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Harald Bauder

Ryerson University

Bernd Belina

J. W. Goethe-Universität

David Butz

Brock University

Ze'ev Gedalof

University of Guelph

Arnoud Lagendijk

Radboud University Nijmegen

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Please Cite:

Bauder, H., Belina, B., Butz, D., Gedalof, Z., Lagendijk, A., Mudu, P., Paasi, A., Schuurman, N., & Wilson, D. (2010). Critical practice of grant application and administration: An intervention. *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies*, 9(1), 102-112.





Critical Practice of Grant Application and Administration: An Intervention

Harald Bauder

Department of Geography, Ryerson University, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.
Email: hbauder@ryerson.ca

Bernd Belina

Institut für Humangeographie, J. W. Goethe-Universität, Frankfurt am Main, Germany. Email: belina@em.uni-frankfurt.de

David Butz

Department of Geography, Brock University, St. Catharines, Canada.
Email: dbutz@brocku.ca

Ze'ev Gedalof

Department of Geography, University of Guelph, Guelph, Ontario, Canada.
Email: zdedalof@uoguelph.ca

Arnoud Legendijk

Nijmegen School of Management, Department of Human Geography and Spatial Planning, Radboud University Nijmegen, Nijmegen, The Netherlands.
Email: A.Legendijk@ru.nl

Pierpaolo Mudu

Geographer. Email: piermudu@gmail.com

Anssi Paasi

Academy of Finland, Department of Geography, Linnanmaa, University of Oulu, Finland. Email: anssi.paasi@oulu.fi

Nadine Schuurman

Department of Geography, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, British Columbia, Canada. Email: schuurman@sfu.ca

David Wilson

Department of Geography, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Urbana, Illinois, United States of America. Email: dwilson2@uiuc.edu¹


Introduction

Researchers experience increasing pressures to connect with bodies that finance their projects. In this climate, critical scholars face many obstacles as they seek to navigate the treacherous waters of securing external funds. To debate these challenges, the *ACME* Editorial Collective organized a panel for the 2009 Annual Meeting of the Association of American Geographers in Las Vegas. This intervention represents a follow-up discussion and collective writing process among some of the panelists and members of the audience who attended the panel.

Below, we examine the neoliberalization of the current funding systems, discuss the implications for research practice, and make suggestions for critical engagement and transformation. Our suggestions, however, will not be easy to implement, as we can infer from the experience of the radical scholars of the post-1968 generation whose ascension into the upper echelons of North American and European university systems was also associated with the neoliberalization of the funding systems. This intervention represents a modest contribution in the tradition of critical research practice of creating the possibilities for progressive change.

Grants and the Neoliberal Academy

Neoliberal capitalism has long penetrated higher education systems around the world (Mitchell, 1999; Paasi, 2005; Zeuner, 2007). This development relates to larger structural trends that have been emerging internationally. In particular, the state has actively searched for new strategies in promoting capital accumulation, and knowledge production has been a crucial element in this process. Bob Jessop observed that the state adopts two apparently contrary but complementary strategies. Firstly, it asserts the importance of education in the realization of national interests. Secondly, it concedes greater autonomy to educational

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institutions in how they serve these interests. Especially the second strategy subjects education to the disciplines of the market and the methods and values of business. Education becomes a “competitive private good!” (Jessop, 2002, 167).

For example, the Finnish granting agency, the [Academy of Finland](#), employs 267 Academy Researchers and 40 Academy Professors who work at Finnish universities. The government now plans major changes so that both posts would no longer be administered by the Academy of Finland but rather put under the control of the university administrations. While the Academy would still organize application and evaluation processes, this practice could ultimately lead to a situation where the universities can make claims that diminish the autonomy of researchers as to the use of their research time, require participation in administration and deliver teaching loads to current full-time researchers. At the same time the Finnish Ministry of Education intends to follow other European states and increase the “autonomy” of the universities. Jessop’s (2002) account indeed tells the story of what is happening in the university systems of Finland and other European and North American countries very well. It is important to locate the contextual features of grant distribution in the matrix of global and imperial capitalism.²

