Between Factory and Consultancy
The Excellent Posthistorical University

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The contemporary neoliberal university is often compared to a factory. In this essay, Roel Griffioen and Jesse van Winden explore the practical and symbolic value of this metaphor, using the recent protests at VU University in Amsterdam as a case study. Is the relation between the two institutions – university and factory – more than just proverbial?





After the recent well-documented occupations of the Bungehuis and the Maagdenhuis buildings at the University of Amsterdam (UvA), it is interesting to look back at the occupation of the Kerkzaal in spring 2014. The small chapel atop the main building of VU University in Amsterdam, a reminder of the university's Calvinist history, was occupied by students from the Faculty of Earth and Life Sciences in protest against the abolishment of a number of relatively small programmes. In their eyes these programmes were highly valuable, however, quickly gaining the protesters support from Actiegroep Titanic, an action group which united a much broader student population with shared concerns. The emblem for the protest became a giant banner hung from the roof of the main building and spread across its facade, with a picture of Cookie Monster and the caption "Cookie Factory."

The term "cookie factory" had already been coined two years before the Kerkzaal protest by Verontruste VU'ers [Upset VUers] – a coalition of academic and support staff who lodged a protest against the planned reorganization and cutbacks of EUR 33 million – whose manifesto included the line: "Decolonize the VU. We are not a cookie factory." [1] The essence of the problem, according to this manifesto, is that: *the transformation from an academic model to an economic model makes the central tasks of education and research, and therefore the people who must carry it out, subordinate to economic goals. The university is not a manufacturing company and can never be. The development and dissemination of knowledge is a different matter than producing cars or cookies.* [2]
Attracting students and mass-producing diplomas and academic output for the consumer collective of the government / student population / business community seemed to be the business model that was elbowing out reflection and education as basic societal provisions.

The term stuck. The newspaper *De Volkskrant* even coined a new dictionary definition in the autumn of 2013: "cookie factory: invective referring to a university that considers quantity more important than quality." [3] Although the cry for help had been sent out in 2012, the *Volkskrant* journalist predicted that "terms like 'cookie factory' will also be frequently heard in the debate on the quality of universities in the coming year." He was proven correct a little less than a year later when the occupiers of the Kerkzaal gave the term a central place in their communications. "University administrators mainly focus on

production," the occupiers wrote in their manifesto. "Promotions, publications, earned study points, awarded diplomas and agreements concerning performance and study results" are changing the university into a "cookie factory." [4] In other words, the cookies are academic products produced on assembly lines as a result of an output-oriented policy imposed from above. But who is the Cookie Monster and why is he eating so many cookies?

The Excellent Posthistorical University

A factory is not the first metaphor that comes to mind when you walk into the refurbished main building of VU University. It is sooner an architectural "space of flows," suited for a consultancy or an accountancy or another form of service provider endemic to late capitalism. A great deal of effort has been invested in student friendliness. Before the renovation, there was a reception desk at the entrance; now, a "hostess" in a stewardess uniform stands in the middle of the entrance hall to direct new education clients to the proper classroom. Studying can be done at study tables or in one of the "flexi-work" cubicles, but relatively more space has been reserved for leisure. No longer is there only the canteen for that, you can also go to two new coffee bars or the café restaurant – all commercially run by external parties. The previously rather bland campus square has been given a big boost by its redesign and space has even been found for a small supermarket.

The increase in consumer space is the most visible side of the makeover of VU University. [5] Less visible but more significant is the renovation and redesign of the office wing of the building. Here, the academic staff has been segregated to a flexi-work open office that is inaccessible to students; there is now a border checkpoint between teachers and students there. A student who has an appointment must be escorted by the teacher through "security" doors with ID cards. The building was initially designed sometime in the magical years of 1968 and 1969 to satisfy a demand for more academic transparency and accessibility. Now, a student visiting these offices must first stand in a sluice between four lifts and two glass doors, waiting until a teacher comes to free them. Behind the glass choir screen (the architectural division in churches that separates the sanctuary from the rabble), a ridiculous degree of detachment is expected from the evermore-depleted academic staff, because no one is permitted to have a bookcase or to claim a permanent, peaceful workspace of their own.

