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Resisting academic capitalism with a postcapitalist pedagogy

Healthier universities through antihierarchy, communality, and lived alternatives

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With this chapter, I contribute to the debates on retheorising capitalism by drafting a suggestion for a postcapitalist pedagogy that examines alternative epistemologies and methodologies, academic citizenship, and practices of resisting academic capitalism. I revisit previous scholarship on academic capitalism, autoethnography as a way of *writing differently*, and then make use of a case study of a three-day “Retheorising Capitalism Funfair” event that took place in Tampere University, Finland, in October 2023. As an undergraduate student, I also suggest that early-career scholarship is a valuable position for unchained and positive reimaginations of academia. It is a novel position locating sites of legitimacy, politics and innovation.

I argue that a postcapitalist pedagogy is a policy encompassing a philosophy of methodological and epistemological diversity, communality and collegiality, as well as inclusion and antihierarchy. It manifests as institutional culture, teaching and learning practices, and knowledge interests. These results may be significant in constituting healthier—and, ironically, more productive —universities, faculty, and students. With this chapter I answer the call for alternatives in the face of the persistent hold of academic capitalism and the intensified challenges to well-being that follow.

Autoethnography as methodology

For the research material, I utilise my personal experiences to derive from them a narrative representing not only myself, but the positionality and relationality of university students more broadly. My own observations are enriched by engaging in dialogue with other scholars in the field through their publications, which helps critically evaluate the Retheorising Capitalism Funfair and my own situatedness. This piece of writing aims to deliver a participant's perspective, and perhaps to stretch the normative boundaries of the genre of academic writing. Arguably, this kind of writing is in itself resistance to academic capitalism and its hierarchies.

My methodology rests on earlier insights of *writing differently*, drawing heavily from the feminist tradition which by nature defies scholarly conventions (e.g., Brigg & Bleiker, 2010; Gilmore et al., 2019; Kociatkiewicz & Kostera, 2023). The point of departure is the recognition that the norms of academic writing and research shape the perception of valid knowledge, teaching and learning. As Lacatus, Schade and Yao (2015, p. 777) put it “methodological choices are ethical choices”, which “inform our training, teaching, and disciplinary governance.” Therefore, writing differently has political and ethical implications: it aims to broaden, widen and deepen knowledge, and reach new ideas and meanings (Gilmore et al., 2019). This chapter is about writing differently in the sense that it challenges norms both in research and in academia more widely. Moreover, it experiments with and ponders alternatives to academic capitalism, appreciates the perspectives and diversity of academic novices, and concludes with invoking novel practices with a particular emphasis on humane ethics. The chapter is based on my participation at the “Retheorising Capitalism Funfair” event, and I turn to autoethnography as a methodology for locating the sites of politics, resistance, and innovation by systematically, and critically, navigating through my experiences and feelings associated with the event.



Figure 1. Zine-making at the Retheorising Capitalism Funfair event. CC BY-NC-ND Natalia Batrakova, 2023.

Autoethnography bypasses positivist assumptions about knowing and the self, exposes relations of power and legitimacy, and provides perspectives and information otherwise not available. It produces more nuanced, complicated and comprehensive forms of insights, derives from a range of faculties and sources of knowledge, and issues out first-hand information (Brigg & Bleiker, 2010; Buckley, 2015). The force of autoethnography lies in questioning the authority of the seemingly objective neutral and understanding oneself better in the process, leading to a more critical, sophisticated and ethically aware scholar in reproducing and transforming structures of knowledge and power (Löwenheim, 2010). Furthermore, as I suggest here, the social, experimenting, slow, deep, personal, relational and questioning nature of autoethnography challenges the mainstream neoliberal mode of *doing* academia. Considering the aforementioned, autoethnography can be perceived as a “revolutionary form of writing” and methodology (Auchter, 2019, p. 192).

