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# Porous boundaries of resistance

## Translating an authoritarian-neoliberal university

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The task we set ourselves is to build the university afresh in a way that will free  
teachers from the directives of administrators.  
If the university cannot be free anymore, we need a new free university.  
This is where the paths of the university and the state part.

*Manifesto of the Free University*

As the intrusive powers of capitalism penetrate different areas of life, causing dispossession and exploitation, numerous attempts have been made to rethink economic-social relations anew. However, since capitalism is itself a multitude, as the introduction to this edited volume demonstrates, opposition to its workings can be imagined and acted upon in diverse ways. While it is important to capture the workings of capitalism, I believe it is equally important to analyse—and possibly learn from—different projects that actively resist the ruination of socio-economic realities created by capitalism in its various constellations.

In this chapter, I specifically focus on diverse forms of resistance to neoliberal capitalism, particularly when it couples with the oppressive powers of a state (Fabry and Sandbeck, 2019; Fabry, 2019; Dönmez and Duman, 2021) and propagates anti-democratic and authoritarian politics (Bruff, 2014; Bruff and Tansel, 2019). As the epigraph to this chapter demonstrates, I analyse different forms of resistance to the neoliberalisation of universities—one of the sites where the logics and practices of neoliberal capitalism have intruded. In this chapter, I approach neoliberalism as an economic and political formation that generates extraction, profit-making,

managerial control, efficiency, and surveillance over performance (Harvey, 2005; Giroux, 2014). It reinforces itself through administrative and legal mechanisms, limiting spaces of resistance (Bruff and Tansel, 2019). Thus, despite the widespread idea that neoliberalism can build a world of peace and freedom, this notion has faced solid scholarly critique (Harvey, 2005, Chapter 1). Neoliberalism itself can engender authoritarian governance, which reproduces inequalities of power in capitalist societies and breeds a hierarchical and covert political culture (Bruff and Tansel, 2019; Dean, 2002).

Moreover, previous research has shown that the workings of neoliberal capitalism extend beyond liberal democracies, manifesting its consequences in other political regimes, such as authoritarian states. The authoritarian power of the state can synchronize with the neoliberal regime of New Public Management to build hierarchies of power and control. This is visible, for example, in the centralisation of political power in Russia through authoritarian-neoliberal governance, often referred to as the “vertical of power” (Gel'man and Ryzhenkov, 2011), which can also be realised in the context of universities (Gataulina, 2025 Forthcoming; Gerashchenko, 2022).

Analysing resistance to the authoritarian-neoliberal regimes of governance, control, and dispossession is important to understand how the intrusive powers of both transnational neoliberalisation and the state are resisted and can possibly be translated into more hopeful recompositions. Therefore, in this chapter, I seek to retheorise capitalism through diverse forms of resistance against it. My understanding of capitalism and resistance to it is inspired by the assemblage approach, which emphasizes their constant movement, reordering, and connections (Higgins and Larner, 2017; Deleuze, 2004; Acuto and Curtis, 2014). My inquiry is motivated by the following questions: How are resistances to the authoritarian-neoliberal regimes of governance imagined and acted upon? What are the capabilities and limitations of those projects of resistance? What are the ontological relations between the intrusive powers of capital and the state and diverse forms of resistance to them? What can we learn from these projects of resistance to better understand how more hopeful worlds can be actualised?

Pondering these questions, I investigate Russian universities where the oppressive powers of neoliberalisation and the authoritarian state entangle (Gataulina, 2025 Forthcoming; Minina, 2017; Mäkinen, 2021; Dubrovsky and Kaczmarek, 2021; Forrat, 2016). I also pay attention to how different projects of resistance to the authoritarian-neoliberal regime arise. The analysis in this chapter is based on ethnographic data generated for my PhD project in 2019–2021, which included university visits, observations of academic events, interviews, media publications, and my own autoethnographic experience of studying in Russian universities and participating in alternative academic projects analysed in this chapter. Russian universities and alternative academic projects by Russian academics beyond institutionalised universities became fruitful sites to interrogate diverse forms of resistance to authoritarian-neoliberal governance, as well as the possible tensions, contradictions, and limitations of their work. While focusing solely on Russian universities, my intent

is to go beyond the specificities of the Russian situation and make wider claims about authoritarian-neoliberal control and its possible subversion.

My interest in critically investigating resistance to authoritarian-neoliberal regimes does not stem from a desire to devalue their efforts; I respect and am often inspired by their work. Rather, my aim is to contribute to a shared understanding of how oppressive powers can be contested, subverted, and resisted – and what our limitations in doing so might be. Here, I see research as secondary to direct political action. As Hardt and Negri (2000, p. 206) claim, theory is only capable of providing analysis; resistance and liberation are essentially born through practice.

