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The Creation of a New Figure in Academia – The *Homo Applicandus*

Austrian universities have become quasi-enterprises the aim of which is to produce surpluses – whatever this means. In this neo-liberal concept figures and statistics have become relevant indicators of success and fiasco. As almost everywhere, the faculty of sciences is on the winning, the humanities are on the losing side. Since universities have not become real enterprises, of course, and their surpluses in knowledge production can never be actually evaluated, the acquaintance of third-party funded research has become crucial.

Key words: Austria, universities, humanities, third-party funded research, homo applicandus, competitiveness

Exposed to the constraints of being somehow profitable, a new type of academic entrepreneur has been emerging: the *homo applicandus*. This new type of academic is shaped by his or her capacity to develop competitive research projects, to write smart applications, to meet application deadlines of national and international third-party funded research programs and to manage as well as to execute research projects.

Academic life in Austria has become full of surprises – at least for someone like me, who started his academic career in 1980 at University of Graz. The year 2002 marks a decisive watershed in the long history of Austrian universities. After centuries of authoritarian state supervision, our universities, the main places of academic research in Austria, were released from it and gained autonomy in all relevant agendas: since one decade they constitute so-called juridical authorities of public law. With the ministry remained only the legal supervision. The ministry concludes objective and performance agreements with each university and after that the universities receive a so-called “global budget” from the state and within this financial framework universities have to be kept functioning. Former democratically elected bodies had been substituted by an authoritarian hierarchy directed by deans, the rector, the senate and the university’s advisory board.

Somehow exaggerated, the university has become a quasi-enterprise the aim of which is to produce surpluses – whatever this means. In this neo-liberal concept figures and statistics have become relevant indicators of success and fiasco. As almost everywhere, the faculty of sciences is on the winning, the humanities are on the losing

side. Since universities have not become real enterprises, of course, and their surpluses in knowledge production can never be actually evaluated, the acquaintance of third-party funded research has become crucial. This is relatively easy for faculties of sciences and medicine, but is rather difficult for the faculties of the humanities, whose tradition had been finding satisfaction in individual intellectual adventures, and their right to exist in a society, which is proud of its classical tradition in education, had been self-evident.

This time is definitely over. In a world that is shaped by neo-liberalism, processes of globalization, global competition and economic crises the humanities have lost their former virginal innocence and the traditionally styled professor-type has become a phase-out model. Exposed to the constraints of being somehow profitable, a new type of academic entrepreneur has been emerging: the *homo applicandus*. This new type of academic is shaped by his or her capacity to develop competitive research projects, to write smart applications, to meet application deadlines of national and international third-party funded research programs and to manage as well as to execute research projects.

As advised in the invitation to this roundtable, my paper will deal with my own experiences and observations. Most of the questions raised can be answered by analysing various facets of this magic figure of the *homo applicandus*. My paper will focus in its first section on the question of research funding in Austria, and in the second part on the question how to become a successful *homo applicandus*.

1) Research Funding in Austria

The emphasis of academic research in Austria is at its universities. The Academy of Sciences and other research institutions play only a comparatively minor role. Austria's system of funding research is obviously contrary to the Serbian system. Firstly, the target of all efforts to make research more efficient is the staff employed at the universities. Secondly, our salaries do not depend on successfully applied research projects to the ministry of science. Our salaries are good, however not as high as in Germany or Switzerland and only we decide about our objects of research.¹ Thus, it looks as if we live in a "Land of Milk and Honey". Relatively well paid, we even can decide in which directions we want to research. Our occupation is apparently our hobby and vice versa.

But stop! We do not live in a land of milk and honey any longer – and continuing describing our situation in Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav film titles – also not in a "No Man's Land", but rather in a tense situation depicted in "Battle of Neretva". Except fossils like me, who have a life-time position, my younger colleagues hold only tenure-track positions and can be dismissed if their work is been evaluated negatively. Junior fellows receive only temporary contracts for four to six years, which usually cannot be extended. Young scholars need survival trainings and we, the established,

¹ This, however, is endangered by a stipulation in the objective and performance agreements, in which the ministry has forced the universities to establish a small number of research foci in order to sharpen the universities' profiles. Each research project, funded or non-funded, ideally should be attached to one of these foci.

have to develop complex strategies to keep them in academia, if we are convinced that they are talented.²

Competitiveness and commercialization of knowledge at all levels is the result of the new university system. Raging competition, comparative rankings, the quantity and quality of dissemination, the hegemony of English language and of Anglo-American academic publishing houses, have lessened the time allowed for fundamental research and sharpened the focus on applied research.

Until now, academic capitalism and neoliberalism have been resulting in two opposite camps: firstly, the ones, who assemble themselves behind the banner of “slow science” protesting against the “Stalinism of excellence” and who refuse to abandon the traditional university culture; secondly, those, who represent the new figure that has emerged in academia, the academic entrepreneur; in the humanities this is concretely the successful *homo applicandus*. The institutionalisation of university-business linkages creates new partnership, new forms of knowledge, new types of actors, but also many new constraints and exclusions. We at the humanities will hardly establish business linkages, except with non-profit organizations, which, however, is not very useful. At the more we have to specialize on writing successful applications to research agencies.