I wish to stress that autoethnography is a complementary expedition alongside more traditional social science approaches, both equally essential. The validity of autoethnographic research should be evaluated in terms of the very process of knowledge production: opening up new hypotheses, identifying research questions, and creating “new and valuable insights for particular knowledge communities” (Brigg & Bleiker, 2010). Following this line, Naumes (2015) provides a simple starting point for the critical examination of autoethnographic research by asking: “[H]ow might the narrative disrupt congruity in political thought and does the narrative incorporate those who have otherwise been left out of political science discourse?” (p. 831). Naturally, autoethnographic research should also be transparent about key choices of selection and interpretation of data and include some self-reflection that is sensitive to cultural and societal contexts in order to provide means for evaluating the relevance of the results (Brigg & Bleiker, 2010). In this research chapter, my unique position as a participant and an undergraduate student helps identify key issues and generate new insights and visions that could challenge and change the present university practices.

Reviewing academic capitalism

Recognising the institutionalisation and normalisation of academic capitalism in various parts of the world’s universities, this contribution attempts to draft a postcapitalist pedagogy as an alternative. In the Finnish context, where this autoethnographic inquiry takes place, there has been a qualitative turn towards academic capitalism through many neoliberal reforms and jurisdiction regarding universities and higher education since the 1990s. This reflects the larger pattern of increased market-oriented and neoliberal reasoning by the Finnish state and the Nordic countries in general. However, notable differences in the practices and scales of academic capitalism still occur between disciplines when compared to other countries such as the United States (Kauppinen & Kaidesoja, 2014). Perhaps the main difference is that in Finland the administrative changes towards academic capitalism

have been largely top-down policies deriving from, among others, the European Union, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and the philosophies of New Public Management and knowledge-based economy (e.g., Kauppinen & Kaidesoja, 2014; Poutanen 2022). In Finland quantitative productivity indicators are highlighted, and education is increasingly viewed as an individual investment and a commodity (Poutanen, 2023). Poutanen (2023) also argues that universities face a crossfire of growing demands and diminishing funding, while debates continue over possible tuition fees and the overall direction of Finland's higher education policy.

All in all, the concept of academic capitalism describes the globally dominant changes in the context of academic work and policy of higher education. Its most prominent features include growing intertwinement with markets, centrality of technoscience, tightening relationships with multinational corporations and limited funds for discretionary activities (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). To compensate for the reduction in public funding, faculty and institutions utilise market activities such as tuition fees, patenting, grants, and industry collaborations to secure external funding (e.g., Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). Academic capitalism transforms knowledge into a profitable market contributing to capital accumulation and the changing labour market and economy (Jessop, 2018). Education, knowledge and creativity are no longer being viewed as a common good. Instead, they are commodified with intellectual property rights claimed and traded through exercises of privatisation, hierarchy and exclusion (Jessop, 2018). On the whole, universities and academics have become increasingly entrepreneurial, profit-oriented and operate in a growingly competitive environment (e.g., Ylijoki, 2003; Deem, 2001).

It can be argued that academic capitalism maintains, creates and defends institutional(ised) inequality. It divides educational institutions, faculties and academic workers into ranks (e.g., McNay, 2021; Reitz, 2017; Beatson et al., 2021). Resources are granted unevenly among universities and faculties, favouring institutional prestige next to market-oriented and male-dominated STEM-fields (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics). Simultaneously, the new system of stratification through competition legitimises positional privilege, wage differences and hierarchies in general (Reitz, 2017). Furthermore, despite the academic profession growing more diverse, women and racial minorities continue to constitute the lowest positions and suffer salary discrimination (Reichman, 2022). Altogether, as with capitalism in general, there seems to be no trickle-down effect (MacNay, 2022).

The negative impacts of academic capitalism also include the growth and intensification of project work, short-term contracts, and external funding, which is deemed to endanger researcher's career prospects, financial safety, and even the quality of their research (Ylijoki, 2003). Furthermore, universities have implemented a more corporate management approach to leadership (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997), which has led to the weakening of "academic citizenship" (Macfarlane, 2005, p. 300) overlooked simply as an issue of administration (Macfarlane, 2005, p. 299). However,

it would be pivotal to nurture a culture of collegiality, especially amidst junior faculty, in order to secure sustainability within the academia (Beatson et al., 2021).