The dual nature of the renovation operation at VU University painfully illustrates the twofold shift currently taking place at Dutch universities. On the one hand, major investments are being made on the outside. The façade is given a facelift, an interior architect is called in, the house style gets polished up, the brand is promoted through poster campaigns and advertisements. While the construction world is still recovering from the crisis, many a Dutch university is launching ambitious plans for a new campus. All of this is cosmetic. At the same time, draconian measures are being taken on the inside of the institutions, which are completely upending the way that universities function, and will ultimately have disastrous consequences for both research and education. The outside is shining like never before; the inside is crumbling.

The neoliberal university reflects the corporate world, not the factory. In Britain, literary theorist Terry Eagleton recently called attention to a British government report which stated that universities should act as "consultancy organizations." [6] This tenor can also be heard in policy papers in the Netherlands. Universities should transform themselves into flexible consultancies for project work and academic entrepreneurship, where knowledge can be ordered up, assimilated and packaged on demand and delivered to social or commercial partners.

In 2005 in the United States, the academic bigwig Stanley Fish made a case for a similar "university without an idea behind it," an institute with the motto, "No theory, no urgent

mission, no sociopolitical cause."[7] Fish calls this idea "the modern posthistorical university, the University of Excellence (with excellence a local matter of local judgment)."[8] Exactly what kind of research is carried out no longer matters. Karl Dittrich, chair of the Association of Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU), appeared to subscribe to the idea of the posthistorical institution when he compared today's university to a shopping mall where "all sorts of customers find something suited to their taste."[9] Might a course on leadership attract new "customers" to a sleepy department? Then let's add it to the curriculum. Are language programmes not in demand? Then let's cross them off the list.

Excellence and efficiency are terms obviously borrowed from the idiom of New Public Management, but in the context of the university, it is never completely clear what agenda they serve. No one seems to know what we are aiming at with our universities anymore. Policymakers who salivate over the idea of the elitist ports of call for money and top talent in the Anglo-Saxon world fail to appreciate the strengths of our own universities in the Netherlands: accessibility, which does not depend on one's background or bank balance, and the perspective of social aspiration.

The most flexible members of the academic staff have already adapted themselves to this development. Moonlighting professors in the Netherlands "keep many of their extra activities hidden from view, adjust research questions, touch up conclusions," to quote the findings from a journalistic research report published in the *Groene Amsterdammer*. "Professorship has become a brand, the professor a money generator."[10] In *Open!* in 2013, Belgian art sociologist and theorist Pascal Gielen expressed his amazement at the ease with which Dutch researchers switch between different research topics. In their hunt for financing, academics closely follow the agendas of funding organizations and expertly pillage each communiqué from government institutions for the latest buzzwords. Pragmatism has become the norm, writes Gielen: "Yesterday it was cultural diversity, art education, social cohesion and community art; today it is the creative industry, creative entrepreneurship and the creative city, although these, in turn, are now about to be pushed aside by the new buzzword of 'sustainability'. … Today it is all about 'top sectors'. What will tomorrow's hype be?" *[onlineopen.org/wanted-autonomous-researcher-m-f]*

At VU University, a clean desk policy is in effect for the academic personnel. Before going home, you must clear away everything from the desk that you have used. The clean desk is a perfect metaphor for scholarship in the year 2015. For the old, romantic scholar, a rising pile of books symbolized a determined and ongoing Jacob's wrestling with an intellectual problem. But at the Excellent Posthistorical University, books are equivalent to ballast and every form of profundity is essentially suspect. Profundity stands for rootedness, for standstill and stagnation. The Excellent Posthistorical Scholar sits at a different desk every morning, opens up a laptop and, unencumbered, rides off on it into the tundra of expansive information with Google as a guide.

Diploma Mill

It is not just research that is suffering under this transformation into the Excellent Posthistorical University. Education is too. It has been frequently pointed out that there is a perverse system error in the financing of universities in the Netherlands. Faculties receive money for each student who graduates "on time" and therefore a low level of education is to their advantage. It is vitally important for them to have as many first year students as possible enrolling, and as many as possible graduating. The premium for graduating students leads to purposely keeping courses simple and evaluating weak students much too positively. Folia, Amsterdam University's magazine, revealed that teachers of political science at the school even get paid for each dissertation they approve. According to the article, teachers receive at least EUR 500 per dissertation, depending on their salary scale. "We need to have money to pay the teachers and we only get it when our students graduate. So you'll be seeing payment for performance at the university more and more," a HR manager said. [11] The statistics are larded by manoeuvring students through the course of study with as little friction as possible.

