

Perverse Relationships: The Graduate Teaching Assistant in the Neoliberal University

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Abstract

The ambiguous nature of the role of the Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) has been the focus of much of the – albeit limited – research regarding these higher education labourers. Previous analyses of the GTA have made use of Foucault’s theories of subject formation within the neoliberal university. Walter Benjamin’s metaphysics of transcendence offer a complementary theoretical framing: a space to glimpse the possibility of radical alterity within the GTA role. It is in phenomena such as the GTA role – rendered ambiguous by its synonymous importance and invisibility – that hope for change resides. The disconnections between these phenomena materialise in the perverse site of the neoliberal university: a site where relationships are twisted beyond recognition. The GTA role, when read against the myth of a progressive academic career, contains the possibility of change. This possibility is to be found within labour relationships within the neoliberal academy. GTAs’ liminal status presents the opportunity to reimagine the contracts of reciprocity upon which pedagogy and research depend.

Introducing the Invisible

Perhaps the most vivid metaphors have been supplied by Chris Park who frames GTAs as ‘neither fish nor fowl’ (2002, p. 60) within the organisational and imaginative structure of UK universities. This liminality, the ‘betwixt and between’ (Turner, 1964) state of the GTA role does not only characterise those uncertainties attributable to all transitional roles. Rather, this article considers the liminal position of the GTA as a specific form of invisibility; a blind spot which the logic of the neoliberal university proliferates as an absence.

I focus here on a myth of the doctorate as an apprenticeship. Within this evolutionary model of an academic career, low-paid teaching work appears as an ‘opportunity for development’ (Weidert et al., 2012). In this piece I read this progressive narrative against the grain. What shadows are cast on this myth by the material of the current moment?

Following changes to UK higher education funding in 2012, the GTA role has become increasingly important within academic departments. Undergraduate courses have exponentially inflated both cohort numbers and tuition fees since 2012. Departments have used casually-employed doctoral researchers in order to respond flexibly to heightened demands for undergraduate teaching hours. However, both the wider context and detail regarding the specific way that GTA employment operates is obscured by a failure to consider this role as separate to the more widespread use of casual and precarious academic staff. In this paper, this blind spot is read through the COVID-19 crisis

as a force that renders GTA workers invisible to wider systems of support.

Previous analyses of the GTA have made use of Foucault's theories of subject formation within the neoliberal university (see Gill, 2014; Gill & Donaghue, 2016; Raaper, 2018; Rao, Hosein & Raaper, 2021). Focusing on ideas of power and agency within the culture of UK higher education, this body of work has introduced important discussions regarding the interrelated nature of GTAs' self-perceptions and the structural context of the university. This article aims to contribute to these debates through implementing an alternative understanding of change within UK universities.

In Foucault's neo-Kantian metaphysics, material is immanent and time is teleological (see Gordon, 1986; Miller, 1994; Dupré, 1998). Put another way, in the world as described by Foucault everything that might happen is already present within experience. Progress occurs through the increased agency granted to the subject, as multiple phenomena are identified within things that appear as singular objects. This is a world where things – multiple though they may be – follow on from each other. In short, Foucault's model of progress can be seen as an iteration of Kant's: a theology of human development which is directly correlated with the growth of taxonomic systems. These "knowledges" (Foucault, 1980) offer little in the way of hope, being as they are documents of the order of things *as they are*.

This paper proposes that Walter Benjamin's (1921) metaphysics of transcendence offers a complementary theoretical framing: a space to glimpse the possibility of

radical alterity within the GTA role. For Benjamin, the chance for the world to be different is present in every moment. These chances are held in things that have slipped out of view, concealed by myths that make the world as it is seem inevitable (see Leslie, 2000; Weber, 2008). It is in phenomena such as the GTA role – which I explore in this article as both central to the current business model of higher education, and invisible within its documented structures – that hope for change resides.

My aim is not to illuminate something previously unseen or to convince the reader of a position through a neat narrative. The intention is rather to place the image of an academic apprenticeship next to two other images. The first, as mentioned above, appears as an increased reliance on GTAs in the provision of undergraduate teaching. The second is the concomitant decrease in secure roles for doctoral researchers in the postdoctoral period.