Practices of resistance

Remarkably, academic capitalism has caused notable backlash and incentives to pursue alternative forms of work (e.g., Ylijoki, 2003; Collyer, 2015). Alternatives through which academic capitalism can be resisted include, for example, community activism, curiosity-driven research, the mentoring of junior colleagues, intensive interaction with students, intellectual engagement for its own sake and those forms of knowledge production which aim to improve understanding of community issues or the solving of social problems. (Collyer, 2015, p. 325). Moreover, as Oili-Helena Ylijoki (2003) suggests, project work and partnerships can also be interpreted as a possibility for collective teamwork, collaboration and solidarity opposing individualism.

Besides challenging the working culture of one's own unit or institution, the resistance against neoliberal reforms has also prompted action against national governments in various countries, such as the UCU strikes in the United Kingdom and protest against university privatisation in Greece (The Guardian, 2023; France24, 2024). In Finland, a national walk-out of researchers and university teachers took place in February 2024 organised by Akava, the Confederation of Unions for Professional and Managerial Staff in Finland. This occurred while I was writing this text. The campaign was part of a larger strike wave, united under the apt motto "for a better working life", opposing government reforms that, if implemented, would significantly weaken Finnish labour legislation (Tieteentekijät, n.d.). Additionally, in September 2023, university students mobilised against government education cuts and universities' policy to sell out campus spaces by occupying campuses and camping there overnight for two weeks (e.g., Auranen & Kauppi, 2023; Yle News, 2023).

These examples illustrate that despite the neoliberal reforms taking place in various universities, academic workers and students remain active shapers of the academia driven by their values, interest, aims, and traditions. Importantly, they demonstrate that relations of power and structure are (re)produced and changed through social action. (Ylijoki, 2003; Collyer, 2015.) These observations also speak to the need for (auto) ethnography in recognising the significance of feelings, experiences and individuals in the creation of institutions and institutional cultures.

In the quest for drafting a postcapitalist pedagogy as an alternative to academic capitalism I draw on Latin American and feminist frameworks. In their article Rhoades et al. (2004, p. 326) present three significant alternative projects regarding universities. Firstly, they propose a focus on democratisation and the promotion of increased access to higher education as a public good and as an investment; secondly, strategies for independent social development and community; and thirdly, sovereignty and cultural distinctiveness for universities. This project resonates with Gibson-Graham's,

Cameron's, and Healy's (2013, pp. xviii-xix) postcapitalist proposition for "taking back the economy". This includes:

surviving together well and equitably; distributing surplus to enrich social and environmental health; encountering others in ways that support their well-being as well as ours; consuming sustainably; caring for...our natural and cultural commons; and investing our wealth in future generations (Gibson-Graham et al., 2013, pp. xviii—xix).

In my reading, the projects outlined by Rhoades et al. (2004) and postcapitalist diverse economy scholars are mutually supportive. I combine the two signposts with the experiences from the Retheorising Capitalism Funfair event, as locating and building on existing forms of alternative economies and revolution is at the heart of postcapitalist politics (Gibson-Graham et al., 2013). The notion of "taking back the economy" (Gibson-Graham et al., 2013) also complements my autoethnographic approach by stressing the significance and power of individual agency.

Retheorising Capitalism Funfair

The "Retheorising Capitalism Funfair" was a three-day event held at Tampere University in October 2023. It was organised by the Academy of Finland funded project *Assembling Postcapitalist International Political Economy*. The event invited students and scholars of International Relations (IR) and International Political Economy (IPE) to rethink capitalism and its aftermath(s) through cultivating alternative academic cultures, epistemologies, and creative workshop methods (Tampere University, n.d.). The program included zine-making (i.e., a small-circulation, self-published DIY leaflets), a movement-based workshop, a relaxation session, capitalism-themed board games, group discussions, a roundtable, as well as keynote presentations on decolonisation, Islamic economic philosophy, and capitalism's spatio-technological infrastructures. Approximately 30 people, both students and staff members, participated in the event. Further analysis of the diversity of the event will be discussed later.

Master-level students could join the Funfair through a 5 ECTS intensive course, which involved completing preassigned readings, writing a learning diary, and participating in the Funfair. As a 21-year-old, second-year bachelor's student, I ended up on the course by a lucky accident. Having spotted an advertisement for the event in an email newsletter, I immediately enrolled feeling very much invested in the topic, excited, and looking forward to the seminar. Blinded by my enthusiasm, I only later reread the practicalities and realised the Funfair was intended for advanced students. Having faced this first academic hierarchy, I sent a follow-up email explaining my motivation to the coordinating teacher and, to my delight, was admitted regardless. Taking on my first master's course made me feel proud, yet

slightly nervous and insecure as I knew I would probably be the youngest and most inexperienced one present.

