Hall and Winlow, 2015; Lloyd, 2019; Raymen and Kuldova, 2021). But what also needs to be explained is their *concrete* relation to subjectivity which is both shaping and shaped by these structures and the dominant Symbolic Order (Lloyd, 2019). Disavowal is furthermore interlinked with pleasure, or *jouissance*. Alvesson and Spicer touch upon this pleasure principle,

An important aspect (...) is the strange seductiveness of rankings, performance measurement and similar systems. What is so striking is that whilst academics are often unhappy, or even downright critical of these techniques, they also embrace and, in some cases, even revel in them. (...) This creates a rather strange double think whereby academics both claim to loathe the control system which they find themselves subjected to and also measure their own self-worth in terms of it. (2016: 38)

Numbers, metrics, indicators, become a fetish – the material trace of the ideological fantasy. While there is pleasure inherent in the structure of disavowal (Pfaller, 2014), which resides in the cynical and enlightened attitude and acts as a first level barrier against the possibilities of resistance, we also have to account for the pleasure that resides in *delegated* enjoyment. This is key to understanding the *gamified* neoliberal academic subjectivity. Awards, rankings, competitive grants, publishing points, and digital platforms such as ResearchGate, which actively employ strategies of gamification to keep you coming back, are turning academia into a *game*, while exploiting the principles of behavioural economics and ‘nudging’ to induce behavioural change (Thaler and Sunstein, 2009). The same strategies of ‘gamification-from-above’ (Woodcock and Johnson, 2017) are also increasingly used by university management to optimize academic performance, often taking the form of internal competition for both financial and symbolic rewards. As Burrows (2012) argued, gamification – the use of game elements in non-game settings to generate behavioural change, emotional engagement, boost performance and so forth – not only mimics the market and market competition but serves their enactment. Marketeers have understood how ideology functions better than academics who insist on notions such as ‘false consciousness.’ Like Althusser, marketers have understood that ideology resides in actions, in behaviour, and that the degree to which one *internally* believes in the ideology is irrelevant. The coveted affective investment in the ideology can be triggered *despite* one’s better knowledge (Kuldova, 2019; Ashcraft, 2017). What is to be done?

Breaking the Chains of ‘Decaf Resistance’?

Let us return to our initial vignette. After the speech, a doctoral student whispered in my ear: ‘This was too cool; he really gave it to *them*. One day, if I ever land a permanent job in academia, I will also have the courage to talk like that’, already anticipating years of self-censorship and submission ahead. But

I replied, ‘he can *afford* to do that, being a couple of years from retirement in a secure position.’ This brief encounter points to the causative nature of *absences* (Lloyd, 2019; Raymen and Kuldova, 2021) – in this case, the absence of security in the highly competitive, individualized and gamified academia and the absence of an alternative – which both prevent the externalization of disbelief (as it comes at a future cost) and mould the researcher’s gamified subjectivity. He cannot *afford* to be critical other than in his interior thoughts. If he is to win in the game, he must, despite his better knowledge, *disavow* this knowledge presented in the speech in order to have a chance of escaping his own precarity (absence of security), thus effectively reproducing the system that keeps others like him in a condition of precarity. Our speaker, on the other hand, could, from his position of security, *refuse* to ‘play along’, compromise, be ‘pragmatic’ and become the entrepreneurial academic; refuse to see his academic work as a game, to tweak his texts, let his production be governed by metrics, self-brand, or see himself through an h-index. Overall, he could refuse to sacrifice his professional discretion at the altar of statistics. This refusal came most likely at a cost of foregone promotion and salary raises – a punishment for not playing along. There is a clear *cost* to insubordination. Yet, his *personal* refusal was accompanied by cynicism vis-à-vis any possibility of *collective* action and organized resistance against governance by numbers. The cynical stance vis-à-vis any possibility of *collective* refusal is symptomatic of a resignation to ‘capitalist realism’ (Fisher, 2009). Cynicism is also directed at trade unions and their representatives, despite the unions’ vocal critique of New Public Management in the Norwegian public debate – much like individual resistance, they are perceived as impotent. Trapped within the logic of ‘government’, the unions are unable to respond to the new modes of real-time ‘governance by numbers,’ and perpetual reform. The principles of co-determination are undermined by the reversal of the function of labour law – through various mechanisms of corporate style governance – into the protection of the employer *from* the collective and individual actions of the employee (Supiot, 2017; Nordrik and Kuldova, 2021). The Norwegian model of workplace democracy is undermined by cynicism and hollowed out from within, which has had profound consequences for the possibility of collective resistance. This also manifests itself in the almost complete absence of any mention of trade unions in the latest critiques of New Public Management by Norwegian academics (Tjora, 2019; Ese, 2019). Resistance proper, as opposed