I discuss the disconnections between these phenomena materialising in the perverse site of the neoliberal university: a site where relationships are twisted beyond recognition. Far from being a hopeless commentary on the state of contemporary academia, the work of this article is to rupture the constraints of the empty myth of the academic apprentice. This splinter appears as a site of possibility. In the devastation of the myth of the academic apprenticeship, a chance glimmers. I propose here that the GTA has a specific opportunity in the current moment to reimagine relationships within the academy, and in doing so provide hope for new possibilities in pedagogy and research.

The Invisible Academy

When I first began the research for this paper, I asked numerous friends and family if they could think of any representations of GTAs in literature or media. Nobody could think of one. Internet searches also proved fruitless. This absence in popular media of a role that over the past decade has become integral to the undergraduate learning experience, raises the question of whether undergraduate students make a distinction between lecturers and GTAs. Research suggests that whilst undergraduate students perceive GTAs as responsive and broadminded, they are also perceived to be less knowledgeable, confident, and skilful tutors than lecturers (Park, 2002; Dudley, 2009; Muzaka, 2009; Kendall and Schussler, 2012). These studies seem to suggest that when pulled into focus, the GTA appears to undergraduate students as a distinct category of tutor. However, when they are not distinguished as a separate category they disappear, exceeded as they are by the cultural capital of their regularly-employed colleagues.

The myth of the GTA as an academic apprentice positions them as tutors who are not *yet* good enough. The cultural and symbolic capital acquired by the lecturer through the status of their title and occupational security gives their communications a greater legitimacy (Bourdieu, 1991). This myth cultivates a larger field of *not-quite* lecturers whose seemingly second-rate cultural capital is made and perpetuated by precarious working conditions. This cultivation occurs through the naturalised progress narrative in which the GTA moves into a lectureship after passing their doctorate and enjoys the bounty of their accrued cultural

capital. When a stable academic role is aimed for and does not occur in the postdoctoral period, it appears to be due to a deficit in the individual.

Over the past decade, however, there has been an increase in the use of casualised academic staff in UK universities. Vitae's Careers in Research Online Surveys (2015-2019) estimate that although across Europe around three quarters of early career researchers aspire to an academic career, only a small minority will attain this goal. Even if an academic job is attained, it is unlikely to be secure. Vitae gather the views of research staff in UK universities about their career experiences. In recent surveys, 72% reported being employed on a fixed-term contract (although this has declined from 82% in 2009). The proportion in Russell Group institutions was almost 80% across all major disciplinary groups, while at other institutions this varied from 71% in physical and engineering sciences, to 41% in social sciences, and 37% in the arts and humanities. Among those who had completed their doctorate in the previous five years, 86% were employed on a fixed-term contract.

A survey of postdoctoral researchers in the humanities and social sciences found that respondents reported negative personal and professional implications of being employed on a fixed-term basis, including the anxieties and distractions of needing to regularly apply for competitive positions and relocate (University and Colleges Union, 2016). This emotional labour and its subsequent costs performed by these casualised academic teaching staff are laid out in Read and Leathwood's (2020) discussion regarding the implications of casualised academic labour:

[...] key pedagogical difficulties brought up by participants concerned a lack of ability to build longer-term knowledge of/relationship with the students they taught; a lack of involvement in planning or constructing courses on which they taught, and delays in being given course content or information, compounded by the emotional labour of attempting to hide such difficulties from students. Hiding these difficulties can ultimately work to support a conception that the success or failure of a course is primarily down to the qualities and abilities of the individual lecturer, measured and audited through technologies such as student course evaluations and satisfaction surveys. (p. 550)

If the GTA is obscured in research and popular discourse, this is intimately bound up in the shame and stigma of precariously employed postdoctoral colleagues' feelings of shame and illegitimacy. Precariously employed academics in Leathwood's (2013) study expressed valid concerns that students may question their legitimacy due to their contractual status. This led to secrecy regarding their labour conditions, further intensifying the lack of context for students regarding their tutor's position.

The absence of GTA representations in popular media appears within this context as a symptom of a wider obscuration of labour conditions within the higher education sector. There is an unclear boundary regarding what constitutes work: the outer limits of which academia inhabits. The UK university sector is marked by what Bourdieu might call a denied or paradoxical economy. I am

referring here to a system in and through which the prestige and perceived exceptionality of academic work tends to vanish the precarious and often unpaid labour required to sustain the academic institution. Put another way, academic success is often ascribed to 'qualities and abilities of the individual' (Read & Leathwood, 2020, p. 550). The naturalised image of an aptitude, gift, or endowment for scholarly work disavows the socioeconomic context of academic labour, shrouding the whole field in a myth. To be clear, I am describing a mythical university: in which the narrative of a progressive academic apprenticeship, leading to full time employment, forms over another myth. That of the gifted scholar.