However, regarding autoethnographic research, I now view my position as a “novice” to be a strength as it breaks many norms. As a beginner, my mentality has been less affected by (sub)conscious schemes, habits and commitments, which might lead to fresh viewpoints and insights. Additionally, my lack of experience has led me to draw value also from exposures outside academia, potentially resulting in interesting outcomes. Furthermore, my positionality has allowed me to become easily excited and surprised. Here, I seek support from the feminist notions of “getting lost” as a beginning for subversive research (e.g., Lather 2007). In developing my analysis, I have utilised field notes and my learning diary from the time of the event.

My first, and perhaps the most important point concerns the emphasis placed on alternative epistemologies and methodologies during the event. For a start, naming the event a “Funfair” suggests a focus on enjoying oneself, the company, and the learning process. Overall, the stated aim of implementing these alternative approaches was to find new ways to learn, think and (re)theorise capitalism (Tampere University, n.d.). The methodology involved practical exercises of zine-making and a movement-based workshop. This drastically differs from the mainstream and traditional academic experience, mostly leaning on physically immobile knowledge work executed through listening or reading. Moreover, by centring sociability, the Funfair event proposed a stark contrast to the mass, distance- and independent courses that have been generally predominant in my studies.



Figure 2. A movement-based workshop. CC BY-NC-ND Natalia Batrakova, 2023.

The zine-making also prompted questions of wellbeing and consent. One goal of the Funfair was to produce postcapitalist zines. Crafting was allowed during the presentations, and everyone progressed at their own pace. Some made multiple zines while others did not finish even one. On the last day, everyone was invited to present their work, but no one was forced to do so. There was an open discussion about coping and tiredness, as one participant admitted to not having created anything due to being too exhausted. Despite the idea of everyone producing something, this was accepted, and the hosts agreed that the past three days had been long ones. It felt as if the pressures of productivity, competition, or accomplishment were absent. In my view, more flexibility was granted, and students' anxieties over coping were acknowledged better than usual. According to my experience, these kinds of policies customarily remain superficial and easily yield to the demands of efficiency.

The second significant observation regards the notably low hierarchies and power structures. During the Funfair, scholars, keynote speakers, and students all happily mingled with each other, and, importantly, were encouraged to do so. I found myself discussing hair dyes with an international senior scholar, flirting with a cute fellow-student, falling asleep next to a course mate during the relaxation session, talking to a doctoral researcher about her partner reading aloud for her, crafting with another well-established researcher, having lunch at the cafeteria with peers, exchanging numbers with a new friend, and playing board games in a team dissecting all attending groups. This fusing was further emphasised by the informal logistical arrangements. Instead of traditional lecture halls, the venues were spaces where the furniture could be moved.



Figure 3. Playing capitalism-themed board games. CC BY-NC-ND Natalia Batrakova, 2023.

My third point covers the apparent emphasis on discussion and collegiality. Multiple group discussions were scheduled in the program, there was always time for the audience's questions, and lunch and coffee breaks were adequately long for informal networking. Crafting and playing board games together were ideal impetuses for exchanging thoughts and establishing new connections with others. The genuine interest and appreciation of the participants' input regardless of their academic rank spoke for antiauthoritarianism. In addition, this communality diverged from my preceding experiences of academia as onerously competitive and hierarchical.

The fourth and final remark I wish to raise turns to the evident commitment to diversity. There were many nationalities present, and the speakers were multicultural. Intentionally or not, all the keynote speakers were women. I found this rather exceptional given that IPE has long been one of the most male-dominated fields within IR (Elias & Roberts, 2018). Also, the outward appearance of these women challenged the normative ideas of a "credible academic". Everyone was neatly dressed but allowed their personal style to shine through. There was a young woman of colour in business formal, a middle-aged woman without make-up in a hoodie, and a third woman who represented a bohemian aesthetic with many loose-fitting and layered pieces. Most appeared in colourful and patterned clothing. It felt as if the stylistic choices made by these women opposed the masculinist notions of professionalism that tend to suppress femininity and personality. The example these women posed made me feel more included, confident, and trusting in finding my path and place in academia. I was left feeling empowered.