to ‘decaf resistance’ (Contu, 2008) would involve *collective externalization of disbelief* and *degaming* of the academic, a sovereign political act that defies the logic of technocratic submission to the rule of numbers. While we may lack hope in the possibility of collective action, and we may perceive individual acts as impotent (where one only stands to lose), individual externalization of disbelief and degaming of our academic subjectivity is a possibility we retain. But, to break with ideology and create an alternative in this way, we have to act, foolishly, against our self-interest in the absence of collective material support.

For Steve Hall (2012a) the hope of collective action has been extinguished by neoliberalism’s constant ideological reference to political catastrophism, a parable ever-present throughout the west’s liberal educational and media systems. This is grounded in an objectified fear that any committed and protracted collective action will inevitably result in brutality and totalitarianism. The psycho-cultural result is the constant repression of the ‘passion for the real’ (Badiou, 2007) amongst any established or potential collective. In the grip of neoliberal ideology, this fear percolated down from the specific historical critiques of the French revolution, Stalinism and National Socialism – where of course it is entirely valid – to the broad category of collective action through organisations like trade unions in a social democratic context. In the grip of this mislocated fear, long-term postponement of the return of collective politics as a mass response to neoliberalism’s failures is ensured. While it is true that each creative individual has the capacity to change laws and codes, for Hall (2012b) the individual must find reliable and committed partners in crime. For politics to come alive, it must move beyond the individual’s hopes and dreams to be established by structured symbolic acts, which must be collective. Alas, in neoliberalism, any inaugural political act is materially ill-advised and symbolised as a dangerous and regressive horror. People are now accustomed to finding love and seeking pleasure elsewhere; in cynical acts of revealing oneself to be the cool, motionless ‘one who knew all along’.

Gamified Academic Subjectivity: Lateral Surveillance, Self-Monitoring, and Pleasure

In the title of his article, Chris Lorenz asks ‘If You’re So Smart, Why are You Under Surveillance?’ (2012). But his analysis falls short, concluding that NPM is so hard to challenge because it is *bullshit*, in Frankfurt’s sense of being profoundly unconcerned with truth (2006); cynicism is reduced to a *reaction* to bullshit. Even if surveillance is explicitly mentioned only in the title, Lorenz manages to ask the right question, pointing us to the need to connect the aforementioned structure of disavowal and cynical ideology to the logic of surveillance and control. Seyama and Smith linked performance management to *panopticism*, and rightly so (2016). Jeremy Bentham was equally passionate about the panopticon as he was about audits and accounting (Bowrey and Smark, 2010), while Frederick Taylor about optimization, or else, ‘the development of each man to his maximum state of efficiency’ (Taylor, 1919: 9) achieved through the monitoring of workers. From the outset, the surveillant gaze has been built into the logic of governance by numbers, but the implications of this have often been glossed over. Today, data-driven tools enable (workplace) surveillance and affective and emotional capture (Lordon, 2014) on an incomparable scale and detail level. The digital footprint of our everyday activities as academics has dramatically expanded, extracted for the purposes of profit, control and data-driven governance (Ball, 2010), increasingly posing a threat to academic freedom and privacy as academics become objects of online surveillance by governments and secret services (Tanczer et al., 2020). Taylorism and surveillance have been digitized and gamified (Dewinter, Kocurek, and Nichols, 2014). Academics have been, often against their will, colonized by the logic of the Quantified Self movement – a direct descendent of scientific management and Taylorism and the European Science of Work (O’Neill, 2016). Governance by numbers aligns with the logic of surveillance capitalism and its hunger for data, prediction and monetization of human futures (Zuboff, 2019), and the technosolutionism of the Silicon Valley (Morozov, 2013). Transparency and audit cultures, risk-based, data-driven, and evidence-based governance, which shape the contemporary culture of control (Han, 2015), are enabled by the faith in and the ‘triumph of numbers’ (Hummel, 2006). Alongside this lies a renewed and unwavering *faith* in neopositivism (Spoelstra, Butler, and Delaney, 2020), radical empiricism,