The work that GTAs perform for the university sector is obscured not only through their exclusion from popular representation. This work is also eclipsed through its *inclusion* within these wider semi-visible structures of degraded and precarious employment in UK higher education. Although the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) collects academic labour force statistics, all precarious workers within the university are recorded under one category. This means that the specifics of the GTA context cannot be discerned. HESA does not collect information on the length or type of contracts, nor on the use of hourly-paid staff. It does not compel institutions to report their data on atypical staff in a consistent way.

At this moment, the teaching that PhD students provide is couched as an opportunity for development, and a chance to add experience of higher education teaching to a CV in a competitive job market. Through framing GTA workers as

academic apprentices rather than workers, their labour is imagined as a noneconomic pursuit: in this case as a form of cultural investment. Being neither student nor worker, GTAs cannot protest as students through the normal channels of the consumer. Their future career depends on them acting as good citizens in their home department, providing labour as and when it is needed. But they are not supported and cushioned by the employment laws that protect even their most precarious colleagues. Doctoral researchers in general are placed in a 'betwixt and between' (Turner, 1964) state; they are borderline/faultline academic subjects, who cannot claim institutional citizenship and its protections from their employer or the state. Nevertheless, they are subject to demands and judgements from students, academics, university administration and wider social structures in pursuit of a future career.

The structural difference between precariously employed academics and their GTA counterparts became apparent during the COVID-19 epidemic. Many funding bodies such as the ESRC and AHRC provide three years of stipend for doctoral researchers, despite the fact that the deadline for submission of a thesis comes after four years. There is, therefore, an expectation that in the fourth year of a doctorate, a doctoral researcher will be writing up their thesis whilst teaching and marking to support themselves. This is framed as a kind of apprenticeship into scholarly life where papers are produced and research is tied up, whilst working and gaining experience to add to competitive CVs. However, when the 2020 pandemic hit, some GTAs were placed in one of two situations: 1) at universities such as St

Andrews, GTAs were used for the bulk of face-to-face teaching whilst secure staff taught from the safety of home; 2) at many Russell Group universities all GTA work was cancelled in order to attempt to “balance the books” in expectation of dwindling student numbers in the following academic year. What both of these unhappy outcomes revealed was a structural issue. Full-time students are not eligible for Universal Credit unless they meet criteria other than being out of work, such as being ill, disabled or a parent. In short, in and of themselves, GTAs are not seen by wider governmental structures as workers. This vulnerable position renders GTA workers more likely to quietly accept unfavourable working conditions.

Precariously employed postdoctoral academics may hide their contract status due to stigma and shame. They are, however, recognised in the wider social context as workers. They have access to state support if their contract is suddenly terminated, as was the case in universities including Bristol, Newcastle and Sussex in March 2020. On the other hand, GTAs are obscured by forces outside of their control. As I explore in the next sections of this paper, this occurs in a manner that permeates their subject status. UK universities’ extensive use of GTAs – who are not eligible for state support – allows them to respond to a flexible academic economy. This has created a new labour market that places disadvantaged doctoral researchers at particular risk. The omitted category of the GTA – who is so close to the centre of the structure that they vanish – is simultaneously a site of both intensified danger *and* possibility.

Exploitation or multiscale precarity?

The myth of the GTA as an academic apprentice is explored under different terminology in Bosquet's (2008) *How the University Works*. By conceptualizing doctoral researchers in research universities as apprentice scholars, the university feels ethically justified in keeping their working circumstances substandard. If GTAs are workers, then they need to be treated as other labourers. The lack of academic jobs available after graduation, Bosquet asserts, means that GTAs are being recruited for their contingent labour as teaching faculty. Once awarded the PhD, they must either leave the university or find work on a short-term and unstable contract.

The situation that Bosquet describes is one of intentional exploitation by universities. In the next section, I provide an alternative reading of this myth of the academic apprentice. The invisibility of the GTA across multiple fields of research, the popular imagination of the university, and government benefits is deceptive. These workers are key instruments of a neoliberal logic which enacts perverse punishment on the humans required to keep its systems in operation. GTAs are constrained by the myth of an academic apprenticeship into acting as pliable components of a rational, marketised system. The figure of the GTA then not only exposes the human cost of processes of neoliberal restructuring: they also hold the potential to resist these systems through exercising a non-pliable subjectivity. Once the myth of an academic apprenticeship leading to a secure academic role is viewed as a fiction, new opportunities for resistance emerge.

