An Organizational "Mini" Monster: An Anarchist Critique of the Hyper-Hierarchization of a Small Department at a South African University

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NOTE / FOREWORD BY ALEXANDER ANDRASON, FOLLOWING HIS DISMISSAL BY STELLENBOSCH UNIVERSITY, SOUTH AFRICA, FOR WRITING THIS ARTICLE

The current issue of the *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies*, JCEPS20(3) (December2022/January2023) *contains* the article "An organizational "mini" monster: An anarchist critique of the hyper-hierarchization of a small department at a South African university" authored by Alexander Andrason. This article and the anarchist ideas defended by its author were the main reasons that led to the termination of the employment of this academic at Stellenbosch University in early September 2022.

Instead of explaining the matter through our own words, we would like the reader to have access to the facts and understand for themselves the context in which this article was written.

FOREWORD BY ALEXANDER ANDRASON 2 January 2023

At the end of August 2022, in a letter communicating the intent to terminate his employment at the University of Stellenbosch, the acting director of Human Resources wrote:

It has been brought to my attention that you have authored a research article titled an Organizational “Mini” monster: an anarchist critique of the hyper-hierarchization of a small department at a South African University. […] I have read your research article. While you have supposedly attempted to keep the identity of the department discussed in your article anonymous, any reasonable reader, would deduce that you are discussing the Department. […] To describe your colleagues both within your department and your faculty as prison wardens and oppressive is highly problematic. Claiming that this is a “research article” masks what is, self-evidently, an attack on the Department. Surely, you knew, or ought reasonably to have known that the comments in your article would be viewed as abusive, uncollegial and a breach of the rules established following my investigation. [These rules forced one to “*display respect for authority*”, prohibited “*taking [an] issue to an external forum in order to continue to express unhappiness or protest the decision*” and made it clear that one might “*not undermine colleagues or the department*”].

I can only conclude that the reason why you persisted in authoring this article and publishing the abstract on the Department’s notice board is because you do not recognize my authority as the Director: Employee Relations to create rules aimed at ensuring a harmonious working environment within the Department. [...] In my view, you characterize yourself as being at war with the Department because you view it as unnecessarily hierarchical. This is untenable. Your recent engagements with the Department clearly demonstrate that this is not merely your philosophical

outlook but that you are actively establishing yourself as an anarchist island. […] You have purposefully set about using your article and research as a blueprint to undermine, attack and subvert the Department. […] The University is compelled to take a stance against conduct which serves to sow disunity and disharmony within a department […].

Through your conduct you have shown [yourself] *to be incompatible with the values, the culture and levels of collegiality and respect for authority expected of employees of the University. I see no other way forward but to deal with the situation by terminating your employment.*

While the acting Human Resources director found the author of the article to be the cause of problems in Dr Andrason's former Department, the Transformation Office (which works towards the elimination of inequalities and marginalization of minorities and previously disadvantaged groups and peoples at the university), the Equality Unit (which deals with "unfair discrimination and harassment […] and social injustice"), as well as Employee Wellness (which focuses on the employees' wellbeing, including mental support) and an Employment Equity and Promotion of Diversity division, came to an opposite conclusion in their report dedicated to the Masivule Collective, in which the author of the article actively participated (for the manifesto of the collective consult https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7499208). The Transformation Office wrote:

There is a very large disconnect in how the majority of staff and the staff and students in the Masivule Collective experience the Department. The Masivule Collective experience the Department in line with the experiences of many

marginal staff and students (most notably black and queer) at Stellenbosch University and historically white institutions of higher learning in South Africa. The majority of staff experience the Masivule Collective, and Dr Andrason, in particular as threatening and aggressive […].

The disconnect is evident most obviously in the language that colleagues use to narrate their experiences. The Masivule Collective understand and narrate their experiences through a decolonial lens and the commensurate language. There seems to be a misunderstanding and threat experienced in this language by the majority of staff. This is also evident in the questioning of the legitimacy of the research methodology being employed by the Masivule Collective.

Although Dr Andrason has been singled out as the protagonist of Masivule and its actions, it is clear that Masivule is a collective exercise of which Dr Andrason is simply a member. His is also the only full-time member of staff who is a member, and therefore most present in the department at any given time.

Further to this the 'problem' being experienced here is not one unruly staff member. The Department's inability to respond to the Masivule Collective is a case in point. The Masivule Collective are pointing to systemic and cultural issues within the Department that it must address. The resources and expertise to bridge this disconnect do not exist within the Department. […]

After our meetings with the staff and Masivule Collective and indication that we would be leading a process in the Department, the Transformation Office discovered that XXXX […] had continued with the 'incompatibility' process he had initiated at HR before our engagement on 7 April. As we understand that as of 23

May Dr Andrason has been effectively banned from speaking further on the matter of Masivule, and if he does so, may face dismissal. We feel this is in very bad faith and support Dr Andrason's claims that he is being unfairly targeted.

A month earlier, the Equality Unit conducted their own investigation and came to the same conclusion. They informed Dr Andrason the following: "*Transformation is not an easy task. Being that critical voice, it has taken a toll on you […]. But you are not alone – there are people who see the need for such a project [such as Masivule]. Trust that […] even though it may seem at times that there are a lot against you, there are a lot who are for you and for the project […]. Alex, continue doing your work! [You …] will be met with resistance; that is for sure because people do not want to lose their status [and] their power.*"

In light of all these investigations and reports, the Transformation Office, Equality Unit, Employment Equity, and Employee Wellness jointly designed "*a series of interventions the Department […] can embark on to address their challenges*". None of these interventions have been implemented, the Transformation Office was "*excluded from the efforts to sort stuff out in [the Department]*", and Dr Andrason's contract was terminated. This is apparently what academic freedom, transformation, and decolonization look like at Stellenbosch University in practice.