psychometrics, and statistics, an almost religious belief in ‘raw’, ‘objective’, ‘cold’, ‘rational’, ‘neutral’, and ‘hard’ data and their ability to do away with ‘human bias’ and thus perfectly *optimize* society. Despite decades of sustained critique of positivism (St. Pierre, 2012), and the rise of critical algorithm studies (O’Neil, 2016; Benjamin, 2019; Noble, 2018; Kuldova, 2020), which have shown that this data is neither hard, objective nor neutral, neopositivism thrives. This naïve faith in the ‘purity’ of data has found its strongest allies in psy-sciences and behaviourism, ‘governing the soul’ (Rose, 1999) through real-time and predictive modelling of behaviour, performance and emotions in the name of profit. Psychometrics and even anthropometry have been revived, now powered by artificial intelligence and equipped with ‘predictive’ powers, utilized by governments, human resources, police departments, advertising agencies and so on, to increase efficiency, cut costs and eliminate the unproductive, the low performers, the future criminals, and others deemed sub-optimal or not optimizable. While commercial products are sold with the promises of ethical, ‘unbiased’, data-driven and efficient decision-making, studies have shown that the proprietary black box algorithms often discriminate, reproduce and exaggerate injustices and existing biases, and create new algorithmic harms (O’Neil, 2016; Benjamin, 2019; Mau, 2019; Pasquale, 2015). Surveillance capitalism relying on technocratic and algorithmic governance now enables large-scale ‘social sorting’ (Lyon, 2003; Amoore and Piotukh, 2016). The problem is thus not only one of the harmful effects of the governance by numbers in academia, but also one of the *epistemological* underpinnings of this form of technocratic governance. Again, the knowledge about data biases and critiques of positivism have not been able to break with the fetishization of numbers and the false claims to ‘objectivity’. This is because numbers have moved out of the realm of knowledge into the realm of collective ideology – evidence-based and data-driven technocratic politics is not only a contradiction in terms, but an ideology par excellence. But we cannot remain blind to the *enjoyment* which sustains this ideological fantasy.

Seyama and Smith argue that top-down managerial surveillance leads to “‘coercive’ compliance’ and that ‘strangely, academics seem to have succumbed to the “normalization judgment” effected through systemic managerial practices, to the extent that they “willingly” subscribe to this neoliberal rationale for leading and managing HEIs’ (2016: 172). Perceiving this surveillance as

exclusively coercive they assume that ‘one is then *unconsciously* complicit in one’s own oppression’ (*ibid*: 173; emphasis mine), concluding that ‘despite their discontent with PM (...) panopticism’s numbing and threatening effects dissuades academics from offering resistance’ (*ibid*: 174). It is not that simple. Firstly, the academic knows perfectly well, but *disavows* this knowledge; hence the academic is not unconsciously complicit but rather using critical distance to keep her self-image intact and retain pleasure in knowing and remaining virtuous but dutifully not acting collectively and risking some future political catastrophe. Secondly, top-down surveillance is not the only mode of surveillance; academics commonly engage in *lateral surveillance* and peer-to-peer monitoring (Andrejevic, 2005), tracking competitors and colleagues across social and institutional platforms, performing their own risk assessments and background checks (Saltman, 2016). Thirdly, the academic turns the surveillant gaze against herself, self-monitors and keeps comparing her own quantified measures of performance to that of others – despite knowing very well that metrics and rankings, whether the h-index, ResearchGate score or Google Scholar Metrics, are methodologically flawed, unreliable, built on ‘dirty data’ and biased datasets, saying little about *quality* – instead turning the academic into a product. But these analytics and metrics generated by proprietary algorithms for profit trigger simultaneously both anxiety and pleasure. If we have learned anything from the Quantified Self movement, it is that there is pleasure lurking in this exercise of control through numbers, and a peculiar comfort (Lupton, 2016). Gannon, reflecting on her own experiences shows how ‘academic subjects willingly make themselves amenable to measurement (...) deployed via practices that commodify academic labour and promote an individualising and competitive milieu that is simultaneously experienced as repellent and desirable’ (2018: 73). There is pleasure in submission and in playing the game – seeing the h-index increase, seeing numbers of downloads and views increase (and they always increase). There is a pleasure, which I have described elsewhere in more detail (Kuldova, 2018) derived from the mere phenomenon of viewing numerical growth. We could argue that ResearchGate, Academia.edu, or Google Scholar, keep playing on our behalf – while we are working and occasionally feeding and stimulating these platforms with new publications. They keep running, calculating, analysing, monitoring, playing, in the background and *on our behalf*, while we work. The pleasure is thus *interpassive* – both the enjoyment and the belief (in the