New winds blow in many ways. In academia, competition between researchers, research groups, academic fields, universities and nation states is increasing; institutions of higher education are imitating the management practices of private enterprises; temporary and precarious work as teachers and researchers is on the rise; and academic scholarship is increasingly subjugated under business life. For example, the European Union’s Lisbon agenda set the goal to raise research and development spending to three percent of GDP by 2010 (Lisbon European Council, 2000). This goal, however, is linked to the objective that two-thirds of this spending is related to business rather than government or education sectors. The current system of grant distribution and administration is integral to the neoliberalisation of universities.

In the past, the higher education systems of Europe granted research funding through subsidy configurations that, on one hand, supported mission-oriented research and, on the other hand, provided so-called proportional allocation policies (Geuna, 2001). In the last twenty years, the research funding policies became increasingly mission-oriented. According to Geuna (2001, 626) this shift caused “1) increased concentration of resources, 2) disproportionate incentives for short-term foreseeable research endeavor, 3) conflicting incentive structures, and 4)

² At a global scale expenditures for research and development are extremely distorted. While North America and Europe claim 39.1 percent and 27.9 percent respectively, Africa only receives 0.6 percent of all global research and development spending (National Science Foundation, 2006).

exacerbation of the impact of cumulative and self-reinforcement phenomena present in the process of scientific production”. Canada and the United States also have mission-oriented funding structures in place.

These funding structures are complex and variable between regional and national contexts. Generally, however, we could identify three major types of funding available to researchers. *Ivory-tower money* is designated for independent research and academic innovativeness. Usually, panels of experts evaluate applications. For example, the money granted by the Academy of Finland has been relatively “interest free” money, giving the researchers a significant degree of freedom to carry out the research. From the viewpoint of the Academy, it is in a sense “venture money” that is awarded based on the previous research record of the applicant(s) and on the quality of the research plan. In Germany, the most important funding agency is the [German Research Foundation](#), whose elected members allocate state funds for academic research. In recent years, however, with a new generation of researchers with fixed-term contracts who are evaluated partially based on their ability to raise grant money, applications have skyrocketed, resulting in increasing processing times and declining success rates. Similar institutions in other countries have experienced similar problems. The [Social and Humanities Research Council of Canada](#), for example, deemed 65.0 percent of all 2008 standard research grant applications in geography “successful” but only had the funds to support 32.7 percent of applications. The success rate of applicants is expected to decrease in coming years, too. Cuts to the three major Canadian funding agencies, including the so-called “white coat” sciences—often the envy of other academics—amounted to almost \$150 million in 2009 (Hoag, 2009). [The Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research](#) has increased research and grant funding considerably over the last decade, at the expense of direct state funding to universities. In the past it supported Ph.D. research and larger research projects, team-led by established researchers. Recently it added programs to fund junior assistants, post-doctoral researchers and teaching buy-outs, and it is increasingly focusing on individual applications and competition. Many of our colleagues would regard ivory-tower money the most prestigious types of funding.

Two other major types of research funding are available to academics. The second type focuses on the *end use*. Many granting councils, including the Academy of Finland and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, offer grants directed to a particular end product. The “uses” can include worthy aims related to social justice, health or environmental protection. However, the uses can also be associated with less worthy pursuits. For example, the recent political focus on “security” has motivated the European Union, national governments and other state institutions to fund projects that are expected to legitimate state control and surveillance. In addition, granting councils are increasingly pre-occupied with a narrow definition of “applied”, as promoting economic growth and corporate interests, and “collaborative”, as involving

partnerships between academic researchers and businesses. Other grants may directly involve the private sector for the purpose of capital accumulation. These “uses” raise concerns of conflict of interest (e.g. Barnes and Bero, 1998; Friedman and Richter, 2004).