In October 2022, after the termination of the contract of Dr Andrason, the Justice Khampepe Commission of Inquiry into alleged racism at Stellenbosch University (https://www.sun.ac.za/english/Documents/2022/Commission-of-Inquiry-into-Allegations-of-Racism-at-Stellenbosch-University-Report.pdf) identified "*the fixation with hierarchy, exclusive networks of power within the University […], as well as a tolerance for bullying and intimidation in the workplace*" (p. 76) as the

elements of Stellenbosch University’s culture. In their conclusions, the Commission wrote:

The University’s organisational structure and historic culture favour hierarchy. This has resulted in leaders at the University, both members of staff and students, overemphasising the hierarchical nature of leadership positions and underemphasising the duties of service expected of leaders, particularly in the context of the University’s transformation project (p. 12).

Transformation […] is being hampered by bureaucracy and hierarchy (p. 148).

Resistance to transformation […] is coming from members of staff who are high enough in the system to exercise their power to stall any initiatives or proposals that might change the status quo (p. 150). *[However] this […] resistance to transformation [also] aris[es] from members of the University’s middle management. These individuals are not positioned high enough within the University to be held directly accountable for the status of its transformation, but have enough power to make decisions that frustrate the efforts of those members of the University who are responsible for the implementation and operation of the University’s transformation apparatus* (p. 12).

In addition, many of the key structures within the University’s transformation apparatus are ineffective in practice. […] *The Equality Unit and the Transformation Office […] are under-resourced, under-supported and under-equipped to perform the Sisyphean task that is expected of them.* (p. 12)

The conclusions of the Khampepe Commission fully coincide with points made by Andrason in his article, with the experiences described by the Masivule Collective in which Andrason participated, and with the Transformation Office's report that tried to provide a sobering perspective on Andrason and Masivule's fate at the Department and Stellenbosch University. No one within the university's management – the departmental Chair, the Dean and the Vice-Deans of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, the Rector and Vice-Rectors, and the acting Director of Human Resources – listened to the Transformation Office, Equality Unit, Masivule Collective and Andrason's concerns. Maybe they will now listen to judge Justice Sisi Khampepe.

An Organizational “Mini” Monster: An Anarchist Critique of the Hyper-Hierarchization of a Small Department at a South African University

Abstract

The present article is dedicated to the hyper-hierarchization of small-scale organizational spaces (and the most immediate ones for most academics) – university departments. By using the anarchist critique of hierarchies to deconstruct the architecture of an undisclosed department located at one of the South African universities, the author demonstrates the potential organizational monstrosity of such rudimentary educational environments. While, in purely quantitative terms, the hierarchical architecture observed may not seem extreme – the structure involves nine members, four echelons, and 17-19 governing positions – it is overwhelming and absurd from a qualitative perspective and complies with all maladies of hierarchies identified in anarchist scholarship: it is panoptical, informationally unidirectional and, thus, organizationally unintelligent, as well as opaque for both lower and upper layers. In order to combat this oppressive structure, a series of tactics with which one can disrupt hierarchical systems and work towards their destruction, are proposed. These tactics constitute the first steps that must precede the construction of more horizontal types of organizations.

Keywords: *higher education, hierarchical organizations, panopticism/panopticon, anarchism*

Introduction

With their pompous ceremonies and the pretentious parades of "deans and provosts and people wearing funny robes", universities are among the few types of institutions that, in the 21st century, remain relatively faithful replicas of their feudal blueprints (Greber 2009, p. 107). Indeed, universities have survived in an almost unchanged shape since the Late Middle Ages (13th, 14th, and 15th c.), i.e., the time in which the university concept was developed, and universities mushroomed across the European continent (ibid.).[1] As any exemplary feudal system, modern universities are essentially hierarchical and fetishize their own vertical organization.[2] Universities are structured around the idea of domination: elites from the top of the ladder "lead people into an unauthentic type of 'organization' and […] thus avoid the threatening alternative: the true organization of the emerged and emerging people" (Freire 2000, p. 148). To defend this vertical *status quo* and ensure its reproduction from generation to generation, universities obsessively cling to the organizational 'norms' and 'values' they once embraced, often calling them 'tradition' (Kaltefleiter & Nocella 2012, p. 201). We are hierarchical, have always been so, and therefore will continue our hierarchical rituals – they (seem to) proclaim proudly.

This worship of hierarchal traditions is then internalized and imitated at micro levels, i.e., in smaller work groups and among individuals who eventually behave exactly as the feudal machinery itself and operate hierarchically (Kaltefleiter & Nocella 2012, p. 202). By promoting "obedience and conformity" (Chomsky 2003, pp. 27-28), universities thus generate – or rather de-generate – "docile student bodies" (DeLeon & Love 2009, p. 163) and equally "docile […] workers for capital" (Noterman & Pusey 2012, p. 180). Of course, this "social reproduction" (ibid.) can only be successful if academics themselves partake in the hierarchy and

contribute to it actively. The more hierarchized their immediate environment is, the more tamed they are.

The present article discusses the (extent of) hyper-hierarchization of immediate environments of most academics – small university departments. To be exact, I aim to verify whether hyper-hierarchization which is usually associated with massive institutions (Suissa 2010), may also be attested in small-scale spaces such as university departments, and should this be the case, to determine the extent of this hyper-hierarchization. For this study I have selected a small-size department located at one of the universities in South Africa. I consider this department as emblematic of similar departments. Hence, I do not disclose the name and location of this department as I neither wish to single it out nor to target it. My focus is purely systemic – I discuss a *phenomenon* that is deeply problematic and may be widespread (in more or less similar forms) across many tertiary educational institutions in South African and across the world.