numbers, which is disavowed) is delegated to the platform. The platform not only enjoys, but also believes on our behalf. Ideology here has an *interpassive* structure (Pfaller, 2005; 2014), and that interpassivity is maintained by the acceptance of political catastrophe as objectively real, to be avoided by the virtuous promise of political inactivity (Hall, 2012a). Academic social media function like the *interpassive* self-playing game Cookie Clicker, which keeps playing in the background on your computer, while you keep working (Kuldova, 2018). ResearchGate unlocks new levels on its own and enjoys on your behalf while you frantically work – you are notified on email about your new ‘2500 reads badge’. But the game can also be played more actively; numbers can be gamed. ResearchGate even provides tips on how to improve and game your own RG Score – ‘a metric that measures scientific *reputation* based on how all of your research is received by your peers’ and ‘can’t be turned off or hidden’;¹ simply put, spend more time on the platform recommending, following, adding more details – *keep clicking* (generating more data and profit for the platform). What is it a measure of? Certainly not scientific reputation. And yet, management encourages us to invest time into cultivating these profiles, decorate our CVs with scores, mention them in research applications and self-brand. Excellence is increasingly measured in visibility, engagement and impact. While not all metrics are meaningless and should not be rejected outright, the problem arises when anything that can be measured, is measured; when anything that can be compared is compared, when numbers have been fetishized – and when individuals and institutions begin to understand and value themselves through these fetishized metrics, and accordingly improve their relative position. In this context it becomes increasingly impossible to ‘use judgement to put measurement back into its proper place, mindful that the numbers are never the full measure of the man (or woman or child)’ (Hummel, 2006: 76). From Altmetric (fig. 1) to the Indicator Report by the Research Council of Norway – which proudly proclaims that ‘Norway has one of the highest number of articles per capita in the world’, or else 3,7 articles per 1000

¹ <https://explore.researchgate.net/display/support/RG+Score>

inhabitants in 2019² – we are to reduce each other to numbers and compete in the attention economy.

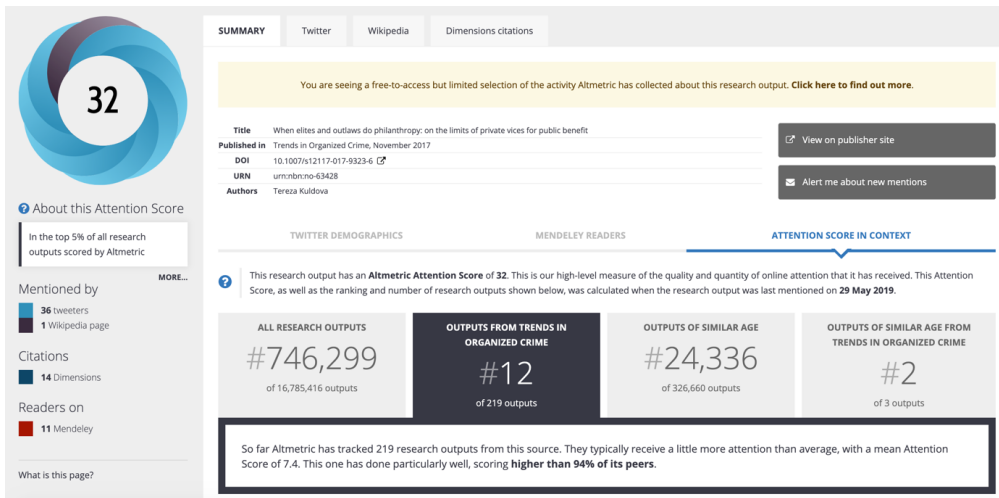


Figure 1 Screenshot of the Altmetric donut for one of my articles, measuring the ‘attention score’. What does it really serve?

Institutions and individuals are encouraged to manipulate and game metrics in the name of financial rewards – practices often referred to as micro-fraud (Oravec, 2017). Governance by numbers is not only undermining academic freedom, job security, and the humanistic values on which universities have been built, but also creating a rapidly expanding market for predatory publishers, journals, fake conferences, fake metrics and even fake universities (*ibid.*). This market has been labelled as a global threat (Cukier et al., 2020). Drawing the line between legitimate and illegitimate publishers and other actors is becoming increasingly difficult, as many academics do have stakes in these markets. In Norway, a number of journals published by the grey-zone MDPI publisher have been listed as point-giving in the national register, thus translating into funding per publication. While there has been some discussion, it has been rather tame, mostly circling around the ethical issue of

² <https://www.forskningradet.no/contentassets/8f25adbf4cb437eb784b4d06ca35700/science-and-technology-indicators-for-norway-2019.pdf>

academics being incentivized to compromise their professional ethics.³ The common propositions on how to address the threat of predatory publishers typically consist of *more* governance by numbers: audits and certification assisted by algorithmic and bibliometric sorting of those legitimate and those illegitimate, accompanied by calls for more *ethics*. Such proposed solutions are merely treating the *symptom*, using the very same logic that is creating these proliferating harms. Both legitimate and illegitimate practices are underpinned by the same ‘neoliberal moral economy of fraud’ (Whyte and Wiegatz, 2016) – from ‘micro-frauds’ to large scale academic fraud. These harms cannot be thought apart from the governance by numbers and the neoliberal gamified academic subjectivity. Predatory publishers are just an extreme manifestation of the generalized moral economy of fraud sustained by the ideology of cynicism.