Not all fun and games

Even though I was deeply impressed with the Funfair, it is worthwhile to also examine it critically to make visible the contradictions and challenges that surround postcapitalist pedagogies. The event challenged academic capitalism in many ways but simultaneously remained entangled with it. This complies with the previous literature reviewed in the theoretical framework section.

Firstly, this was a one-time project that has been enabled by external funding from the Research Council of Finland (RCF). Even though the RCF is a state-funded government agency operating within the Finnish Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, this still reflects a pattern where university operations are increasingly dependent on financing from external agencies such as the government and industry (e.g., Ylijoki, 2003, p. 307). Aligned with the framework of academic capitalism, this may also speak for serving business interest, profit-seeking market mentality, and commodification of knowledge. It may undermine the Research Council's mission of supporting high-quality, diverse, impactful, and responsible Finnish research across all fields of science for the benefit of the whole society (Suomen Akatemia, n.d.). On the one hand, outside funding offers possibilities to conduct free research, while on

the other hand it imposes increased competition, as scholars of academic capitalism have noted.

Secondly, some of the cozy spaces were located outside the university campus in the nearby Nokia Arena, a new concert and event hall with 15,000 seats distinctive to the image of the city of Tampere built in 2021. The narratives behind the construction of the Nokia Arena are influenced by neoliberal ideas of creating an urban, dynamic, and lively city centre. This is supported by the symbolic capital of hiring world-class Danish-American architect Daniel Libeskind. Through Nokia Arena, Tampere additionally embraces its roots and legacy of sports success, proudly being home to two long-standing and popular hockey teams. (Leino, 2024.) Notably, this careful orchestration also served to depoliticise the Nokia Arena as a “political-economic megaproject reinforcing large-scale urban regeneration” (Leino, 2024, p. 14).

The fact that the university rents a costly venue in the Nokia Arena in the hopes of attracting visibility and improving its image, while at the same time reducing its original campus spaces to save on operating expenses, appears controversial (e.g., Eskelinen, 2022). It further exemplifies the interweaving between academia and business actors, of a shift away from prioritising student and research needs, and of the demand for universities to brand themselves with nonacademic merits in order to succeed in the current competitive environment. However, hosting the Funfair partly in the distinguished space proved that these aspirations are successful, as the venue was impressive and boosted the overall spirit of the event. Nonetheless, this triumph is accompanied by the loss of pleasant spaces elsewhere, even though they tend to serve a larger crowd of students and staff (instead of limited groups of seminar attendees) on a daily basis at the campus. This again points to internal structures of hierarchy and privilege.



Figure 4. Relaxation session. CC BY-NC-ND Natalia Batrakova, 2023.

Thirdly, a modest distance and distinction between students and scholars remained, and some made more of an effort to overcome it than others. Relatedly, it is important to note here that sociality and sociability are not equally easy, enjoyable or natural for everyone due to differences in personal temperament and upbringing. Additionally, the definition of good social skills varies significantly between cultures. (Keltinkangas-Järvinen, 2010.) I propose that authentic appreciation of diversity fosters collaboration and sociality while acknowledging their intricate limitations as aspirational new norms of pedagogy. Like autoethnography, alternative methodologies may not be suitable for everyone or everything but are nonetheless worthy and complementary in specific endeavors.

Finally, it is worthwhile to note that another student with a different background, interests, opinions, experiences etc. likely would have provided a divergent account of the Funfair. I wish to point out the rather like-minded atmosphere of the Funfair, which was perhaps due to the subject and nature of the event. It is possible that this left no space for dissidence, or made it difficult to express disagreement, which might weaken student and community engagement and reduce diversity. Although I consider the perspective and diversity of an academic novice to be a plus in the context of this autoethnographic inquiry, it may also make me by default easier to impress. However, I have aimed to balance this out with a thorough review and discussion of preceding literature in the field, by strictly following good scientific practice in this research, and by engaging in self-reflection and transparency, which are central elements of a successful autoethnographic methodology.