The study, ethnographic in essence, will be grounded within anarchist theory as codified by Clark (2007), Ferrell (2009), Armaline (2009), and McLaughlin (2021). The structural properties of the departmental space themselves will be analyzed by making use of an anarchist critique of hierarchical organizations proposed by DeLeon & Love (2009) and, especially, Carson (2021).[3]

Anarchist framework

I unapologetically embrace philosophical and more specifically epistemological anarchism. I therefore view anarchism as a "skepticism" about (McLaughlin 2021, p. 23), "critique" of (Carson 2021, p. 365), and "opposition" to (Clark 2007, p. 6) structural and agential domination recognizable in authorities (McLaughlin 2021)

and all types of systems in which order is achieved by imposed policies, punitive laws, and coercion (Bowen & Purkis 2004, p. 11).

This choice of an anarchist framework – as explained above, primarily in its epistemological form – to analyze the organization of a university department, specifically a South African one, is deliberate. First, anarchism is a theory that is probably the most critical of hierarchies and therefore, in my view, the most suitable to highlight their weaknesses. As I will explain in detail below, the essence of anarchism is the critique of hierarchies and working towards their obliteration. Second, anarchism has a long and rich history in South Africa. South African anarchism dates to the second half of the 19th c. It relatively flourished in the early 20th c. until 1930s. Anarchist thought was also visible in anti-apartheid movements from 1970s until 1990s, when anarchism remerged as a distinct, although still minority trend in the South African socio-political landscape (van der Walt 2004; 2006; 2009; Hirson 2005; Macqueen 2011).[4] Third, anarchism exhibits several convergence points with some theories questioning the organizational *status quo* that still permeates the global South and, in particular, South Africa – e.g., decoloniality. Both anarchist and decolonial scholars aim to remove "Capitalist/Patriarchal Western-centric/Christian-centric Modern/Colonial World-System[s]" (Grosfoguel 2013, p. 89) and replace them with alternative systems that are more just, empowering, aware, and empathetic (Kessi, Marks & Ramugondo 2020, p. 271; see also Grosfoguel 2011; Swanick 2012; Maldonado-Torres 2016; 2017). As is true of anarchism (Bowen & Purkis 2004; Kaltefleiter & Nocella 2004; Armaline 2009), decoloniality argues for "radical autonomy and freedom" (Kessi, Marks & Ramugondo 2020, p. 271) and the subjective, situated, constructional, and "pluri-versal" character of knowledge (cf. Grosfoguel 2013, p. 89; Maldonado-Torres 2016; Kessi, Marks & Ramugondo 2020). As is the case

with anarchism (see further bellow), decoloniality not only creates but also insists on undoing institutions, especially those that embrace power hierarchies characterizing (epi)colonial realities (Grosfoguel 2011; Maldonado-Torres 2016; 2017; Kessi, Marks & Ramugondo 2020). Fourth, the idea of immediacy of action, an emphasis on the activism of people involved in tertiary education (whether students or workers, including academics), and the necessity of change all align with the variety of communalist frameworks available in southern epistemologies, as well as with the recent struggles and movements that have surrounded (South) African higher education: *Rhodes Must Fall*, *Fees Must Fall*, *Open Stellenbosch*, and *Masivule* (Booysen 2016; Chinguno et al. 2017; Habib 2019; Hodgkinson & Melchiorre 2019).[5]

Although anarchism seems to especially condemn societal authority, which operates at a statal level, an anarchist critique may be – and has often been – applied to authorities found in all types of smaller or larger institutions (Carson 2021, p. 365). Indeed, the essence of anarchism is not the state itself, but rather hierarchical organizations which are exploited and propagated by states (DeLeon & Love 2009).

No matter how simple or complex, hierarchies are perverse because they cause, sustain, and reinforce oppression (DeLeon & Love 2009, p. 160). Hierarchies "exist for the purpose of the management" rather than all people partaking in the organization (Carson 2021, p. 377). They guard and advance the master-group by "shift[ing] benefits upward" (ibid., p. 365), while at the same time bring "negative consequences downward" by controlling and limiting the servile group (ibid.). Due to the conflict of interest between those who hold authority and those upon whom the authority is exerted, which is inherent to any hierarchical relationship (Carson

2021, p. 370), information flow is regularly distorted. In the systems organized around an "authority-and-submission" principle, the top of the echelon never extracts sufficient information from the bottom layers of the pyramid and sincere information only travels one way, i.e., from top down (ibid., pp. 365, 367). The system thus lacks honest and uncoerced feedback channels and is unable to correct itself (Carson 2021, p. 365). As the master group does not receive a true picture of the lower levels of the pyramid, the entire system gradually becomes opaque and ultimately transposes authority holders into imaginary worlds, in which they experience a "psychotic break with reality" (ibid.). Therefore, by their very nature, hierarchical systems do not operate "intelligently" (ibid., p. 367), but are regarded as "systematically stupid" (ibid.). The only solution of the hierarchy to this conflict of interest between its layers, is to respond with paranoic mistrust and obsessive surveillance, palpable through excessive bureaucracy and further hierarchization (ibid.). This increasing bureaucratic and hierarchical machinery is orchestrated to "give an illusion of transparency" to the upper-layer group because, immersed in their imaginary reality, they are "out of touch with the actual [work] process" and do not understand what the servile group does (ibid., p. 371). All of this results in a panopticon organization that typifies modern prisons, where "the warden can see all the prisoners, but the prisoners can't see each other" (ibid., p. 377). This prevents the lower-layer workers (prisoners) from organizing independently of the master class (the warden) (ibid.).