Refusing to be Reduced to a Number and Degaming the Academic

‘How many tickets in the lottery do you have this year?’, a colleague asked me, referring to the recent deadline for grant applications to the Research Council of Norway. Cynicism stemming from the elitist nature of the game – only about 8-11% successful from the thousands of applications sent. The scores, ranging from 1 to 7, where 7 is ‘exceptional’ and 6 ‘excellent’, have become a new order of worth. Results are internally evaluated, scores discussed at departmental meetings, transforming relations between colleagues as they become reduced to their score. Envy, anxiety, stress, insecurity, and feelings of inferiority now number amongst the simultaneously subjective and social harms of the game. These disappointments, as one of this article’s reviewers suggested, may even further stimulate the desire for rewards, resulting in a deeper submission to neoliberal logic rather than resistance. Winners, deemed excellent, gain limelight, but also new enemies. Solidarity, and with it the hope of an inaugural political act, such as a strike or the establishment of a union with real intent, is being destroyed by institutionalised competitive individualism. This is a result of a costly bureaucracy in the name of strategic governance of research – where content has to be aligned with the demands of the bureaucratic forms based on pre-determined criteria of success,

³ <https://www.dn.no/innlegg/innlegg-forskere-blir-ledet-til-etiske-overtramp/2-1-720605>

reflective of key indicators for research funding and policy, on which one has to report. As one of the interviewees put it,

In that [reporting] there is enormous influence and power, I was surprised to what extent it shaped the execution of the project (...) now there are institutional structures so that you are no longer in doubt about governance, all authority is up in the system (...) there is a tremendous ideological restructuring that takes place without anyone calling it what it is (...) they remove all criticism.

This system is the opposite of efficient, just or transparent – decision-making remains opaque, not unlike the black-box proprietary algorithms (Pasquale, 2015) that determine the various – and often mutually contradictory, and always *partial*, scores. It is designed to produce elite winners and a mass of losers – of suboptimal (or improperly optimized) individuals with substandard rankings (in turn, their existence legitimizes this competitive system). And, as if built by a predictive algorithm fed by historical data, it tends to always privilege those who have received comparable grants before – or graduated through and worked in prestigious institutions often as a consequence of hereditary privilege – and who can efficiently sell themselves. This is reflected also in the ‘citation inequality’ where 1% of most-cited scientists receive 21% of all citations, a sign of ‘intensified international competition and widening author-level disparities in science’ (Nielsen and Andersen, 2021: 1). Those rewarded by the system are also often cynical about it but far less likely to revolt against it or support those who wish to do so. Or as a colleague put it when I questioned the need for the Research Council and argued for a return to direct funding to institutions,

I agree with the critique, publishing points and all these metrics they use, it is methodologically flawed, of course there are enormous resources being wasted by people applying for these grants and the evaluators (...) but you have to be pragmatic, there is a time for certain questions, you have to be a bit smart and play your cards right. It is a game. But – and you will not be popular for saying that – academia in Norway is full of losers, of second-rate so-called researchers. There is a reason why me, and you, and some of the people in my department are landing grants again and again, it is because we are excellent. And since we are excellent, we do not have a problem getting those grants. (...) Just look up their Cristin profile (Current Research Information SysTEM In Norway) and check their production, they are mediocre. Most should not even have the titles they have. (...) Look at this one, 25 results!

How excellence is to be fairly evaluated lies beyond the limits of this paper, but to become part of ‘the club of the excellent’ under neoliberalism, academics must perceive and value themselves through numbers, scores and evaluations in which nobody really believes. As in Yevgeny Zamyatin’s dystopic novel *We* from 1924 (Zamyatin, 1993), about a future society built on the principles of scientific management and transparency, I was to reduce my myself and my colleagues to a *number*. Gamified governance by numbers not only transforms academic practice into a ‘game’ to be *gamed*, but also results in dehumanization accompanied by both arrogance and disavowal of the structural harms that the system inflicts. It leads to the emergence of ‘special liberty’ (Hall, 2012a) where the individual ‘actively solicits the sociosymbolic structures of neoliberal ideology; the subject epitomizes the competitive individualism, envy and self-interest’ and ‘the absence of a moral duty (...) towards the Other’ (Lloyd, 2019: 114-5). This is what allows one to perceive oneself as excellent, while reducing the Other to a number, and treating the Other accordingly.