The background for the high priority of third-party funded research is, first and foremost, that our universities are chronically under-financed and, secondly, the evaluation we are exposed every five years. The administration of shortage belongs to our daily business. For instance, I have only 1.5 permanent scientific personnel at my Centre for Southeast European History and Anthropology. Southeast Europe is a large area; history and anthropology are large fields, too. In order to run research that makes sense, I have been applying for research projects since twenty years. At the moment my staff consists of approximately 15 collaborators. In order to keep quality and quantity upright, no year passes without conceptualizing and writing applications for research projects. This is time-consuming and the certainty of being successful is only slightly higher than the prognosis of the result of a football match between *Crvena Zvezda* and *Partizan* Belgrade.

2) How to Become a *Homo Applicandus*?

Evaluation of research units, also in the humanities, is basically a good thing, because universities are expensive, although permanently under-funded as already mentioned, and require therefore quality control. Targets of evaluation are individual researchers, research units such as my Centre, and institutes – in my case the Institute for History. One of the basic documents that is delivered to the evaluators are our individual achievements, which are documented in so-called “performance records”. This kind of electronic “evaluation bookkeeping” is time-consuming and has to be done accurately, because your record is open for public viewing. Generally, our performance records consists of formal and countable aspects such as publications, national and international activities such as papers delivered at conferences, memberships in advisory boards and the third-party funding raised; quantity means quality. Your activities can be traced back

² This new system has advantages and disadvantages. The most crucial disadvantage is one’s not predictable academic career. The obvious advantage is that rather less vigorous scholars previously occupying life-time positions do not block positions for more ambitious young scholars any longer.

like on the Facebook, the only difference is that you don't make friends, but only enemies, if your performance record looks too ambitious.

The neo-liberal attitude regarding academic research has changed our academic lives considerably. For the new academic entrepreneur to work continuously and for years on solving an intellectually stimulating problem is a waste of time because this keeps his or her performance record empty. A category for such a kind of activity is not foreseen. Instead of writing a good book, which can keep you busy three, four or five years and which will be read even after thirty years is something that classifies you an academic writer from another planet. The advanced style of academic writing consists in writing applications for third-party funded research projects and in copy-pasting and brushing up previous articles published in regional journals for international peer-reviewed journals.

Under the constraints of the administration of shortage the successful raising of external funds has become a prominent parameter for evaluation. The university is, of course, primarily interested in the amount of raised funding. However, the amount of money does not tell very much about the quality of projects per se. Especially EU-projects can be highly remunerated which does not necessarily correspond with the quality and expected outcomes of a project.

In Austria there exists only one major funding institution for research projects in the humanities – the Austrian Research Fund. Private funding institutions such as private foundations do hardly exist. In 2011 43% of its budget went to Life Sciences, 40% to science and technology and 17% to social sciences and humanities.³ An application to the Austrian Research Fund means to become exposed to a very tough reviewing process. Dependent from the amount of applied money two to four anonymous international peers evaluate your application; no national reviewers are called on, because Austria is a small country and the chances would be too high that the application lands on the desk of one of your friends or enemies. The application has only a chance to survive the reviewing process if the surveys are unconditionally positive. As soon as doubts or well-intended suggestions have been expressed, the research proposal would fail. A young and inexperienced researcher has practically no chance to apply successfully.⁴ I had the 'good luck' that in the first eight years of my career as researcher I had no position at university. Thus, I was forced to apply for research projects from the very beginning and learned how to write successful applications from the scratch – in times, when requirements were not as demanding as at present.

At least in the humanities there is no way to establish research projects longer than for three years. This does not prevent researchers from long-term research, but he or she has to apply again after three years. For instance, I have been working on the history of the family in the Balkans for twenty years on the basis of a series of sixteen projects. There are no national or other priorities defining our research topics and there is no need to relate a research project the one or the way to Austria or to national issues. I think this is good so because this is the only way to produce and to keep pluralism and a wide range of approaches and methods.

The second channel for funding is the various EU-funding lines. Ten years or so ago the EU did not offer lines for the humanities. This policy has changed and lines such

³ Info. Das Magazin des Wissenschaftsfonds 1/12, p. 17.

⁴ The Austrian Research Fund strives to increase the chances for young researchers by organizing workshops on writing applications.

as HERA, Marie Curie and IDEAS are open also for our disciplines. Also the EU policy of funding exclusively very big projects based on consortia consisting of five or more universities luckily has changed. Because of the high amount of administrative paper work it was impossible to apply for and to run a project for a small research unit like mine. Now, projects without forming a consortium can be applied.