## The authoritarian-neoliberal university

The intrusive powers of capitalism penetrate university spaces, and this intrusion is often described with the concept of neoliberalisation (Giroux, 2014; Connell, 2019; Olssen and Peters, 2005; Hall, 2018a; Cannella and Koro-Ljungberg, 2017). In this literature, neoliberalisation is closely connected to the rise of “knowledge economies” or “knowledge capitalism,” which are defined as the latest, post-Fordist phase of capitalism associated with the technological revolution in the 1990s (Peters, 2021). Neoliberalisation of academia refers to the subjection of higher education and research to the logic of markets by replacing the “traditional professional culture of open intellectual inquiry” with institutional stress on performance, audit, competitiveness, and the economic efficiency of university activities (Olssen and Peters, 2005, p. 313). Research on the neoliberalisation of universities often emphasizes its negative impacts on higher education and research, such as the dissipation of academic freedom (Dönmez and Duman, 2021, p. 4; Peters, 2021), precarisation of academic work (Borovskaia et al., 2014; Loveday, 2018), and erosion of critical thinking due to the subjugation of the curriculum to perceived market needs (Ashwin, 2020). Moreover, the neoliberalisation of universities leads to the rise of hierarchical, covert, or even authoritarian governance (Belina et al., 2013; McCann et al., 2020).

However, analyses of how universities operate beyond the contexts of liberal democracies and the Global North emphasize that universities are equally becoming subjected to the oppressive powers of the state, including authoritarian state governance. The intrusive powers of the state often entangle with neoliberal reforms, creating a new composition of oppressive forces (Coşar and Ergül, 2015 on Turkey; Dönmez and Duman, 2021 on Turkey and Hungary; see also Bruff, 2014). Similar developments are visible in Russian universities, where the authoritarian-neoliberal control of the state regime engenders control and dispossession (Gataulina, 2025 Forthcoming; Minina, 2017; Mäkinen, 2021; Dubrovsky and Kaczmarska, 2021; Forrat, 2016). Russian development cannot be characterised simply as privatisation and deregulation. Neoliberal ideas such as competition, cost-efficiency, managerial control, and economic growth thrive when attached to the authoritarian governance of the Russian state (Gataulina, 2025 Forthcoming; Smolentseva et al., 2018).

The effects of neoliberal-authoritarian governance of Russian universities have often been referred to by the academic community as processes of ruination: the “destruction” of higher education (Sidorov, 2021) or a “guillotine” for academics (Konkurs..., 2020). The salvage accumulation on which capitalism breeds produces ruination (Tsing, 2015, p. 5; Pyyhtinen et al., 2022, p. 3). Authoritarian-neoliberal governance similarly intrudes into academic worlds and translates them into a power- and profit-making assemblage. While universities are not abandoned, academic worlds are ruined through this intrusion. In this chapter, my aim is to analyse the resistance to hierarchical, covert, and extractive practices that neoliberal capitalism cultivates through its attachment to the authoritarian state. I demonstrate how, in the Russian context, resistance is formed against the neoliberal-authoritarian university and, subsequently, the Russian state, which complicates the scenario of solely resisting marketisation or privatisation.

## Resistance

The intrusive powers of capital and the state penetrating universities prompt different forms of resistance and attempts to transform an authoritarian-neoliberal university into something more liveable (Wulff-Wathne, 2020; Peters, 2021). During my fieldwork in 2021, I participated in a panel discussion where two Russian professors pointed out that alternative, horizontal projects are a way to disseminate knowledge in society, as the university, functioning as an authoritarian-neoliberal bureaucratic “machine,” fails to do so:

There is a demand for the dissemination of knowledge in society, but the university as a structure is not moving forward with this demand. Firstly, the university is a huge bureaucratic and supervisory machine; thus, to get some new courses or any new undertakings started, a lot of approvals are needed. Second, university is there to a great extent to “feed” the university management, fulfil the requirements and chase the rankings. If we want to spread knowledge, we need to work on horizontal projects.

The quotation suggests that struggles against neoliberalisation should be analysed in a complex manner: while resistance against neoliberalisation often equals resistance against marketisation, this might not be the case in every time and place (Bruff and Tansel, 2019, p. 241). Neoliberalisation takes different forms. Those interested in mutations of capitalism should also pay attention to localised projects of resistance and the imagining of alternative futures. Moreover, resistance to neoliberalisation in academia rarely takes place solely around university operations but instead stands against the wider political context (Dönmez and Duman, 2021, p. 10).