A peculiar reversal takes place when we come to cynically act as if the academic field were a game. In normal play, we get carried away despite knowing that ‘it is just a play’ – the ‘sacred seriousness’ of play, its extraordinary affective capacity and pleasure in playing stems precisely from this structure of disavowal (Huizinga, 1970; Pfaller, 2014). In gamification, this is reversed. *We know quite well that the matter at hand is deadly serious, but we act as if it were just a game and hence play by its rules in order to win.* Disavowal is redoubled. We are not only dealing with a cynical disavowal of the game, but also of the anxiety inducing Real; gamification relieves us as it enables the disavowal of unpleasant realities while cynicism helps us cope – while we reproduce the harmful realities that we disavow. At the bottom of this disavowal is the objective fear of the results of real politics and the subsequent relocation of pleasure from the socioeconomic core of solidarity, political action and telos to the peripheral milieu of competitive individualism and the cool administration of what exists with no objective but its permanent reproduction (Hall, 2012a; Hall and Winlow, 2015). So how do we resist these ideological pleasures? I propose a strategy of ‘degaming’ or *externalization of disbelief* in the governance by numbers, a strategy of *refusal* to reduce the Other to a number; a refusal of the fantasy that one is outside of ideology

because one knows better; a refusal of ‘special liberty’ – an ideological license to inflict harm on the Other. We can begin with small acts, robbing ourselves of the interpassive pleasures of academic social media, refuse to be reduced to arbitrary metrics, turned into a product and exploited for profit, our subjectivity to be gamified (fig. 2 and fig. 3). I have myself participated in this, and I am not the first to suggest leaving to seek means of independent research and dissemination as an inaugural political act – to return pleasure and faith in ourselves to their rightful place, the political core of our meaningful intervention in the world informed by the pursuit of truths rather than post-human administrative convenience and cynical, individualised virtue-signaling. At some point, it is time to stop playing along.⁴ Similarly, whenever we have the opportunity, we can voice our refusal to participate in the reduction of ourselves, our work, and the Other to arbitrary metrics. If others follow, we can create hope and an alternative even in a system that tells us that there is none, and where the odds are skewed.

⁴ For others who have left and argued on diverse grounds for leaving, see:
<https://www.chronicle.com/article/metrics-mania/>
<https://geokush.com/2020/03/26/moving-on-from-academia-edu-and-researchgate/>
<https://icietla.hypotheses.org/114>
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/drsarahbond/2017/01/23/dear-scholars-delete-your-account-at-academia-edu/>