These sorts of *end use* or “results-based” grants have become very popular in the physical sciences, where the economic benefits of research—in particular the mobilization of cheap student labour—are more readily obvious. In Canada, the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC) is increasingly allocating funds towards “strategic research opportunities.” While these grants are intended to “increase research and training in targeted areas that could strongly enhance Canada’s economy, society and/or environment”, recent calls for proposals in the areas of information technology, biomedicine, manufacturing, and fisheries suggest that the focus is more on economic than societal or environmental benefits³. The seven strategic areas identified do not mention societal benefits (and the environment is only explicitly targeted in one). Like many such *end use* grants, the NSERC strategic research grants require meaningful participation (including support in kind or in cash) by non-academic partner institutions, most often in the private sector. These partners usually expect tangible returns on their investments, and typically do not support research that does not meet their own corporate needs.

A third type of funding comes from a variety of sources and targets *applied research* that is not in the immediate interest of the state or corporate capital. But applying for these funds means to enter a grant market that non-university research institutions depend upon, including the ones that employ radical and critical geographers and activists who are unable (or unwilling!) to pursue an academic career. Our friends and colleagues in such institutions who depend on these funds are not happy about competition that uses a privileged university infrastructure and cheap student labour to outbid them.

Implications for Research Practice

Pressures to apply for funding affect academic practice in many ways. The quantity of research money academics can accumulate has become a crucial indicator of the quality of their work and for recruitment policies. On the one hand, this practice is a mechanism to discipline academic labour. On the other hand, it is a way to make up for the shortfall of direct funding that many universities are experiencing. In Canada, for example, universities charge overhead on many grants, and the base funding from the federal government is calculated based on the total value of grants held at each university. The effect is that universities now assess academics based on their ability to bring money into their departments. Even if researchers only need to walk to the library to do research, they are expected to

³ www.nserc-crsng.gc.ca/Professors-Professeurs/RPP-PP/SPG-SPS_eng.asp

apply for money, whether they need it or not. Other colleagues, whose research involves labs and fieldwork, need to enter the competitive funding market, because the university no longer provides the necessary equipment, research assistance and fieldwork allowances.

A consequence of the need to apply for funding is an increase in workload and work-related pressure. Much energy, time and money is devoted to the processes of grant writing, reviewing, selecting, evaluating and administrating. These processes involve not only the applicant but the entire community. For example, one of us has applied for 79 grants as either a principal investigator or co-applicant in the last 9 years. Many of these grants are reviewed and assessed by the volunteer labour of our colleagues. Survival in an academic workplace requires persistence. Some of us are advising our graduate students that in order to succeed as an academic, they need to behave like the toy punching clowns that some of us had as children: no matter how hard they are knocked down, they spring back up. Nowhere is this more true than grant writing. In particular, junior academics are increasingly expected to attract research Euros and Dollars. As these academics acquire seniority, one of the key determinants of success is productivity on past grant projects. To get new grants requires publishing your research from past grants. In Canada, for example, granting agencies typically use a researcher's past productivity as a key criterion for the assessment of grant applications. Pressures to publish and to acquire grants go hand in hand. The resulting increase in workloads and the affect on the physical and mental well-being of academics has been an ongoing and well documented phenomenon (e.g. Willis, 1996).

An extremely damaging consequence, we think, is the increasing competition among academics for research funds. For example, the Dutch government takes the view that organized competition and imposed flexibility boost quality. In 2007, it shifted a significant amount of money from direct university funding to the Organisation for Scientific Research for competitive bidding. One program is even called "free competition"⁴ (no irony intended). Due to the inability of the granting council to handle the volume of submissions in this particular program, the number of accepted proposals has been limited to a certain number. As a result applicants now wait for the system to open at a set date, at midnight, and then frenziedly try to navigate the overloaded system to submit their files before the competition. Digital submission speed, technical competencies and the willingness to work past midnight have become a "condition qua non" for grant awarding. In the Netherlands and elsewhere grant successes have turned into vital symbolic measures of esteem. What is rewarded is the capacity to compete with our colleagues on the basis of writing well-structured and articulated proposals.