My analysis draws on the assemblage-inspired view of theorising and conceptualising resistance. Assemblage-inspired analysis suggests that any politico-

economic formation, including capitalism, authoritarianism, or their hybrids, is characterised by constant movement, change, and (de)stabilisation. These assemblages are composed of human and more-than-human elements, such as human subjectivities, institutionalised regulations, and material objects (Higgins and Lerner, 2017; Deleuze, 2004; Acuto and Curtis, 2014). This suggests that changes and ruptures of these oppressive systems are not always controllable by human intentions. Nevertheless, in this chapter, I specifically analyse those projects that intentionally attempt to subvert and decompose authoritarian-neoliberal powers. To analyse their workings and limitations, I invoke Anna Tsing's concept of translations.

## Translations

Translation is the process of “drawing one world-making project into another” (Tsing, 2015, p. 62). Anna Tsing uses the concept of translation primarily to analyse the liability of contemporary capitalism. She argues that contemporary capitalism is based on acts of translation, where non-capitalist value systems are drawn into capitalist accumulation (Tsing, 2015, p. 43). Capitalism, in all its variety, stabilizes itself by being “a translation machine for producing capital from all kinds of livelihoods, human and non-human” (Tsing, 2015, p. 133). The spaces where such acts of translation happen are pericapitalist sites: they are simultaneously inside and outside capitalism (Tsing, 2015, p. 63). While Tsing focuses mostly on how non-capitalist sites are translated into profit-making in these pericapitalist sites, she leaves room for other kinds of translations: “[p]ericapitalist economic forms can be sites for rethinking the unquestioned authority of capitalism in our lives” (Tsing, 2015, p. 65).

While Tsing specifically looks into translations for the capitalist accumulation, I develop this concept further by theorising different forms of resistance which attempt to translate, subvert, and transform the authoritarian-neoliberal assemblage of extraction and dispossession. The projects that I analyse in this chapter initially sprang out of institutionalised universities and work to translate academic production into a form based on collegiality and openness. This is where the idea of a pericapitalist site becomes enriched by layers of oppressive state power and resistance to it: I trace how resistance to neoliberalisation of universities become merged with resistance to the authoritarian state. These sites of translation attempt to subvert hierarchical and surveillant political culture which both neoliberalisation and authoritarianism bolster through their contamination.

### Sites of translation: FEM TALKS, Free University, DOXA

In the following, I analyse three academic projects where the translation of authoritarian-neoliberal governance has taken place: FEM TALKS, Free University, and DOXA. These are sites of knowledge production that escape institutionalised

university boundaries and show resistance to authoritarian-neoliberal control and dispossession. They can be thought of as attempts to translate the processes of ruination into liveable projects and to reclaim academia that has previously been alienated by the authoritarian-neoliberal accumulation of power and resources.

FEM TALKS is an educational project organised by three early-career researchers in 2018. FEM TALKS consists of various activities: mini-conferences, a course on feminist theory, translation and writing of feminist texts, and a podcast. The goal of the project is “to enable people to talk and learn about [feminism] in the language of current research”: “[f]rom an initiative to popularise feminist philosophy within academia, FEM TALKS has grown into a broad educational project” (FEM TALKS, n.d.). The organisers of the FEM TALKS project openly stated that it was very unlikely they would be able to institutionalise their activity within a contemporary Russian university contaminated by authoritarian-neoliberal governance: “We would not be given a position at the university, even if we all received a degree, and hardly any of us needs it anyway” (Danilov, 2020).

Another translation site, the Free University, was established in 2020 by a group of Russian academics whose work contracts were not renewed by the Higher School of Economics in Moscow. The university administration laid off opposition-minded academics, citing the need to secure the university’s business reputation (Golubeva, 2020). The format of free universities has been known since the 1960s and is “built on a rich tradition of feminist, anti-racist, and working-class struggles to create spaces of autonomous learning and empowerment” beyond the institutional confines of the public and private university (Erdem, 2020, pp. 316–317). Free Universities are usually organised against the commodification of higher education and become grassroots initiatives aimed at the development of “postcapitalist imaginaries in academia” (Erdem, 2020, p. 317). However, the extractive and ruinative workings of capitalism beyond the contexts of the Global North imply resistance to both capitalism and other forms of oppressive power, such as the authoritarian state, as demonstrated by the case of the Free University organised by Russian academics.

The third site of translation, DOXA, was initially started as a student media publication at the Higher School of Economics in Moscow but rapidly became one of the strongest voices of political opposition in Russia. DOXA covered university news, published academic texts, and organised support for students who had been persecuted and detained due to their political activities (DOXA, n.d.). Because of these activities, DOXA’s official status as a student organisation was revoked. As explained by the university administration, DOXA’s activities were “harming the business reputation of the university” (VshE lishila zhurnal..., 2019).