Towards postcapitalist pedagogies

I propose that a postcapitalist pedagogy harbours a philosophy of *methodological and epistemological diversity, communality and collegiality, as well as inclusion and antihierarchy*. It views universities as infrastructures that support public investment and common good, rather than the neoliberal modus operandi of capital accumulation, productivity and business interests. A postcapitalist pedagogy subsists as an institutional culture, teaching and learning practices, and knowledge interests.

A postcapitalist pedagogy must be fundamentally antihierarchical and committed to demolishing intersectional structures of oppression, as capitalism's prerequisite lies in divisive exploitation. Embracing alternative epistemologies and methodologies assist in this through exposing new ways of asking, searching, knowing—and eventually being. In turn, focusing on diversity and inclusion in terms of the people involved and uplifted in academia attends to the prevalent inequalities within the academic institutions specifically and the society at large.



Figure 5. Participants at the Retheorising Capitalism Funfair event. CC BY-NC-ND Natalia Batrakova, 2023.

An important finding of this chapter is the centrality of building short- and long-term communities within academia. The essence of this also appears to be found in the dismantlement of hierarchies. I derive from this the insight that a postcapitalist pedagogy is in particular a policy that materialises through engagement in practices of resistance and benevolence. These include for example curiosity-driven research, mentoring students and junior colleagues, peer-reviewing, co-operating, volunteering for the community—and even activism (Beatson et al., 2021).

Despite advocating for presence over productivity, an alternative postcapitalist pedagogy does not indicate the erasure of hard work, challenging oneself, ambition, advancement, publicising or conducting first-rate research. Rather, it actually fortifies these by enhancing the well-being of current academic workers and students; improving the integration of junior and early-career scholars; maintaining academia as a desirable work environment; shaping academia and academic success as feasible for a more comprehensive public; and by introducing novel research approaches and aspirations. Ironically, experiences of community, affinity, safety, support, motivation, contentment and continuity are, in fact, likely to simultaneously contribute to neoliberal aims of increased productivity (for example more graduates faster) (e.g., Katz et al., 2019).

Relatedly, traditional and mainstream approaches continue to persist, as differences occur between disciplines, institutions and countries in the experienced benefits, disadvantages, practices, and scales of academic capitalism (e.g., Ylijoki, 2003; Deem, 2010; Kauppinen & Kaidesoja, 2012). Ultimately, a change in mentality and practicalities is indeed a valuable first step in “reframing” the university and

studying (Gibson-Graham et al., 2013), but a comprehensive normative shift away from academic capitalism will also require institutional and governmental actions. Nonetheless, in the light of this research, postcapitalist pedagogies can and, de facto, do operate within the neoliberal university.

My autoethnographic expedition showed that students and early-career scholars are a valuable resource for reimagining capitalism, as they raise fresh viewpoints, expose points of congestion and are not limited by habitual normativity or restrictions brought on by the prestige of a senior position. Autoethnography allowed me to produce comprehensive and nuanced understandings, draw from first-hand experiences, entwine them with previous literature on related topics, and locate sites of politics and innovation. Furthermore, autoethnography continues the important legacy of “writing differently”, therefore shaping the perception of legitimate knowledge and carrying political and ethical input (Gilmore et al., 2019). These results consolidate the notion that autoethnographic research ought to always be assessed with regard to its contributions to the process of knowledge production (Brigg & Bleiker, 2010). Moreover, this chapter, as a piece of writing, can also be interpreted as an example of a postcapitalist pedagogy, since an autoethnographic expedition conducted from an undergraduate student position challenges the existing knowledge hierarchies.

I argue that the presented results are useful for both defining a postcapitalist pedagogy, and for extending the understanding and meaning of postcapitalism itself. In the 21st century context of persistent neoliberalism, this chapter adds to the existing literature on academic capitalism and postcapitalist politics by using a pedagogical approach and demonstrating alternative modes of actions within academia through a real-life example. These findings are significant for individual experiences of well-being; for the university as an institution; for academia as a place of employment and study; for the validity of knowledge, teaching and learning; and for composing better policy and politics in the future. I conclude with an invitation for further research on the subject and a message of hope for healthier universities through antihierarchy, communality, and lived alternatives.

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