⁴ http://www.nwo.nl/nwohome.nsf/pages/NWOA_4XLBT7_Eng

As in other labour markets, competition often leads to the division and subsequent segmentation of academic labour. At North American universities, grants and fellowships can be used to partially buy faculty out of teaching. The funds are then used by the university to hire instructors at a lower pay. In some cases, sessional instructors teach more courses than the bought-out professor would have taught. One consequence can be envy and resentment: in light of increasing competition among academics, successful fund raisers can experience that their colleagues hold their funding records against them. A more serious concern is that the reliance on grant money increases the segmentation of academic labour by valorizing research and fundraising, and devaluing teaching (Bauder, 2006). This segmentation of labour can also result in the exclusion of relevant actors with fundamental knowledge and practical experience of critical issues. The concentration of resources in this way can generate knowledge dispossession.

The segmentation of academic labour is compounded by the short-term nature of most grants. The emphasis on time-limited research projects is associated with an increase of the use of temporary and precarious labour and typically does not permit offering research staff and sessional lecturers fixed-term and/or tenured appointments. Graduate students are one source of 'flexible' labour. In Canada, the continuing underfunding of graduate students has been going hand-in-hand with current trends in grant distribution and administration. In Finland, the number of academic degrees has been quickly rising. In 1986, roughly 300 new Ph.D. degrees were awarded nationwide. Now the ministry of education makes contracts with universities each year to educate 1,600 Ph.D. students, who often serve as low-paid, full-time research labour in four-year positions. The over-supply of labour has led to rising unemployment rates among most highly educated people, especially in certain sectors like the biosciences.

Another fundamental dilemma relates to the establishment of research teams involving natural and social scientists to maximize the chances of grant acquisition. In the United States, this melding of natural and social scientists has become popular among large grant agencies, such as the National Science Foundation, the Environmental Protection Agency and National Institute of Health. Too often, however, superficial connections are made between the natural and human realms. When there is little substantive knowledge and appreciation across this traditional academic divide, research practice typically fragments, perpetuating the very thing that was to be avoided: production of non-integrative, traditional research camps.

Critical social scientists must realize, in this context, that natural scientists are frequently squeamish about taking on issues of redistribution, equity, and equality. Rather, natural scientists often see such foci as counter-productive to the securing of grants and often equate them with subjective non-science. A geologist recently told one of us: "face it, there's two kinds of work being done today [in higher education], science and touchy-feely subjective stuff". Some natural

scientists enact a hierarchical, custodial ethos in their relations with the social sciences. These relations can be reproduced within the grant assessment procedure. Some of us have had experiences where interdisciplinarity in grant writing is a declared goal, but review committees seem not to support it. There are gatekeepers at the boundaries of natural and social sciences and between the disciplines who are fervently guarding methodological convention.

Finally, an emerging challenge faced by natural scientists who would prefer not to engage in applied research in the corporate interest is that end-use grants tend to subvert other sources of funding. For example, the [Ontario Early Researchers Awards Program](#) supports graduate students and post-doctoral fellows with the intention to produce potential economic benefits to Ontario, especially in the areas of biotechnology, health and pharmaceuticals, high-technology manufacturing, and other emerging fields. The grant, however, does not support the research costs directly. Scientists who are successful in securing one of these grants typically need to support these projects using support from other grants that are not tied to specific outcomes, effectively converting *ivory tower* money into *end use* money.

Engagements and Transformation

We envision multiple ways in which to intervene with the problematic trends outlined above. The first set of suggestions represents short-term tactics of engagement with the current system of grant acquisition and administration. The second set of questions involves longer-term transformations.