All three projects are sites of authoritarian-neoliberal translations: they have been in contradiction with, and ruined by, authoritarian-neoliberal governance and, through their activities and ethos, have attempted to translate the extraction, control, and hierarchies of authoritarian-neoliberal governance into something different. The ensuing analysis is organised around the following themes: spatialities of resistance and the imagination of freedom outside of authoritarian-neoliberal dictate; collegiality,

horizontality, and joy in academic projects; reclaiming the university; and, finally, the limitations and paradoxes of such acts of translation.

## Aiming outside: Spatialities of resistance

Being in contradiction with the authoritarian-neoliberal nature of contemporary institutionalised universities, these projects, in their aim to find the opportunity and space for translations, have deterritorialised academic knowledge production and attempted to form connections outside the institutionalised university architecture.

The organisers of FEM TALKS, who initially started their project within the boundaries of a university, realised that these boundaries became pressing on them:

We really lacked feminist theory at Moscow State University. We wanted to make ourselves known and arrange events, lectures, and seminars on feminism. [...] But over time, it became cramped inside the university, we were something like a circle of interests there, this did not quite suit us. Our goal is to popularise feminist knowledge. (Danilov, 2020)

FEM TALKS describe their feeling with the word “cramped” (*tesno*), as if they experience the *embodied* effect of boundaries pressing on them. They continue by explaining how, in their desire to promote feminist knowledge, they have aspired to create spaces outside institutionalised spaces of teaching and learning:

It was all the more joyful to meet like-minded people at the faculty and create some kind of safe “islands” – mini-conferences and scientific seminars on feminism. The [FEM TALKS] project was the culmination of our desire to create a feminist space within the university. (Danilov, 2020)

As it does not seem possible to change the university composition, FEM TALKS have aspired to create safer spaces within and near the university: ones that the organizers call “islands” —new territories that are deterritorialised from the institutionalised university spaces. During my fieldwork, I encountered cases where FEM TALKS’s outsideness was referred to as “profanation” and “devaluation” of academic knowledge—not so much due to the format as to the teachers’ lack of qualification. However, to a great extent, feminist knowledge has historically been produced outside academia in activist groups: “[m]ost of the groundbreaking contributions to feminist theory were made by the women’s movement in the 1970s through practice; some of its insights were published in journals, obscure newsletters, and some books” (MacKinnon, 1991, p. 15). Along these lines, FEM TALKS insists that it is possible to produce good knowledge outside institutionalised universities, and that is exactly what they do:

It seems to me that we and projects similar to ours are proving that a good education can also be obtained outside institutions. This became especially clear after the dismissals of outstanding teachers from the Higher School of Economics. (Danilov, 2020)

By “dismissals of outstanding teachers from the Higher School of Economics,” they refer to those who were laid off from the university due to their oppositional political activity—and who subsequently founded the Free University in 2020. This case could be seen as a sign of tightening authoritarian-neoliberal control over academic performance in Russia. At this point in time, the need to teach and learn otherwise—to organise liveable projects outside the authoritarian-neoliberal university—became especially pressing. The Free University proclaimed how they transitioned outside the university controlled by authoritarian-neoliberal state governance: “This is where the paths of the university and the state part” (Free University, n.d.).

The Free University attempts to decompose not only the authoritarian-neoliberal governance that contaminates universities but also to subvert the power of state borders and territorial grip. The Free University imagines itself and builds its infrastructure through connections beyond regional and national boundaries. Existing in the digital space without a physical campus has made the Free University a project with multiple spatialities, as its members are often on the move. When I was taking courses at the Free University, I noticed the geographic mobility of the course participants; this experience was supported by one of the students at the Free University whom I interviewed:

Of course, it would be cool to see everyone live and all that, but online, of course, has huge advantages, because, for example, our teacher of the “Sociology of nature and city” is from Krasnoyarsk. It’s interesting that we already had three lessons, three Thursdays, and it turns out that the first Thursday I was in Berlin, the second Thursday I was in Turkey, and yesterday I was in Novgorod. Another Thursday I will be in St Petersburg—and everything works. Bliss.

Free University activities are attuned to the multiplicity of contexts and spatialities. The charter of the Free University claims: “The Free University is extraterritorial; there are no citizenship restrictions for community members” (Free University, n.d.). This deterritorialisation / extraterritoriality is also proclaimed in the project’s manifesto: “We do not have a campus. We will teach from home, we will teach from libraries, we will teach at summer schools” (Free University, n.d.; my emphasis).