An anarchist response to hierarchies – whether societal-statal or institutional – consists of two equally important components, namely destruction and creation (Ferrell 2009). The destructive facet involves revolution: an immediate obliteration of not only vertical authoritative structures, but also most methods and knowledges that are dominant, accepted, and stagnated (Bakunin 1974; Ferrell 2009; Byas &

Christmas 2021). The creative facet involves evolution: a constant reimagination of alternative and essentially fluid, because self-organized, self-managed, and self-critiquing, structures, methods, and knowledges (DeLeon & Love 2009; Ferrell 2009, p. 74; Armaline 2009). Usually, the destructive component precedes the creative one, although they may also be exploited concurrently. In any case, destruction is viewed as a necessary foundation of creation.

In the present study, I will deconstruct the structure of a university department by following the principles of the anarchist critique of hierarchies outlined above. Additionally, by exploring the more fundamental component with which anarchism responds to such hierarchical bodies, i.e., destruction, I will propose a series of tactics that may help to annihilate the oppressive hierarchy (which is necessary for the subsequent development of any new type of organization). Before that, however, I will describe the architecture of the space in question: a small-scale department located at one of the South African universities.

The architecture of the space

The structure of the department that I describe below was implemented – or rather imposed upon its members – during one academic year between the months of May and August. At that time, the department comprised of nine academic staff members. This group was stratified in the following manner:[6]

(a) The department was *de facto* managed by two Heads of the Department (HoDs): an HoD that was stepping down after two terms of office and an HoD that was beginning their first term. Although the succession should occur at the beginning of June, the two HoDs coordinated their administrative works before and after that time, and most importantly,

jointly represented the department at higher organizational levels, e.g., in meetings with the Dean and Vice-Deans.

(b) The two HoDs presided over an Executive Committee, referred to by the name *Daily Matters Committee*. This label incorrectly suggests that the Executive Committee only dealt with a mundane, administrative, and day-to-day running of the department. In reality, it often made binding decisions that affected the work conditions of some or all staff members of the department. In addition to the HoDs, the Executive Committee included three other staff members. As a result, the Executive Committee comprised more than the half of the department (i.e., five out of nine academics).

(c) The department was further divided into four Thematic Sections, each specializing in a different area. I will refer to these sections as sections A, B, C, and D. Each section comprised between two and three academics and had its own Section Head, generally the most senior staff among the members of the section. Although some members liked to entertain the idea that Section Heads were purely representative roles, the record rather suggests that they had real power in interpreting certain policies and/or signing off some critical documents.

(d) In addition to the above bodies, eight Work Groups were introduced, i.e., entities dedicated to dealing with the various types of internal and external activities carried out in and by the department. These activities were arranged into the following clusters: A – Undergraduate teaching; B – Postgraduate affairs, C – Research matters; D – Liaison; E – Work environment; F – Social Impact; G – Finances; and H – Social and wellness.

> Each Work Group consisted of two or three persons who had been assigned – without any consultation – to a respective group. Within each Work Group, every person was given a specific "portfolio", also determined without being consulted. Each Work Group had its Representative – a head who would collect the information from the other staff members within their (i.e., the Representative's) own portfolio and collate the information prepared by the other members of the Work Group. The Representative would moreover prepare reports that were shared before and/or during the departmental meetings. The role of Representative was usually spontaneously assumed by the most senior staff member among the persons involved in a given Work Group. The main duties of the Work Group were reporting rather than creating policies, although they did conduct meetings in which some policies – at least in their initial forms – were formulated.[7]

Overall, given its architecture, the space that involved 9 people generated between 17 and 19 governing positions, i.e., positions whose holders would be assigned certain power over some other members of the department. While the posts of an HoD and members of the Executive Committee were elected – although the actual freedom of these elections was severely compromised[8] – all the other posts were imposed. They were either unilaterally communicated by a superior or were assumed by a member given the unspoken principle of seniority. Similarly, the decision of operating with two HoDs instead of one, as is customary at the university, had not been reached democratically by the department.

This *rocambolesque* structural complexity of the department described in this section becomes more evident if one represents it graphically (see Figure 1 below). In this figure, one member is singled out and marked as M_0. This helps to

demonstrate the actual position of some members – invariably located at the bottom of the pyramid. To be exact, M_0 belonged to Thematic Section D which consisted of two people, with a professor acting as the Section Head. M_0 was also assigned to Work Group C and G (i.e., Research matters and Social Impact) in which two other professors assumed the respective coordinating and reporting roles.