In 2012, the structure of UK higher education funding was changed by David Cameron's Conservative government. Central government cut direct funding to universities and instead increased the cap on tuition fees to £9000 for home students. Long-term government loans were introduced to fund tuition and student recruitment caps were lifted shortly after. The opening up of the UK higher education market introduced new financial power structures into the university. These new structures and the rules that accompany them have been obscured through the blossoming of myriad administrative departments, each with individual objectives. Responsibility for large-scale disinvestments such as staff budgets cascade 'down the pipeline to small, weak units wholly unable to cope with them technically, politically, or financially' (Brown, 2015, p. 132).

Department and faculty leads have found themselves in a Kafkaesque frieze. The power that has been granted them turns out to be illusory; the laws that govern their role are obscured through a proliferation of bureaucratic procedures. Earlier in this paper, invisibility gestured through the figure of the GTA. It also appeared in the shame and secrecy of precarious academics regarding their contractual status. At the scale of the academic department, this invisibility occurs through a dematerialisation of the department's connection to the resources and information required to exercise choice. The GTA, the casualised academic, and the university department all appear here as bound by the same invisible force. It twists Bourdieu's (1991) notion of a paradoxical economy into a site of perversity.

The precarity of the GTA can also be glimpsed at the scale of the university in the first months of the COVID-19 crisis. When face-to-face teaching ceased due to lockdown restrictions, many universities feared that students would not return. The Institute for Fiscal Studies warned of losses of up to £4.3bn from reduced international student numbers, and up to £7.6bn from deficits in pension schemes, as well as falls in the conference, catering and student accommodation income: streams that are now crucial for universities' funding. Despite calls for a £2bn bailout, the government offered only limited financial support for struggling universities. Even that was offered in terms of a 'restructuring package' that placed stringent conditions on universities (Staton, 2020).

Perverse Machinations

The figure of the GTA embodies the invisibility and precarity that can be found at many scales within the university. They are what in psychoanalytic terms might be referred to as *disavowed subjects*, a figure that exposes deceit and simultaneously re-covers it through mythological self-deception.

The post-2012 UK university is a site where disjunctures of neoliberalism have metastasised into a perverse rejection of the truths of dependence, interdependence, and vulnerability. Taken to the scale of the university, this appears as a system which requires highly educated people to teach undergraduate students and conduct research. Excellent pedagogy and gold standard research is required from academic staff, not only for their own success but also

for the success of the university. However, the very thing that is demanded is rendered impossible.

Indeed, David Graeber (2013) was right when he stated that the more obviously your job benefits other people, the less you get paid. He failed, however, to mention that the more value a person's *human* labour has for the system that employs it, the more that subject finds itself the subject of perverse machinations. A key element of this is in the disavowal of one's very subject status, which places a shroud of invisibility around the role (consider for instance the way that cleaners and refuse collectors appear before dawn like a dream). Similarly, GTA staff are meant to invest in their own future by providing teaching labour within a system that disavows its own need for human teaching staff. By vanishing the future body of its academics, the university perpetuates a perverse fantasy of moving ever towards functioning as a capital-generating neoliberal machine that does not require human labour. In short, neoliberal structures have a perverse relationship to the human labour that sustains them.

What is particularly striking in the case of the GTA is the manner through which the role subjectifies the individual through its disavowal. This process occurs most markedly in the humanities and social sciences where, paradoxically, GTAs' specialisms in the critiques of neoliberal structures are most likely to be central to their work *and* whose future stability and safety are most jeopardised by the neoliberal university. Compared to science and engineering students, arts and humanities and social sciences students are both more likely to aim to stay in the higher education sector and also significantly less likely to gain permanent employment

following their doctorates. Critical analysis of political and organisational structures is required from social sciences and humanities GTAs. It is simultaneously devalued, so that the very act of criticism is the perverse relationship that emanates from this disavowal. This relationship can be understood as the psychic act of the university's discourse penetrating its future body of labour without being penetrated (Parsons, 2000). The GTA must understand the cost of neoliberal life and accrue capital for the university – through teaching about its discontents – whilst also suffering at its hands. The critique taught and researched neither penetrates the organisation nor its functioning.