## Building collegiality, horizontality, and joy

When breaking outside, these projects aim at different translations, most of which revolve around efforts to decompose the vertical power structures strengthened by authoritarian-neoliberal governance and to enrich academia with collegiality and horizontality. As the FEM TALKS organisers emphasize, such translations usually bring about feelings of joy.

[FEM TALKS] have lectures in the format of parties and our course: they are all about a horizontal and relaxed format of interaction with people. Here you first discuss serious things and then dance to Lana Del Rey with a glass of cider in your hands. You are discussing memes in Zoom before the lecture, while you are waiting for everyone to join. This is the kind of communication that is impossible to imagine in an ordinary university, and the format that eliminates the fear of everything academic. Many wrote to us that initially that they were afraid to take the course because of the fear of not understanding some complex terms and concepts, but later these fears disappeared. And it's cool. I think feminist theory is about that, and not preaching from the tribune. (Danilov, 2020)

FEM TALKS activities embody resistance to institutionalised university hierarchies and power relations through their “horizontal and relaxed format,” which is “impossible to imagine in an ordinary university” where knowledge is preached “from the tribune.” Hierarchy is translated into collegiality, and the fear propagated by such hierarchies is translated into joy.

One of the course students shared with me in an interview a very joyful account of her participation in the FEM TALKS activities:

I love them. [...] I enjoy it a lot, I look forward to seeing them every Saturday. There I'm not afraid to look stupid. Especially because there are such topics, you know, as “queer” or “transgender.” And I'm just a simple girl, from Novgorod [smiling]. I understand that I am able to ask different, even offensive, controversial questions there because they understand that we are learning. [...] And we communicate with memes, and TikToks, and so forth. In short, there is a very kind atmosphere there.

The student pays a lot of attention to the project's non-hierarchical architecture of teaching and learning. Social media becomes an important socio-material component enabling this project: it helps bypass the hierarchies and, in this sense, further deterritorialises university knowledge, whereby academic life in the sense of collegiality and richness of topics springs up from the ruins of the corporate-authoritarian university. Interestingly, the student not only observes free communication between participants and “the teachers,” but also suggests that the

boundaries between the elitist and the peripheral are breaking. In her narration, the student ironically mentions that she is “a simple girl” from the small city of Novgorod, thereby contrasting her (peripheral) subject position to the presumably elitist academic (feminist) research. This juxtaposition breaks in the format of FEM TALKS by dismantling the academic hierarchies, making it a site of translating authoritarian-neoliberal hierarchies and control.

## Finding freedom

Collegiality and horizontality, as opposed to the authoritarian-neoliberal vertical of control, are often imagined in terms of freedom. The name of the Free University already suggests this aspiration, and the project describes itself as “an independent educational project free of administrative pressure and censorship” (Free University, n.d.). The goal is to build a university anew, freeing teachers from any corporate-authoritarian dictate: “We, professors and teachers at different universities, are joining forces to work with students in a new way” (Free University, n.d.; my emphasis). This newness signifies the attempt to imagine academic life otherwise, to breathe life into higher education that has become synonymous with “bureaucratic indicators, massification, and cheapness of the educational process,” as expressed by Viktor Gorbатов, one of the founders of the Free University:

When, due to COVID-19, when universities were forced to be thrown into the online space fully, it suddenly became especially clear that many of the institutional requirements that we used to take for granted are completely false in terms of goal setting and ridiculous in form. We realised that they are not at all about the quality of education, soft skills, and motivation. Rather, they are about bureaucratic indicators, massification, and cheapness of the educational process. And then we further realised that we could do a lot on our own, if we need a quality education not for show, but for life. (Free University, n.d.)

“Freedom,” however, is understood in very particular terms. The Free University does not try to escape the idea of a university as such. Rather, the Free University has built itself in opposition to the institutionalised architecture of corporate-authoritarian knowledge production. The Free University is a translation site where the corporate-authoritarian university is attempted to be recomposed into a liberated university.

When I interviewed one student at the Free University, who had also been a part of other oppositional activist and academic networks, she mentioned that freedom from corporate-authoritarian censorship and bureaucracy was exactly what had attracted her to this project:

Well, I'm probably attracted to this one because it is free. But not even because of the money, but because [...] your background is not important to them. That is, they are not such bureaucrats. I like this very much. That they don't look at your regalia, at your diplomas; there are no such obstacles. [...] I also really like that the teachers have a position similar to mine. Not like at St Petersburg State University where the teacher kisses the dean's ass, the dean kisses the rector's ass, the rector kisses Putin's ass. That just made me feel sick at St Petersburg State University. And of course, this is one of the main, most significant things for me, that people there [at the Free University] have a connection with reality, that they do not deny it, that... I know that if I join a course on political systems, we will analyse things that are unpleasant for authoritarian regimes. I joined just for this. Because I understand that if I would like to study Political Science or even International Relations at St Petersburg State University, then they will iron out difficulties, and all controversies will be avoided. I do not need it. What I want is the most critical view, the relevant agenda. I just understood that I would find it there [in the Free University], and not in the institution.