Figure 1: The governance structure of the department

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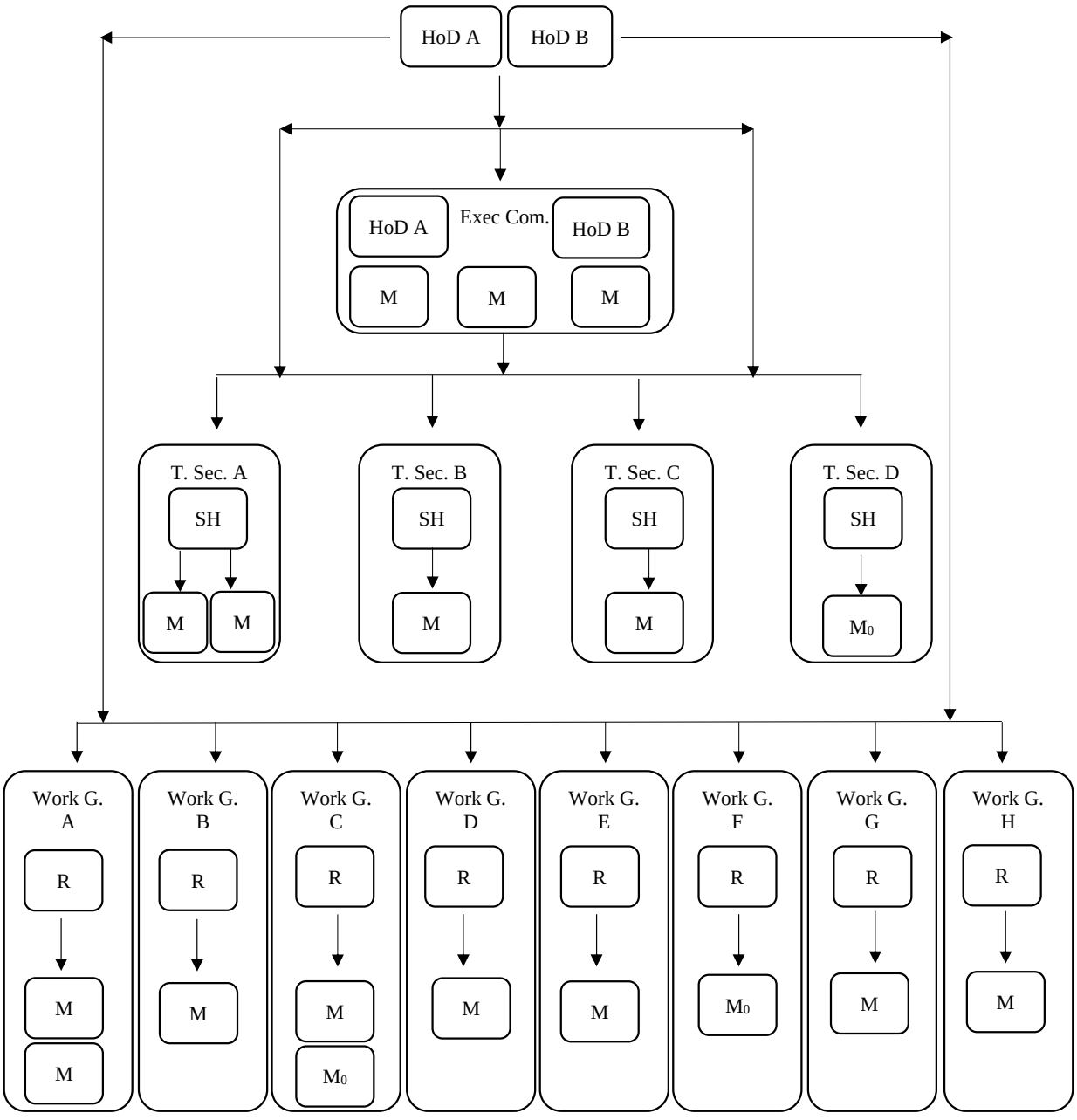

Deconstruction

The architecture of the department described in the previous section can certainly be viewed as Kafkaesque. To inflate the number of administrative positions to more than twice as many as the number of the people involved is nightmarishly intricate and odd – if not ridiculous. Even for those who would defend hierarchical structures, this type of complexity will most likely appear as excessive. While, in quantitative terms, this hierarchical architecture is certainly not monstrous – it involves nine members, four echelons, and 17-19 positions – it is overwhelming qualitatively. To some members of this department, this hierarchy felt damaging, violent, and vicious. It not only simply seemed absurd but also affected them as scholars, and persons as it hampered several of their research and teaching activities. This overall absurdity, however, is nothing more than an uncritical micro-level imitation of the hierarchical macro-structure characterizing many – if not most – universities.

While the organizational complexity of this departmental space is absurd, it need not be incongruous from the master caste's perspective. Indeed, the organization outlined above strongly resembles a panopticon. In doing so, the department imitates structural practices that typify modern prisons, authoritative regimes, and several other types of abusive powers (Lyon, Haggerty & Bal 2012, p. 4).

Like prison wardens, comfortable, untouchable, and unaccountable in their "central tower" (Foucault 1977, p. 204), the supervisor(s) oversee(s) all the other members that they have under their dominion. The two rulers surveil the department by determining, controlling, and revising all the members' bureaucratic activities: they "judge [the members] continuously, alter their behavior, [and] impose upon them the methods [that they as the wardens] think [are] best" (ibid.). This surveillance is

principally achieved by ordering staff members to constantly gather and supply information about their own activities and other members' duties. For instance, member M_0 – who, as explained in the previous section, had been assigned to Work Groups C and D, (i.e., Research matters and Social impact) – was ordered to collect and collate information related to current research projects carried out in the department. When the results of this task were evaluated by a superior as unsatisfactory – because of the initial, very imprecise instructions rather than M_0's lack of dedication – the method of information extraction was unilaterally altered. It was communicated to that member that because of their "inten[t] to mess […] up" with the task and their "manipulation [of this] responsibility", some other members would assume "the job". In fact, the superior decided to take upon themselves M_0's duties. They asked the staff members to supply the research-related information directly to them, thus omitting M_0. The compiled information was never reported, revealed, and/or discussed at the staff meeting – it remained in the warden's tower.

In contrast to the panoptical position of the supervisors, the members themselves are confined to their own cells where they remain invisible to the larger group of the department – the other inmates of the prison. First, each member individually dealt with the immediate bureaucracy of the Thematic Sections and Work Groups to which they were assigned. Second, a member knew very little about the organizational tasks allocated to the other members – except when filtered out in reports at staff meetings – and even less about the relationships those members entertained with the upper echelons of the hierarchy. To take again M_0 as an illustration, this member had virtually no knowledge of what was happening in the areas under the responsibility of the Word Group A, i.e., Undergraduate teaching, despite their expertise and involvement in the matter. That is, although M_0 was

teaching four undergraduate courses, this member did not participate in reporting mechanisms nor, more importantly, did they contribute to the development of relevant undergraduate policy proposals. Similarly, as a constituent of Thematic Section D, M_0 had no insights into the matters examined in the remaining Sections A, B, and C. This member was allowed to only consider the matters related to their own bi-personal Thematic Section, where they were supervised by the Section Head. It was therefore unsurprising that the individual members seldom, if ever, discussed or coordinated their administrative actions across the Thematic Sections and Work Groups independently of supervisors’ mandate and control.