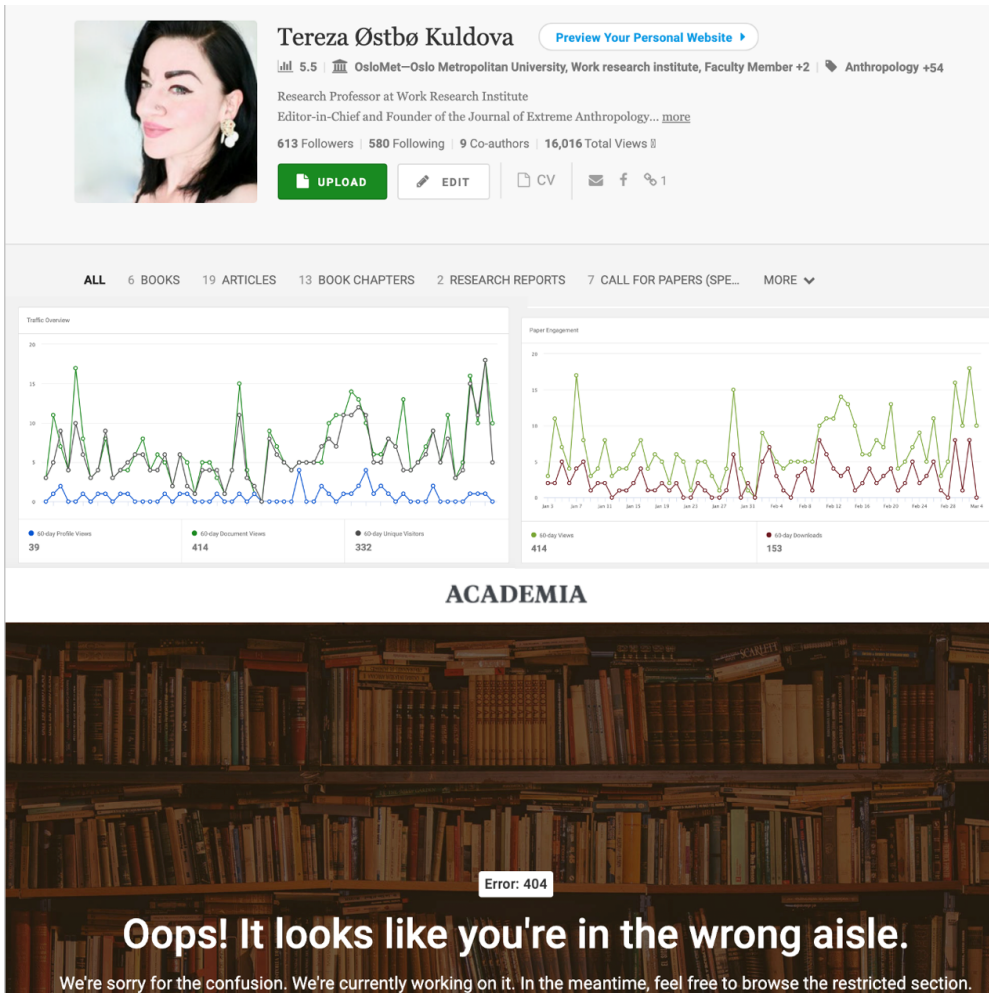
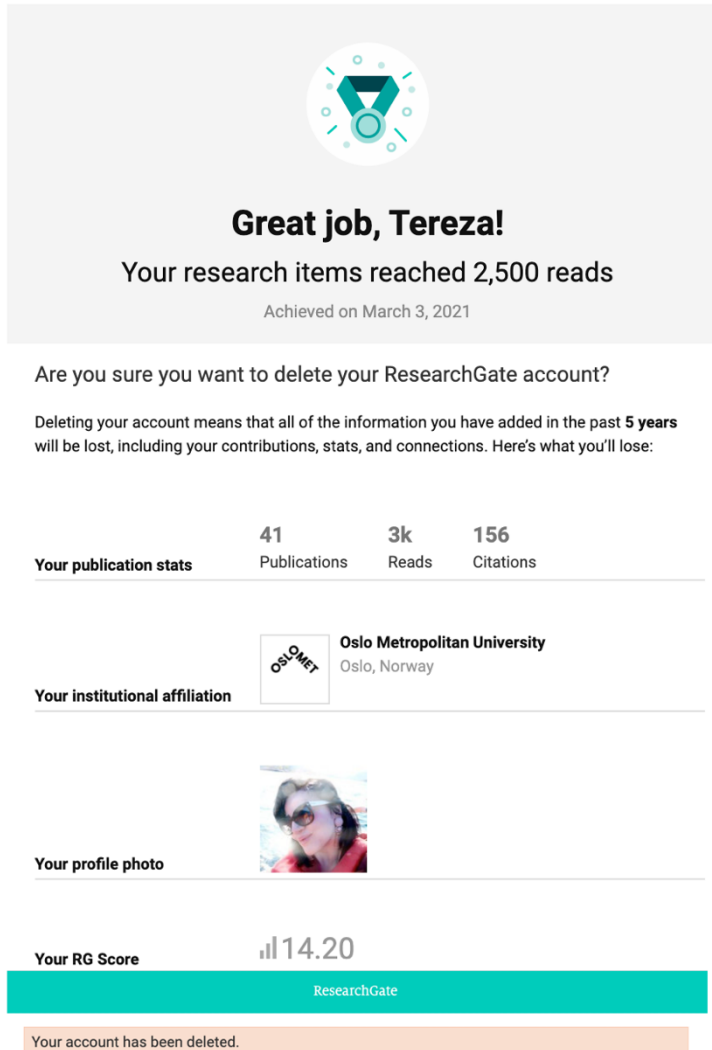



Figure 2 Screenshot collage before and after deleting Academia.edu; note that the very site that argues for open science encourages to browse ‘restricted section’, after all, you have to have a profile to be able to download papers – many of which are available in institutional repositories, or are already open-access; in this sense, Academia.edu drives traffic away from the original publishers and undermines institutional repositories which do not require anyone to create profiles.