The student intertwines several things that became important and attractive to her in the Free University: its "freedom" from bureaucracy ("they don't look at your regalia"), from the authoritarian-neoliberal vertical of power ("the teacher kisses the dean's ass, the dean kisses the rector's ass, the rector kisses Putin's ass"), and from authoritarian-neoliberal depoliticisation ("they will iron out difficulties"). The knowledge in the Free University is openly produced in a politicised environment. The Free University not only creates spaces for critical knowledge but, arguably, creates a sense of community united by the values of freedom from censorship in an authoritarian context where all self-organising has become extremely difficult (cf. Erdem, 2020, p. 320).

## Reclaiming the university

When the corporate-authoritarian university has the ability to control the content of studies, the role of the university, and the academics' working conditions, academics arguably feel alienated from their academic life-worlds (Poutanen, 2022; Hall, 2018a; Hall, 2018b). The alternative projects organised by Russian academics and students not only attempt to escape the institutionalised boundaries and subvert its authoritarian-neoliberal control into something joyful, collegial, and horizontal. In these new spaces of translation, the organisers and participants attempt to reclaim what the university is, to take it back from the bureaucratic authoritarian-neoliberal machine of ruination. As the Free University's manifesto claims, "We cannot be expelled from the university because we are the university." (Free University, n.d.)

“We are the university” is a slogan that has been voiced by different academic groups. In the Russian context, the Free University was not the first to apply this slogan. It was taken up even earlier by the Russian students’ collective DOXA in 2019. When DOXA’s official status as a student organisation was revoked by the university administration due to DOXA’s oppositional political activity, the organisation continued without official status. DOXA declared that “the university is a platform that belongs to society, and not to the business reputation, the brand, the vice-rector, the Board of Trustees, or anyone else” (DOXA vygonyayut..., 2019). DOXA resisted authoritarian-neoliberal control over university activities and attempted to reclaim them: “We are the university” became a slogan frequently used in their media publications.

DOXA mobilised the idea of reclaiming the university in the context of protests against the arrest of opposition figure Alexey Navalny in January 2021. DOXA posted a video address where they declared threats by university authorities to expel students for participating in protests as illegal. In that context, they talked about the right of citizens to protest and called for expressing students’ political opinions “in any peaceful way” —for example, by becoming a volunteer in a human rights organisation or launching an independent student initiative (Adresant..., 2021). The video address ended with DOXA editors saying, “The state has declared war on youth, but we are the youth, and we will win.” The video address was banned by governmental agencies within days, and DOXA editors who appeared in the video were subjected to criminal persecution. However, the slogan “We are the youth” / “Youth is us” (*Molodost’ eto mi*) became one of the prominent slogans of DOXA as well as of the student movement more broadly. The identity of youth was mostly constructed around the identity of a student, which DOXA saw as an essential academic subject at a university. DOXA resisted the power of the university to punish and expel students for their participation in the protests and attempted to reclaim their subjectivity as active citizens and university subjects.

## Limitations of translations: Intrusive powers of state and capital

Despite the attempts to translate the corporate-authoritarian university into collegiality, freedom, and joy, break free from its control, and reclaim academia, these processes of translation have their limitations. The powers of state and capital continue to have, or even amplify, their grip on academia, preventing possibilities for translation. Breaking free from the state simultaneously means losing material, administrative, and institutional resources, which the state, through its authoritarian-neoliberal governance, monopolises. For example, not being affiliated with a state university prevented the FEM TALKS project from receiving institutional funding. Most of the project activities were performed voluntarily; the organisers sometimes had to donate their own money to the project. For their course on feminist theory, they implemented commercial relations by charging their students fees (Danilov, 2020).

The Free University experienced similar limitations. Due to the lack of institutional support and resources, one of the students noticed how the activities of the Free University, especially in the first rounds of courses, were poorly organised. The number of applications exceeded the capacity of each course several times over, making the selection process laborious; in the context of unstable resources and overlapping projects by the Free University teachers, the organisation was not always smooth. Moreover, there is criticism toward the formation of course groups: while the student, whom I quoted above, appreciated the anti-bureaucratic nature of the Free University, she criticised some courses that did not pay attention to the differences in students' backgrounds, thus making the course content not suitable for everyone.