As documented in literature (see Elmer 2012), this panoptical organization and report-driven surveillance described above generated, in most cases, discipline and docility. Members were rewarded only if they were submissive and complied with orders. Once they were viewed as “trustworthy”, they were allowed into inner organizational circles (e.g., they could enter the Executive Committee the following year) and were able to benefit from a range of other administrative favors. In contrast, members that did not comply with the panopticon prison’s mechanisms were punished. Being labeled as those who had “betrayed the trust”, these members were removed or disallowed from forming part of upper-level structures and/or were crushed with the full power of the bureaucratic machine (e.g., they were required to provide documents or information that were not requested by the university, their activities were administratively hampered and relegated outside of the department, and they did not enjoy equal treatment during promotion). This further increased power imbalances within the departmental space: the warden’s tower became the absolute and only source of authority. To structurally exist in the architecture of the department, a member had to belong to the tower or operate in its proximity, which was only possible if this member was

tolerated by the regime. This tolerance was, of course, afforded if the member was compliant and obedient. The more compliant one was, the more "trust" they were bestowed with. If, however, a member criticized the tower and thus, in the masters' eye, disobeyed their rule, the doors to the inner circle were closed and any realistic contribution to the decision-making process became impossible.

Although the panopticon architecture apparently rendered the surveillance of the department easier and more effective, it did not guarantee that the wardens could see what was actually happening in every cell – whether in Thematic Sections or Work Groups – once the cell doors were metaphorically closed. That is, members placed at the bottom of the hierarchy and located far away from the warden's tower had a relatively good chance to successfully obstruct the visibility of the surveyors and escape their spying tentacles. Because of the seniority principle, some members (e.g., M_0) were universally placed in the lower levels of the pyramid.

Out of concern that the information provided could be used against them, members – especially those who were more critical of the master cast and the entire system – might have revealed only part of the information they had or modified information. Importantly, this would be done in such a way that it would be useless, or at least unhelpful, to the upper layer. Sometimes, members would refuse to share certain pieces of information with the upper level – not because they did not have it, but because they knew that given a specific university policy they were not compelled to do so. Although they could share this information, they preferred to keep substantial parts of it to themselves, mostly due to the fear of how the wardens could reuse it in future. This type of information withholding had a long tradition in the department and was common in the previous decade. At that time, several junior staff members used to withhold information at departmental meetings or in

conversations with the Executive Committee, whom they commonly referred to as the KGB and criticized in private meetings. The same workers and some postgraduate students would also refer to an HoD as ‘the tyrant’ and to the department itself as ‘the madhouse’ or ‘jail’. Their critique was never expressed openly but kept secret. As a result, the governing bodies were unaware of critical voices: they neither knew the content of dissenting discourses nor knew that such dissent even existed.

The information withholding described above and the development of secret discourses with their own lexicon and grammar are reminiscent of the so-called “hidden transcripts” (Scott 1990). Hidden transcripts encompass various types of discourses that are “excluded from the public transcript of subordinates by the exercise of power” (ibid. p. 27). As in other “total” hierarchical spaces, e.g., prisons, reeducation camps, and reformatories (ibid. p. 22), the departmental top level pushed the lower level – both forced and, paradoxically, inspired – to create such a hidden transcript. This hidden transcript was relatively rich and included not only speech but also gestures and other behavioral practices. The subordinate group embraced this code as a form of reaction to the public transcript in which their true voices were seldom, if ever, reflected.

The data suppression and/or its manipulation described above contributed to the fact that the information flowing upwards and reaching upper levels was distorted and largely unrealistic. Two further phenomena increased this data distortion. First, being largely disconnected from at least some segments of the lower layer, the upper layer had to interpret the information they received. That is, instead of formulating the final information jointly with the members who supplied it, the upper layer had to translate the information obtained. It was inevitable that the

members of the master caste would add, remove, or change at least parts of that information – especially those elements that were critical of them. Second, and related to the last observation, if the voice was too critical it was overruled, and the information would flow through another – more caste-friendly – channel. Eventually, the upper layer would concoct information that would fit their narrative – the one that they would want to hear. As a result, the information that the middle management would subsequently pass onto to the higher management of the faculty, was often imaginary or simply false.[10]

The only channel that allowed for the transfer of credible information and was unobstructed – although not unchallenged (see further below) – flew down from the superiors to the departmental members in the form of policies and directives. These were either created by the superiors themselves or passed on from higher management. Of course, this channel often brought negative consequences for some members (especially those who occupied the lowest parts of the pyramid) because it would limit their freedoms and burden them with more bureaucratic tasks.

Accordingly, the transparency aimed at through the bureaucratic and hierarchical machinery was deceptive and the system was opaque. On the one hand, as explained above, the separated members did not know much about each other's activities, tasks, and struggles. Several members were conceptually and spatially disconnected from the other members. On the other hand, the master caste was unable to extract credible information from the bottom. Many reports were entirely useless, empty reporting filled time during endless meetings, and conversations in sections would be unidirectional with the confirmatory 'yes' heard all the time. Since the information travelled only unidirectionally without honest and uncoerced

feedback mechanisms, the system lacked any means of self-correction and improvement and was gradually degenerating. The master caste lost touch with the actual processes and phenomena occurring at the lower level. It plunged more deeply into an imaginary reality, and instead of operating intelligently, the system became “systematically stupid” (Carson 2021, p. 367).