Size matters in the Excellent Posthistorical University, where specialist and comprehensive professional study programmes are being lumped together and watered down into wholesale "noneducation" [*nonderwijs*]: broad, attractive-sounding but wobbly and unsystematic bachelor programmes designed to appeal to the biggest possible target group of choice-stressed school kids. The existence of these "sexy" programmes would not be so bad if they were offered in addition to the existing courses of study. This is not the case, for in the competition for student enrolment, the survival of the biggest is the rule: the smallest are the first to be eaten up. After all, the size of the "first flow of funds" (direct government funding) depends on the market share of the total number of students in the Netherlands. While relatively small study programmes can be extremely valuable precisely because of their compactness – certainly if nothing comparable is offered elsewhere – they very soon lack cost-effectiveness in the eyes of a university administration geared toward efficiency. [12]

The dream is that top students will be educated with a broad horizon in these "container" bachelor programmes. In reality, first-year students are expected to attend overcrowded, impersonal lectures two days a week. Step-by-step, educational quality is being subordinated to market value, so that, to paraphrase professor of financial geography at the University of Amsterdam Ewald Engelen, all we are doing now is training university students to become cannon fodder for the labour market. [13] The actual amassing of knowledge has been degraded to an optional part of the programme, banned to special "honours courses," classes for the talented and other ghettos of ambition. This flirting with nonsensical "academic excellence" and the bandying about of terms like "top sectors," "valorisation models" and the inevitable "knowledge economy" conceal the fact that an unrelenting race to the bottom is taking place.

At UvA, the administration was even planning to reduce the entire Faculty of Humanities to a single-profile and spineless liberal arts college, offering an inland sea of courses with a unique and personalized but unusable diploma on the horizon. Just in time, Humanities Rally, ReThink UvA, The New University (DNU) and similar action groups put this on their agenda, and it looks like this catastrophic scenario has been warded off, for now. Erasmus University is thinking about discontinuing its Faculty of Philosophy because it brings in too little money. Are too few students studying philosophy? No. Many students consider philosophy a good supplement to another field of study and take it as a second major. And universities receive no money for that. [14]

Of course, ambitious and talented students can still be found in the broad bachelor's degree programme, but they often feel a lack of any kind of specialist insight because they are following a study programme comprised of a mishmash of various disciplines. The

Dutch universities will soon be sending a disappointed generation of cocktail chatter experts, afraid of ideas and educated in a smattering of everything, into the big bad career world. Is the labour market really waiting for students who hold – in the words of student and columnist Roos van Rijswijk – a "Master of Fucking Everything"?[15] Actiegroep Titanic put the finger on the sore spot during the occupation of VU University in March 2014 when it handed out diplomas and congratulated students for "meeting the stated goals, whereby you have not developed any skills or learned how to conduct research but do fit within the criteria of the financial model."[16]

University As Factory

The image of a cookie factory is a recent incarnation of the persistent metaphor of the "university as factory," which has been used for decades in discussions on education and in student protests and keeps popping up in new guises. Other variations that have recently surfaced in the press are "diploma factory,"[17] "PhD factory"[18] and "academic factory."[19] Yet the relation between the university and the factory is more than just proverbial. As far back as 1996, sociologist Bart Tromp huffed in a spirited piece in the newspaper *Het Parool* that the university outwardly modelled itself on the business world, but organizationally it was increasingly modelling itself "on the factory of the 19th century."[20] He wrote this article, which was recently dug up by the sociologist and VerontrusteVU'er Boris Slijper, against the background of the implementation of the University Governance Modernization Act (MUB) that year, which abolished the university's self-government and wrought the very trickle-down technocracy against which academics throughout the nation are protesting today. The MUB not only excluded the staff from governance of the university, but also drastically changed the organization of academic work. Staff members went from being co-designers to executors of academic policy, which was effectively written by the national government in The Hague. After the Bologna Process went into effect in 1999, the already rife forms of bizarre government pressure increased even more. According to some, Bologna was a necessary intervention to rid Europe of academic feudalism; according to others, it was the imposed implementation of an aggressive Hobbesian form of Anglo-Saxon "academic capitalism." No matter which, it brought about a phenomenal organizational, educational and administrative transformation, from which the university has yet to recover.