What I don't really like is that, to be honest, [the course] is difficult for me. Probably, if I were a teacher, I would not approve my application, because I don't have this background, and it's very difficult for me. [...] In terms of background, there is a heterogeneous group, and we have these two boys for whom, apparently, [this course] is a professional field. [...] In short, these criteria are not very pedagogical. [...] It's rather strange to me why there was an eleventh grader in our group who is not even from a city. There are these two dudes who fucking quote Lacan and Deleuze by heart. I am also there. And we are all different. We are completely different.

While the student first cited freedom from bureaucratic dictates as something attractive, this eventually created tension: such horizontality becomes an obstacle in the context of a course that does not operate under any standards or regulations. The student continues: "But this [Free University], of course, is not a replacement for [institutionalised] academia. Of course not." While new academic life emerges from the ruins in these spaces of translation, the ruins themselves are not abandoned and devoid of life: they still operate and seem necessary for the participants. The ability to translate the authoritarian-neoliberal assemblages is limited. The institutionalised universities hold the power to provide opportunities that other projects still cannot: structured education, funding, resources, and degrees that are recognised on the labour market.

These projects of resistance are not shielded from the oppressive powers of authoritarian states, which tighten their grip on sites of subversion and translation. All three projects intensively relied on digital technologies: deterritorialised spaces where one could presumably escape from the grip of territorial state control and authoritarian-neoliberal governance. But those digital sites of translation also become reterritorialised and infiltrated by the authoritarian and controlling powers of the state. For example, the students at the Free University from Belarus experienced difficulties with internet connection: on several occasions, the authorities shut down the internet to counteract the protests against the falsification of presidential election results in August 2020. This shows that some bodies are not able to escape the territorial grip even with digital technologies that authoritarian regimes are able to control.

The intrusive authoritarian powers of the state further strengthened their grip in March 2023, when the Free University was proclaimed an “undesirable organisation” by the Russian authorities. The status of an undesirable organisation yields an administrative penalty to anyone participating in its activities and criminal prosecution to those involved in organising them. It affected the project’s spatiality: for safety reasons, the Academic Board of the Free University decided to stop activities on the territory of the Russian Federation (Zajavlenie..., n.d.). The Russian state’s attempt to prevent Free University activities forced the project out of the country: many teachers and students at the Free University relocated abroad. Although the Free University has stated that it wishes to continue its work (Zajavlenie..., n.d.), the possibilities for more liveable translations have been restrained by the authoritarian powers of the state.

### Paradoxes of translations

These sites of translation do not subvert authoritarian-neoliberal control into nothingness. The pressure to institutionalise themselves, attach to other sources of resources, and amplify their voices might lead to attachment to other possible projects of power. The idea of assemblages and relationality reminds us that the sites of translation can hardly be shielded from the workings of capitalism and authoritarianism; in acts of patchy translation, they equally might borrow from other regimes of governance which themselves propagate control and dispossession.

The Free University, while trying to escape and resist the authoritarian-neoliberal control of the Russian state, attached itself to the European Union’s projects of higher education governance, namely, the Bologna Process. After the Russian government decided to break ties with the Bologna Process in 2022 (Vorob’eva, 2022), the Free University posted an address condemning this: “We believe that this step opposes the interests of students and teachers. It leads to the isolation of Russian universities from the world, the destruction of academic rights and freedoms” (Free University, n.d.). The address further disassociates higher education from state boundaries: “Science should not serve the interests of any state, it is engaged in the search for knowledge. Modern academic science is unthinkable without international cooperation. [...] We declare that we have been and remain part of the international academic community” (Free University, n.d.). A tension is visible here: the idea of a deterritorialised Free University and science intertwine, slightly paradoxically, with attempts to anchor the Free University within the EU’s higher education, specifically the Bologna Process. The Free University declared that “[t]he efforts of Free University will be focused on the recognition of our programs within the Bologna system and the development of academic mobility programs” (Free University, n.d.).

Paradoxically, then, while resisting the authoritarian-neoliberal governance of the Russian state, the Free University attached itself to the Bologna Process, which has been characterised as a neoliberal, hegemonic, Eurocentric, and even colonial

project in the field of higher education. One of the imaginaries behind the creation of the Bologna Process was the idea of increasing the competitiveness of European economies (Hummel, 2009; Kaya, 2015). This was exactly the reason why the Russian state initially joined the Bologna Process in 2003 (Deriglazova, 2019, p. 346). In the global competition of knowledge economies, the European Union aspired to become the most competitive one in the world through the Bologna Process (Jessop et al., 2008). Figueroa (2010, p. 248) argues that the Eurocentricity of the Bologna Process is rooted in “narrativizing history” within Europe as the creator of progress understood solely in terms of capitalist culture.