Third-party funded research was not always popular at our university, and I think the situation was similar at other Austrian universities. The status of project collaborators was low and problems of providing work places for them were frequent. They did not fit in the traditional structure of well-established hierarchies. They had the privilege only to research, whereas the permanent staff had to do the administrative work, had to teach and to take part in commissions. The situation changed completely, when the government decided to transform universities to enterprises. Whereas project collaborators previously were personal employees of the project director, they are now formally employed by the university, are protected by university regulations and the project money has to be channelled through the university administration. In addition, university has to provide regular work places for them. Whereas previously a successful fundraiser was considered as somebody who compensates problems in his or her career with research projects, he or she enjoys high esteem nowadays.

There is practically no more difference between a third-party funded research assistant and a university assistant. For both types long-term career planning is not foreseen any longer. Hire and fire is the name of the game. A research project funded by the Austrian Research Fund has a maximal duration of three years. A research assistant can be employed for maximal six years. After six years the former research assistant has to apply on his or her own risk for a research project in order to continue his or her academic career. The university assistant has only an employment period of four to six years and then he or she has to apply elsewhere. Academic life for the young generation has become very competitive.

The writing of applications is accompanied by tactical considerations and the chances of being successful are low. Only approx. 25% of the applications to the Austrian Research Fund are actually funded.⁵ Who will be a potential reviewer and requires to be quoted extensively is one of these considerations. Every application has to be innovative, but the question remains how innovative and therefore risky should it be. Practically every funding institution asks the applicant to provide a list of publications that is related to the topic of the applied project; the more publications the better. Five years ago, after approximately 15 years of family and gender research I wanted to open an additional research field, namely visual culture. Until then I did not have done anything in this field. The preparation of the project application took an enormous amount of time since I had to read a lot of scholarly literature pertinent to the envisioned project. I knew that it was risky to apply without having a proper background – and I actually failed. Actually, this was the first time I was unsuccessful with an application, which shocked my self-assurance. I redesigned the project two times completely and only the third application passed the reviewing process.

Another question is related to inter-, trans- and multidisciplinary. Concerning inter-, trans- and multidisciplinary the Austrian Research Fund neither explicitly supports nor excludes it. This means one can apply for a pure disciplinary or an inter- or whatever project. The only requirement for the second case is to indicate approximate

⁵ Info. Das Magazin des Wissenschaftsfonds 1/12, p. 13.

percentages of disciplinary fields the project belongs to. The two to four peer reviewers then will be called according to the indicated fields.⁶ The practical problem with inter-, trans- and multidisciplinary projects is the profile of the applicant. Since only one applicant is allowed, he or she has to embody this kind of inter-, multi- or transdisciplinarity. When I was trained in history in the 1970s, the training still was a very traditional disciplinary one, and I had to catch up on anthropology in an amateurish way in order to become the historical anthropologist, who has acquired the profile for inter-, trans- or multidisciplinarity.

To study the history of the family, gender relations or visual cultures cannot be conducted without a profound knowledge of anthropology. Despite my historical-anthropological and primarily because of the post-Yugoslav crises I was appointed professor for Southeast European history in 1996.⁷ At the beginning I had considerable problems with my colleagues who were more traditionally oriented historians. One of my colleagues mentioned that I was not historian but an ethnographer, and I would work at the wrong institute. Meanwhile and several hundred thousand Euro project funding later, nobody is provoked by historical anthropology any longer and even when I added “anthropology” to my Centre for Southeast European History nobody cared about.

At Austrian universities only the *homo applicandus* has to embody inter-, trans- and multidisciplinarity, but not the *homo nonapplicandus*. For him or her numerous networks exist. Since University of Graz with its long-standing tradition is rather reluctant with creating new disciplines, interdisciplinarity is practiced in teaching or in research networks. What teaching is concerned new master programs are pronounced interdisciplinary, for instance gender studies or global studies or a joint master in Southeast European History and Anthropology. Newly established doctoral programs such as “migration and globalization” or “visual culture” consist of faculties from various disciplines.

To wrap my paper up I wanted to show that facing the market has considerable consequences for universities as well as for the academic staff. Chronically underfunded universities are avid for additional sources of income. Universities have become quasi-enterprises and have lost the flair of Humboldt’s educational ideals. Without already having raised third-party funding, your chances to be appointed professor are low. Bad evaluation results in an atmosphere of hire and fire may have fierce consequences. I have been always opposed to this neo-liberal concept one of the products of which is the *homo applicandus* because it degrades university to an ordinary enterprise and substitutes university spirit by business culture in the long run.

⁶ The risky component in this procedure is obvious: What the reviewer from the discipline A appreciates enthusiastically may be condemned by the reviewer from the discipline B completely.

⁷ In the pre-reform era the ministry in Vienna was responsible for selecting from a tripartite proposal prepared by a university’s selection committee. The person in charge in the ministry thought it was appropriate to appoint a professor, who had a profile in contemporary history.