The GTA position can therefore be conceptualised as sitting at the crux of not only the university's split narcissism and delusions of omnipotence, but also those of society at large. There is an undergraduate student (consumer) demand for decolonial, anti-neoliberal critique. In short, this is a very neat way in which left-wing critique is devalued: it is a required in a body of people who are made insecure by the very act of their specialism.

GTA teaching takes a similar path. The GTA's role of facilitating undergraduate seminars fosters these students' abilities to critique structures of oppression regarding issues such as low-paid, or zero-contract work. These self-same GTAs are, however, also subject to these very conditions themselves. What occurs here is twofold. The symbolic rules of the university, in which the tutor operates as an impartial observer, is destroyed. It is not openly mocked or ridiculed, but rather disavowed through the labour relationship between the student and the GTA, rendering the act of

criticism meaningless. Undergraduate students have been clear in numerous studies that they feel 'ripped off' being taught by junior members of staff (Park, 2002). They have stated many times that they feel that doctoral researchers are not legitimate academics, and this induces scepticism regarding what they are taught.

Whilst it would be easy to blame senior academics for these issues, what is actually at stake is that the GTA – in its very invisibility – functions as a cipher for perverse relations within the wider university system, to which all academic staff are subject. This is precisely a system operating as a site in which academics critique neoliberal practices whilst also being subject to those very same conditions. The treatment of the GTA functions to protect a crumbling relic of the pre-psychotic subjectivity of the university.

On finding itself subject to neoliberal conditions, the university has attempted to hallucinate itself out of a painful situation (a process that can be creative). Sadly, this capacity instead takes on a machinic life of its own – a regular and repetitive disavowal of the truth of dependence, interdependence and vulnerability. In short it becomes a site of perversity: a place whose own existential logic has twisted. This hidden agenda is not available in the same way as a conscious act. The myth of the academic apprentice normalises and naturalises exploitative labour practices. The real source of authority in the neoliberal university is obscured by this myth and many others like it. There is no depth to the myth of the academic apprentice, its perversions and paradoxes are easy to grasp. However, there is nothing to be found underneath this myth. As discussed, in

the neoliberal university all connections to a wider context dematerialise. When it is impossible to go beyond the surface, resistance appears in the material of the myth itself.

Disavowing Myth

As ever, the question that emerges is: what can be done? I suggest, in conclusion, that neoliberalism's strength is perversely also its failing. In its inability to reflect, to be human and to understand, neoliberalism demands the impossible. In acknowledging this impossibility, instead of allowing hope to shroud it in invisibility, it is possible to resist. Opportunity glimmers in new forms of solidarity with workers that have previously appeared as disconnected from academic life.

The notion of early career academia as a middle-class occupation is a relic of a previous time. It is directly related to the invisibility of the GTA, as well as the opportunity for resistance inherent to this role. Whilst academics retain cultural capital, it is subject to a perverse subjectivity: simultaneously fetishized and disavowed.

The use of Foucauldian analyses in studies of governance, power, and organisation have much to offer when understanding the neoliberal university and its discontents. However, under Kant's inimitable influence these deconstructions have a tendency to accrete into the image of an inescapable prison. I put forward here that Benjamin's thought contributes an important metabolism of theory into action. If we consider that the neoliberal university and its perverse machinations cannot be destroyed, and that what came before is not something we want back, then the myth

of a coming revolution ceases to hold much appeal. However, when this lure of something in the distance is removed, we find ourselves in a moment riven with possibilities.

These possibilities sit in the precise spot that the perverse myth of the academic apprentice obscures. I refer here to the power in fostering and nurturing relationships that work against the grain of the myth of the current academic structure. In experiential terms, the GTA's position is closely aligned with those other precarious workers on whose invisibility the university relies: the cleaners, kitchen staff, gardeners, and technicians. When the myth of the academic apprentice is read against the grain, the GTA role appears as an iteration of these other lowly paid, casualised, and invisible roles.

It is in this site – the connection to which is obscured by the myth of the academic apprentice – that invisibility can be transmuted into accountability, and perversity into reciprocity. One way of approaching this is using the cultural capital of the GTA to campaign for and leverage the working conditions of the other invisible workers, who sustain the material reality of the working university. By using the GTA's cultural capital in the rubble of the myth of the academic apprentice, it might be possible to disavow perversity: to animate new kinds of dependence, interdependence, and vulnerability in the academy.

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