Great job, Tereza!
 Your research items reached 2,500 reads
 Achieved on March 3, 2021

Are you sure you want to delete your ResearchGate account?


Deleting your account means that all of the information you have added in the past **5 years** will be lost, including your contributions, stats, and connections. Here's what you'll lose:

Your publication stats	41	3k	156
	Publications	Reads	Citations


Your institutional affiliation


Oslo Metropolitan University
 Oslo, Norway

Your profile photo



Your RG Score


14.20

ResearchGate

Your account has been deleted.

Figure 3 Screenshot collage, deleting ResearchGate profile. Note the threat of 'loss', alas, none of these things are lost. The platform loses these, not the author.

Conclusion: From Disavowal to *Collective* Externalization of Disbelief

Individual acts, such as the above, may be deemed both impotent and naïve vis-à-vis the scale of the multi-level and networked governance by numbers. But it may be precisely naivety, foolishness and hope that we need. The question is, how can we collectively externalize disbelief in a context of

competitive individualism and *degamify* ourselves? Trade unions, in which most employees in Norwegian academia are organized, could be a way to go, but they tend to be equally trapped by the cynical attitude, and lacking in tools to oppose ‘governance’, the permanent reform and reorganization, and the power of external management-consultancy firms and digital solutions that structure work. Furthermore, the automatic monthly payments to the union relieve the academic’s conscience and *delegate* the work of university politics, resulting in passivity. And indeed, there is no room for politics in a technocratic governance. What results is a resigned, fatalist, cynical attitude that pervades the whole organization, accompanied at best by weak attempts of minor resistance by ‘gaming’ the gamified game that has become academia (at worst slipping into micro-fraud and fraud) – one that reproduces this very technocratic governance through *collective* disavowal. Or as Sloterdijk put it, ‘in the new cynicism, we see a detached negativity which scarcely allows itself any hope, at most a little irony and self-pity’ (Sloterdijk, 1984: 194). The key challenge is that ‘participation’ of the trade unions always already takes place on the *technocratic* premises of management, premises that prevent us from asking the fundamental – political – questions. There is no space for principled questions, instead – one can at best demand a ‘better indicator’ – and treat one symptom or the other. If you demand the impossible, ask principled questions in a meeting with management, you appear as a naïve fool. Or as a trade union colleague put it,

They think you are just a clown and probably an idiot, too; like you have not understood that they expect you to come up with suggestions to change a wording in strategy, but that you are not allowed to question the need for strategy – and that too when the leaders themselves say “yet another strategy bullshit”!

(even the leaders share in the *internal* critical distance and disbelief). He refuses to play the game, be reasonable, and propose the acceptable – thus *externalizing his disbelief* within a forum where this is unwelcomed – it *could* have consequences if taken seriously by others. It has to be discredited. But his is an act of transgression, an act of sovereignty, and refusal to submit to the (technocratic) ‘household economy’ of servitude (Bataille, 1993). We could replace here Bataille’s formula, ‘the sovereign is he who is, as if death were not’ (*ibid*: 222) with: the sovereign is he who is, as if social death were not. Instead of proposing various strategies of counter-gamification or

‘gamification-from-below’ (Woodcock and Johnson, 2017), I argue that we need to *degamify* ourselves and we can do so precisely by externalizing our disbelief. Instead of proposing to game the neoliberal game through ‘subversion, corruption and mockery-making of activities considered “serious”’ (*ibid*: 543) – this is precisely what neoliberal exploitative gamification does to (what used to be) activities considered serious and precisely what the response to it is, already – and by ‘undermining work through the addition of game elements, whose objectives are not those of the work activity’ (*ibid*: 549) – this gamification and its gaming *already* underpin the neoliberal ‘moral economy of fraud’ (Whyte and Wiegratz, 2016) – rather than being ‘subversive’, I argue that we must put both game and play back to its proper place, in the same way in which we must ‘put measurement back into its proper place’ (Hummel, 2006: 76). The only way out, is to collectively *demand the impossible* (Contu, 2008) and break with the apolitical gamified subjectivity of submission. We have to refuse to both play the game and to game it. This means externalizing our disbelief and putting measure, game and play (and thus also pleasure) back to their proper place, and by that refusing to participate in the moral economy of fraud. It also means organizing, reviving trade unions and solidarity wherever possible and developing tools to counter these technocratic dictates. If we agree ‘that positivist knowledge and neoliberal policy dominate our lives is not to be tolerated’ (St. Pierre, 2012: 499), let us together be that naïve fool *despite* our cynicism and refuse the criminogenic marketization of academia and governance by fetishized numbers.

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