The only gain of this hierarchy – a gain in the eyes of some – was the amplification of the perceived primacy of middle management and/or those who exerted some type of control within the department. Those who formed the master caste, repeatedly emphasized the extent and relevance of administrative duties and at times used them as an explanation of their inability to deliver on quintessential academic tasks such as research. Even more significantly, all such bureaucratic work could be included in performance appraisals required each year by the university. Within the segment dedicated to administration and management – one of the five domains within which academics are evaluated, the remaining four others being teaching, supervision, research, and social impact – a staff member was able to report departmental committees, tasks, and duties. To excel in the bureaucratic machinery itself became part of the job and could subsequently be included in promotion applications.[11]

Overall, the structure of the departmental space described above was oppressive. It was not organic, autonomous, or temporary (cf. DeLeon 2008, p. 129), but imposed by the master caste, dependent on their rule, and permanent (or at least for as long as they wished). The hierarchization served mainly the department’s management instead of contributing to the development of teaching, learning, and research activities on the ground. It guarded and advanced the interests of the authority holders, the master-group, and the wardens. That is, the principal

beneficiary of the hierarchy was the master class who, by presenting unrealistic picture of apparent successes to the upper management, could in return accumulate accolades and honors and climb the institutional ladder even higher. In contrast, the servile class, especially those who expressed opinions that were at variance with the warden's views, had no real impact on the decision-making process and faced punishment. The hierarchical system was also manipulative: it would create the impression of democracy among the servile group – "There are so many committees, sections, and work groups where one may contribute with something!" – which could pacify the discontent among some of them. Anarchist scholars know this trick very well: this type of democracy is false, as instead of protecting, it annihilates the (critical) voice of an individual and minority.

Judith Suissa (2010, p. 70) suggests that "keeping social units and institutions as small as possible" may contribute to "facilitating non-hierarchical, decentralized forms of social organization and avoiding oppressive bureaucratic structures". The findings of my research are more pessimistic. The evidence shows that even small spaces like university departments may be hyper-hierarchized and thus oppressive. This seems to me unsurprising because "oppression [is] built into the current educational model" (Swanick 2012, p. 29), and the hierarchization of universities is one of the principal mechanisms to sustain and reproduce oppression (DeLeon & Love 2009, p. 160). As I explained at the beginning of this article, it is through hierarchization that the oppressors control the oppressed and prevent them from organizing themselves and developing alternative structures (cf. Freire 2000). Consequently, I fear that hierarchization (and the resultant oppression) described in this case study is, at least in some form, prevalent in tertiary education, both in South Africa and other countries.

Towards a change

In the above section, I demonstrated that a small-scale organizational space – such as a university department – could be hyper-hierarchized to a monstrous extent. Since I, too, am an academic and work at a university, I reject the idea of university workers being passive victims. I encourage them to act – I want to contribute to changing the structures that oppress us. As explained at the beginning of this article, anarchism bestows one with two approaches to change. The more fundamental one is destruction – the fight against the hierarchy during which an authoritative structure is obliterated and the dominant methods and unjust conventional knowledges that permeate it are eradicated.

Therefore, I see getting rid of hierarchization as the first step in transforming the organizational space of university departments, whether in South Africa or elsewhere. In a revolutionary manner, a group of academics should abolish the hierarchical madness described above and eliminate all its components – i.e., the posts of two HoDs, the Executive Committee, the Sections, and the Work Groups – which instead of unifying the department divide it. But how does one revolt in an academic system, if very often most of its members both naturalize and embrace this self-imprisonment? Indeed, due to the inherited patriarchy and the cult of seniority pervasive at many tertiary institutions, including South African universities, departmental members tend to embrace the hierarchical system and actively contribute to its maintenance.[12]

When a revolution is not feasible, the response is subversion (Armaline 2009, p. 142). By subversion, I understand the development of a wide range of oppositional tactics (Noterman & Pusey 2012, p. 184) which allow one to make their micro-environment, one’s own cell, “a site of […] resistance” (Kaltefleiter & Nocella

2012, p. 201). In that manner, one creates an anarchist island within the hierarchical monster and contributes to its dismantlement at a micro-level (Ferrell 2009, p. 74).[13] As fellow academics refuse to participate in this subversion – be it because of possible retaliations or being merely unsympathetic towards the change as they themselves feel comfortable in their current positions – one must engage students (Kaltefleiter & Nocella 2012, p. 203), as well as alumni and ex-coworkers. The two latter groups are particularly critical because they no longer fall under the coercive reach of a departmental hierarchy and the politics of a university.

The following tactics that may disrupt and eventually lead to the dismantling of an abusive hierarchy have been identified in anarchist literature:

(a) "Penetrate the aura of importance" of the authorities (Ferrell 2009, p. 74).
(b) Undermine the authorities (Shannon 2009, p. 187) and have "the courage to 'talk back'" to them (Illich 1970, p. 34; Swanick 2012, p. 31).
(c) Openly criticize the epistemic methods, bureaucratic mechanisms, and institutional praxes employed in the hierarchy and call them out for what they are: mechanisms that "promote and protect" the master caste (Ferrell 2009, p. 74; Byas & Christmas 2021).
(d) Disclose the hierarchical "mess" (Byas & Christmas 2021, p. 64).
(e) Address issues directly "without mediation through [standard] channels" (Byas & Christmas 2021, p. 62).
(f) "Encourage awareness" of the students about the hierarchical oppression of the institution in which they learn (Suissa 2010, p. 121; Swanick 2012, p. 24).

(g) Create spaces (e.g., courses and extra-curricular activities with students) that are free from hierarchies (Shannon 2009, p. 187).

As can be expected from anarchism, the tactics mentioned above should be understood as prefigurative rather than consequentialist. They "embody anti-hierarchical behaviour that prefigures the forms of […] relationship[s] that the actors wish to bring about" (Frank 2003, p. 27; see also Firth 2010; 2013). Prefiguration – or the idea that "the means have to be in accordance with the ends" (Frank 2003, p. 18), and thus the envisioned structures and practices must be experimented and implemented in the here-and-now (Raekstad & Gradin 2020, p. 30) – is inherent to anarchist direct action. It is this necessarily prefigurative action that allows the actors – the objectors, protesters, and rebels – to "live […their] vision of an alternative world as [they] struggle to create it" (Juris 2009, p. 219). Students and academics too should adopt and promote this prefigurative action by "calling […] into being" the reality they aim to achieve – as if it were already achieved (Routledge 2009, p. 83).