Aligning itself with the neoliberal project of the Bologna Process, which the Russian government had initially taken up to increase its state competitiveness, paradoxically becomes a mechanism of resistance against the authoritarian politics of the Russian state in this new temporal context. The translations entail tensions and contradictions: despite the attempts of these projects to break outside of authoritarian-neoliberal control, they might still be entangled in the patchy acts of translation and not fully shielded from the powers of capital and states, which penetrate these projects through their porous boundaries.

## Conclusions: Porous boundaries of resistance

There is a wealth of research showing that the penetrative workings of capitalism generate dispossession, alienation, and control. They ruin different areas of life, including that of the university, by building authoritarian-managerial hierarchies and subsuming academic activities to profit-making. However, it is important to recognise that the forces of neoliberal capitalism are not working in isolation. Sometimes they entangle with other oppressive powers, such as authoritarian states. This also creates resistance and attempts to imagine and actualise academia anew. While desires to build alternatives to the neoliberal university are common to many contexts, some scholars, such as those in Russia, also struggle with the dictates of the authoritarian state, as this chapter has shown. Analysing the resistance to the oppressive workings of neoliberal capitalism beyond the contexts of liberal democracies is important: projects of resistance in these cases must navigate through a complex assemblage of oppressive powers, that of global neoliberalisation and the authoritarian state. In this chapter, I have been specifically interested in how resistance to authoritarian-neoliberal control is imagined and acted upon, and how we, as scholars of capitalism, could enrich our understanding of the dynamics of destabilisation, translation, and subversion of these oppressive powers.

By intentionally trying to resist the oppressive workings of the state and capital, the projects of resistance analysed in this chapter become sites for translation. This means that they attempt to replace the vertical of power with collegiality, fear with joy, bureaucratic-administrative dictates with freedom, and separation propagated by state borders with the deterritorialised academic enterprise. However, while resistance

is usually articulated through such contrasts and binaries, translations are exactly something different: they are messy and patchy and include tensions, contradictions, and paradoxes.

Although the projects analysed in this chapter were intended to break outside authoritarian-neoliberal dictates, to part ways with the state, and to reclaim the idea of a university beyond institutionalised entities, they had limitations in doing so. The authoritarian state holds control over many of the resources needed for knowledge production and may use its legislative powers to prevent the existence of these projects. While the projects seek to operate beyond control, there is hardly any utopian outside, and the projects might become entangled in other forms of power in the acts of patchy translation. The intrusive powers of state and capital often penetrate these alternative projects through their porous boundaries.

In the complex matrix of authoritarian-neoliberal forms, resistance is necessarily in conversation with the workings of authoritarianism, neoliberalism, and their compositions. The projects analysed in this chapter have been born in the interaction with authoritarian and neoliberal forms of the contemporary university: even when seeking to resist authoritarian-neoliberal control, the latter is the point of departure for their translations. They want to take, reposition, and reclaim the academic world-making projects, to strip the oppressive powers of ownership. However, the projects of resistance are born in and through their relation to the oppressive powers.

The boundaries of these projects are porous, and different elements might leak through them. As I have shown in this chapter, in the void of resources, these projects and sites might need to attach themselves to other powerful orderings. There are diverse capitalisms and neoliberalisms contained by (sometimes opposing each other) states: the Russian authoritarian-neoliberal regime has constructed itself in opposition to the Eurocentric neoliberal project of the European Union. This might create paradoxes in the acts of translation: while resisting one authoritarian-neoliberal composition, such as the Russian state, resistance might come attached to other neoliberal projects, such as the EU's neoliberal Bologna Process. This underscores that translations are messy and incomplete puzzles that patch together different elements. The boundaries are porous. In their multiple compositions, acts of political resistance contribute both to the orderings of neoliberal powers as well as to their subversions.

As capitalism is, in itself, a multitude and hybrid, the very idea of breaking free from all these multiple forms becomes even more problematic. A question remains: how far "outside" neoliberal and/or authoritarian compositions can such projects of translation go? What might be the way to subvert oppressive powers? How drastically can we escape assemblages of control? As capitalism is enabled by diversity and translations, as scholars such as Anna Tsing (2015) or J. K. Gibson-Graham (2006) have shown, the same applies to different forms of resistance. The assemblage perspective suggests replacing the modernist binary of inside and outside and their rigid boundaries with relationality, hybridity, and porosity. Translations are a space of interactions and subversions of meanings that leak into each other through their porous boundaries.



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