It is useful to look at the university-factory as a place where the organization of work crystallizes in a way that says a lot about the organization of the economy at large. This is an argument repeatedly emphasized by such groups as ***edu-factory***, a transnational network set up in 2006 that consists of academics and activists from the educational field who are united around the slogan, "As once the factory, now the university." This slogan naturally refers to the "industrialization" through which academic products are produced "on the assembly line" as a result of an output-oriented policy imposed from the top down, but it also refers to the university's central place in our social economic system. Roughly speaking, the university is taking over the role fulfilled by the factory in the Fordist economy, which was based on the production of goods. The factory, as a place where work was concentrated in time and space, was the mould in which the labour potential could be optimally utilized. Now that the steady contract, the fixed workday and the fixed workplace have completely faded away, the university is setting itself up as rightful inheritor.

In many ways, the university is a laboratory for "the economy to come." Dutch universities are giving new meaning to the notion of flexi-work. Not including doctoral students, the number of temporary contracts at universities has increased since 1999 from 23 to 41 percent. When doctoral students are included, the number of temporary workers even increases to 61 percent of the entire academic employee population.[21] The almost 9000 doctoral students working in the Netherlands together make up about half of the total number of researchers in the country. Only a small percentage can look forward to an

academic future. The output of Dutch universities, which ensures that the Netherlands scores fairly highly in international rankings, is considerably increased by the cheap labour of these discardable scholars.

The Austrian art theorist Gerald Raunig explored the factory metaphor using the example of a German cartoon from the 1970s, which became famous as an illustration on the cover of the book *Uni-Angst und Uni-Bluff* written by Wolf Wagner in 1977, and was recently recycled during protests at universities in Germany. [22] The drawing shows the conveyor belt of a "knowledge factory" pumping out students instead of products. One after another, the factory machines extract individuality and implant discipline and specialist knowledge. At the end of the course, the students roll off the assembly line as standardized final products: uniform, anonymous, grey civilians. The message is clear: in the university, every grain of individuality or venture is skillfully excised, so that the students end up leaving the machinery as ready-made civilians. As Raunig says, "The main statement of this picture is simple: the university-factory is a monstrous machine, in which initially different and diverse students are turned into uniform people and made fit for exploitation in a uniform society. In light of the advanced conditions of the commodification of knowledge and the striation, homogenization and market-economization of the universities, of course this metaphor of the university as factory appears more fitting than ever. But it does not go far enough."

Raunig also refers in this regard to the work of ***edu-factory,*** which has demonstrated how the neoliberal university functions as an apparatus in which not only students but also researchers and support staff are disciplined by means of a finely knit web of administrative actions, performance agreements and audits. This disciplining of the various academic populations is not shown in the cartoon. It stares blindly at the supposed role of victim played by the students, who are presented as raw material for the institutional apparatus. This does not do justice to the students' interweavement with the system, nor to their potentiality as actors.

Students themselves have also begun to consider themselves clients of the Excellent Posthistorical University who pay money (tuition) in exchange for a service, and ultimately in exchange for a diploma. In many cases, students themselves are the ones who are demanding standardized knowledge from teachers. Vice versa, many teachers by now have been so battered senseless that they expect as little as possible from students. Teachers exhausted by over-management have lowered the ceiling and indifferent students are not pushing it back up.

While holding each other in this deadlock, both groups have little eye for the third academic population, which is referred to with the slightly disparaging term of "support staff." The very precarious conditions in which librarians, help desk workers, cleaners and cafe employees carry out their work are not always fully recognized by the protesting students and researchers. The cleaners at the VU, who are actually hired by an external agency, organized extensive actions in 2012 to improve working conditions, including a strike and a brief occupation of the main building. They found some support among students, but not much. In that respect, the inclusiveness of the recent Maagdenhuis occupation is more encouraging, as were the actions of the Verontruste VU'ers group that brought together research personnel and members of the support staff. This might well be one of the most important and hopefully lasting achievements of the recent protests and occupations: a start has been made to forge a broad coalition between the various academic populations, whose struggles and futures are intertwined, after all.