While the above tactics are destructive, "the passion for destruction [becomes] a creative passion, too" (Bakunin 1974, p. 58). Therefore, a 'fight against' may gradually lead to the creation of alternative self-organized, self-managed, and self-critiquing structures, methods, and knowledges – or organizations that are compatible with anarchy.

Conclusion

The present article discussed the hyper-hierarchization of small-scale spaces using the example of a department located at one of the South African universities. By deconstructing the architecture of this space according to the principles of an anarchist critique of hierarchies, I demonstrated its organizational monstrosity. While, in purely quantitative terms, this hierarchical architecture may not seem extreme – the structure involves nine members, four echelons, and 17-19 governing positions – it is overwhelming and absurd from a qualitative perspective and, indeed, complies with all hierarchical maladies identified in anarchist scholarship. It is panoptical, oppressive, informationally unidirectional, and thus systemically unintelligent, as well as opaque for both lower (because of panopticism) and upper (because of informational unidirectionality) layers.

My findings thus show that hyper-hierarchization need not be correlated with organizational complexity. Rather, contrary to what is often assumed, small organizational units can be hyper-hierarchized. This, in turn, suggests that excessive hierarchization (and the resultant oppression) may be a globally prevalent phenomenon, potentially widespread at most universities around the world.

Additionally, I proposed a series of subversive tactics with which one can work towards the destruction of such hierarchical systems. This destruction constitutes in my view – and in the view of anarchist scholars – the first step that is necessary for developing re-imagined and more horizontal types of organizations.

Notes

[1] The first two universities (Bologna and Oxford) were established in the 11th c.

[2] While one could argue that, given the African context of my study – where certain ceremonies are commonplace and remain important – the esteem and value of robes and ceremonial garbs at universities could be appropriate, such rituals performed at many South African tertiary institutions are deeply colonial. That is, they are nearly faithful replicas of medieval European traditions (widely adopted in North America). For example, robes and ceremonial garbs used during official events and "rituals" bear little resemblance with any of the African cultures but imitate garments found in canonical western universities. It should be noted that feudalism itself is an essentially Western idea. Although a similar socio-political system existed elsewhere, feudalism – at least in the form embraced by universities – principally "refers to a medieval system of political, social, and economic organization based on vassalage and the granting of a foedum (fief) that developed in western Europe" (Crubauch 2012, p. 220).

[3] To avoid the identification of the department discussed in this article, I cannot disclose the exact source of my data. The evidence provided has been collected through multiple, essentially ethnographic methods such as institutional policies, organograms, other documents available publicly, and lived experiences.

[4] In the 21st c., the most visible movements are the Bikisha Media Collective (www.struggle.ws/inter/groups/bikisha/main.htm) and the Zabalaza community which, among others, publishes the *Zabalaza Journal* (www.zabalaza.net/educate/zabalaza-journal). The history of anarchism and the sublime analysis of anarchist movements and thoughts in South Africa – as well as Southern Africa more broadly – can be found in the various publications of Lucien van der Walt (see, for instance, van der Walt 2004; 2006; 2007; 2009; 2011, 2019; see also van der Walt & Schmidt 2009).

[5] Regarding the *Masivule* movement (i.e., *Masivule i-Antieke Studies* 'Let's open the Ancient Studies') see https://twitter.com/masivule and https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7499208.

[6] Interestingly, this structure of the department discussed here cannot be linked to any departmental organogram accessible publicly or any official policy document. The only structural complexity recognized from the university's perspective is the position of the HoD, who is currently defined as the "line manager" of all the members of the department.

[7] In addition to the above-mentioned structures, there were several other bodies within the department, e.g., a four-person Ethics Committee and two postgraduate coordinators.

[8] For instance, during some elections, only two candidates were eligible. As one of them declined, one candidature was presented. In case of not electing that person, the department would have no HoD. Furthermore, in the case of one election, voting was not anonymous. Instead, the fully identifiable ballots were collected by the higher management, who thus knew each member's decision. At least from a systemic perspective, one can seriously doubt the freedom and even legality of such elections. Similarly, the Executive Committee has traditionally almost exclusively

consisted of professorial staff. This changed in 2019 when at the request of a less senior staff member, all departmental staff became eligible for a position in the Executive Committee. However, members who would be perceived too critical would be removed from the Executive Committee without any open discussion or voting mechanism.

[9] The following abbreviations are used in Figure 1: Exec. Com. = Executive Committee; HoD – Head of the Department; M – member; R – (Reporting) Representative; SH – Section Head; T. Sec. = Thematic Section; and Work G. = Work Group.

[10] The following case may be used as an illustration. A superior informed the higher management representative that the department did not research and teach in a certain scientific area. They were entirely unaware of the fact that two of the department's members were actually experts in that area, did extensive research in it, and jointly taught a postgraduate module dedicated to it.

[11] It has indeed been used against those who resisted to participate in this Kafkaesque system.

[12] This voluntary participation in hierarchization may be regarded as remarkable because some of these members used to previously criticize the Executive Committee and viewed it as an oppressive and patriarchal mafia-like society. One could propose that the proximity to power certainly is responsible. Since they were now allowed to exert some governance-related functions, they ceased to perceive any problem with the structure, they had once vehemently criticized.

[13] Indeed, several higher education bodies, such as American Association of University Professors (AAUP 2007, pp. 61) advocate for "resistance to … surveillance and regulation of higher education" (Armaline 2009, p. 141).

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