Dutch universities and the strikes

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> *'Is it inevitable that the university will be reduced to the function of providing, with increasingly authoritarian efficiency, pre-packed intellectual commodities which meet the requirements of management? Or can we by our efforts transform it into a centre of free discussion and action, tolerating and even encouraging 'subversive' thought and activity, for a dynamic renewal of the whole society within which it operates?'*
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> *(Thompson 1970, 166)*

E.P. Thompson posed this dilemma between managerial authoritarianism and free action fifty years ago, in response to student occupations at the University of Warwick. Since then, higher education on his side of the channel has emphatically grasped the managerial horn of the dilemma. English universities grew in 'authoritarian efficiency' during the eighties and nineties; they began packaging degrees as 'intellectual commodities' with the introduction of tuition fees in the late nineties; they further bolstered 'the requirements of management' by introducing top-bottom research assessments in conjunction with market-simulating mechanisms, in the early noughties; they were effectively privatized in the early twenty-tens, with the introduction of full-cost tuition fees.

Dutch higher education stands a mere decade behind England, which serves as a mirror of its possible future. Indeed, the

prospects for a Thompson-style renewal in the Netherlands seem bleaker than in noughties England, where universities had a long tradition of independence from the state, where the institution of the ‘chair’ was inexistent, and where institutional hierarchies were flatter than they are in the Netherlands today. But the Dutch university system was not always structurally authoritarian.

It is only a slight exaggeration that the recent history of the Dutch university resembles the early history of the Russian Communist Party. Through a state-imposed process of centralizing substitution, what started as a bottom-up democratic institution has become a top-bottom bureaucratic behemoth. Starting in the nineteen-eighties, the powers of university departments and institutes passed over to sub-committees, which were substituted, in the nineties, by part-time academic administrators, which were substituted, in the noughties, by professional managers and full-time academic administrators. This process has been called ‘new public management’, an Orwellian eurphemism for an Orwellian phenomenon better described as ‘neoliberal Stalinism’: ‘neoliberal’, because it considers markets and market-simulating mechanisms as the solution to every problem; ‘Stalinist’, because it is through-and-through undemocratic.

Neoliberal Stalinism, the process of bureaucratization through market simulation, has grown concomitantly with work pressure: the more work academic staff must perform, the less time they have to govern their own institutions, and the more time they must surrender to managers and full-time bureaucrats. Indeed, the very idea of ‘management’ entails that workers do not manage their own working lives, which become the business of a professional class of administrators ruling over them. This separation is endemic to the capitalist workplace, but not to public universities—at least, not until recently. Overwork, burnouts, and mounting work dissatisfaction are necessary

consequences of this process of separation.

This situation has been fostered by decades of government policy, largely hostile to Thompson's 'dynamic renewal' through free discussion. As a proportion of GDP, public funding for education has fallen for a decade (from 6 percent in 2010 to 5.2 percent in 2018). And although real expenditure for higher education been largely stable, it has scarcely kept pace with student numbers, which have increased by 4-6 percent per year since 2015. This is an unstable equilibrium: at some point, either public funding will have to increase, or tuition fees will have to be raised. For the moment, the Dutch centre-right government has pledged to cut the number of international students, as if this is what is driving the increase in student numbers—it is not. It is clear, moreover, that the government is not really interested in the quality of Dutch higher education. Otherwise it would not be cutting hundreds of millions from the social sciences and the humanities to fund tax cuts on corporate profits.

In response to these pressures, the education sector in the Netherlands is pushing back. The entire sector struck in March, demanding an increase in real expenditure for education, an end to managerialism and its market-simulating complements, and a defence of academic autonomy. The March strike followed in the wake of successful strikes by school teachers in California and by university teachers in the UK. The Dutch universities, for their part, have organized themselves through Woinactie, a grassroots movement supported by the country's main trade unions and by all the major universities. Woinactie is committed to rolling back the frontiers of managerial authoritarianism, but has yet to articulate an alternative vision of the free and democratic university. Its success in spurring broader 'dynamic renewal' may yet depend, in addition to its strategic perspicacity, on the audacity of its vision.

References

Thompson, E.P. (ed). *Warwick University Ltd.: Industry, Management and the Universities* (Nottingham: Spokesman Books, 1970).