Academics could limit themselves to *ivory-tower* money. Next to the need for some money to cover basic budget items to conduct critical research, an important motivation for applying for such grants is to strengthen critical geographical research and support critically-oriented graduate students (without exploiting their labour, of course). A problem with this tactic is that average success-rates are low and declining. Another problem is that activities reflecting critical practice are often ineligible for funding. Some of us, however, have been able to use grants in creative ways to pursue critical practice. For example, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada pays close attention to the grant application, but less attention to the details of the spending and research outcomes. Opportunities exist to design research practices that benefit vulnerable communities and community-based organizations, such as in developing countries where a little money goes a long way. In some cases, the payment of transportation, subsistence and labour costs all have to go through language, script, currency, and accounting practice translations before they reach the university's finance department. It would be difficult for anyone in this department to understand exactly how the money was spent, or exactly how particular expenditures relate to research outcomes. Pursuing such a strategy can enable participatory and action research, and stimulate collaboration with communities on working out research

goals and spending priorities (Butz, 2008). We understand such practices to be a reasonable—if not entirely non-complicit—way to combine critical research with critical practice.

Within the physical sciences, this approach is becoming increasingly difficult, since research funds are either tied to specific “deliverables” or contingent on industrial partners who are required to invest support “in kind” and who expect specific returns on these investments. The tactic of clever subversion of research funds is also unlikely to work for large interdisciplinary research projects, with needs for labs and other large-scale infrastructure. In interdisciplinary collaborations, critical social scientists need to be vigilant in planning the project, carrying out the research and producing results to their satisfaction. Throughout such collaborations, the focus on critical contents, such as notions of class and gender equity, socially constituted realities and the critical appraisals of institutions, must be maintained and policed. Critical social scientists must ensure that natural scientists gain intimate familiarity with critical scholarship, that they incorporate it into the research enterprise, that they acknowledge the policy implications of their work, and that they understand why claims to resources (e.g., funding graduate students, travel money) are important. This process entails cultivating a working knowledge among collaborating colleagues of the varying research questions, methods, practices and ongoing debates in different disciplinary fields.

Furthermore, critical social scientists involved in research teams that cross the natural and human realms must uncompromisingly defend their critical position. Rather than reducing critical theory and practice to peripheral sensibilities, they must be centered as important and valid areas of research investigation. Critical social scientists must assert that critical perspectives are important to improving the human condition and advancing knowledge about the world. In the United States, for example, the National Science Foundation and the Environmental Protection Agency desire to underwrite research that generates both technical advances and increased understandings about equity and processes of redistribution. Moreover, critical research perspectives must be chronicled as thriving and nuanced areas in contemporary higher education. For example, critical perspectives of sustainability, globalization, transnational studies and political ecology currently integrate insights about the dynamics of the natural world. An important short-term strategy is thus to raise awareness within grant-based collaborations.

Other suggestions are longer-term in nature. An important strategy involves sustained intervention in neoliberal discourses. For example, we need to move beyond trying to cleverly manipulate the neoliberal language, such as “collaborative” or “applied,” and realize that we have an opportunity to claim these words and make them part of the critical project. Rather than representing our

community partners and institutions as “formally-organized” or “economically-oriented”, we need to legitimate our partners in the eyes of granting agencies and society at large. Furthermore, critical academics making their way onto granting agencies’ adjudication panels and into higher levels of decision making must not only be sympathetic to any language games we are playing, but they must support systemic transformation.

Another long-term strategy is to initiate debate at global, national and local scales on how to organize responsible and effective research funding. Some discussion can currently be found in the media and discussion forums, but much more will be needed. First, we require systematic, critical and international comparative analysis of the mechanisms and policies of funding to identify the weaknesses that have to be attacked. We think there are many: from the way priorities are given and increasing conflicts of interest, to the construction of inefficient hierarchical structures of research and the distortion in the distribution of expenditures. Second, we need a better understanding of different possibilities to create independent investigations (see Cohen, 1998; Weissman et al., 1999) and begin applying them in an effective manner. Third, we need to articulate complex and precise alternatives to current funding systems that encourage critical practice and address existing inequalities. These alternatives could reinvent critical research in larger emancipatory projects, potentially mobilizing chaotic systems and non-hierarchical democratic learning processes.

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