Seen in this way, the university is indeed the rightful inheritor of the factory as a "crucial site in which wider social struggles are won and lost," to paraphrase philosopher George Caffentzis and social scientist Sylvia Federici. [23] "Where once the factory was a

paradigmatic site of struggle between workers and capitalists, so now the university is a key space of conflict, where the ownership of knowledge, the reproduction of the labour force, and the creation of social and cultural stratifications are all at stake." The factory is dead, long live the university. The university is dead, long live the factory.

Editorial Common Knowledge *[onlineopen.org/common-knowledge]*

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Footnotes

1. Verontruste VU-ers, "Dekoloniseer de VU. We zijn geen koekjesfabriek," Ad Valvas, 8 May 2012, www.advalvas.vu.nl.
2. Verontruste VU-ers, "Manifest: Dekolonisatie van de VU. Dekolonisatie van de VU – de koekjesfabriek voorbij," updated 11 June 2012, www.verontrust.wordpress.com. All translations by the authors.
3. 'Naturally we approve an unwarranted promotion. Otherwise we'd miss out on €90,000.' Frank Miedema (Dean of UMC Utrecht) in Tonie Mudde, ***De Volkskrant***, 28 December 2013. See (in Dutch) www.volkskrant.nl.
4. www.actiegroeptitanic.nl.
5. Fortunately, the campus square now also has an alternative venue, the autonomous student café De Verrekijker, which opened in May 2015 in a vacant space occupied by students representing the New VU University (*DNU-VU*). See www.deverrekijker.org.
6. Terry Eagleton, "The Slow Death of the University," ***The Chronicle of Higher Education,*** The Chronicle Review, 6 April 2015, www.chronicle.com.
7. Stanley Fish, "Take This Job and Do It: Administering the University without an Idea," ***Critical Inquiry*** 31 (Winter 2005): pp. 271–285, www.scribd.com.
8. Ibid, pp. 279–280.
9. Cited in Marcel Metze et al., 'Ondernemende professoren,' ***De Groene Amsterdammer,*** 26 November 2014, www.groene.nl.
10. Ibid.
11. Marieke Buijs, "Politicologie betaalt docenten per ingeleverde scriptie," ***Folia***, 25 April 2012, www.foliaweb.nl.
12. 'Which, regardless of added intrinsic value, thus means that the University is better off without that study programme.' Thomas Muntz jokes in "Tijd voor een nieuwe universiteit," ***De Correspondent***, 4 March 2015. See (in Dutch) www.decorrespondent.nl.
13. Remark made by Ewald Engelen at a debate organized by the action group Verontruste VU'ers. See (in Dutch) www.advalvas.vu.nl.
14. See for example Robin de Wever, "Rotterdam doekt faculteit filosofie op," ***Trouw,*** 2 December 2014, www.trouw.nl.
15. Roos van Rijswijk, "Iets met mensen," ***Ad Valvas*** 59, no. 25: p. 25.
16. Actiegroep Titanic, "Studenten bezetten Kerkzaal *VU*," press release, 12 March 2014, www.actiegroeptitanic.nl.
17. Rutger Bregman, "De prof wint het van de prof.," ***De Volkskrant***, 13 April 2013.
18. Rutger Bregman, "De Promovendifabriek," ***De Correspondent***, 4 November 2013.
19. This term serves as title for an entire supplement in the *NRC* newspaper about the bankruptcy of the university, published on the eve of the Night of the University in 2014. Our manifesto "Nonderwijs" [Noneducation], which the present article builds upon, was included in this supplement and appeared under the title "Decademia" in the compilation Jelle van Baardewijk and Ad Verbrugge, eds., ***Waartoe is de universiteit op aarde?*** (Meppel: Boom, 2014), pp. 17–22.
20. Bart Tromp, "Van WUB naar MUB," ***Het Parool***, 4 September 1996. The University Governance Modernization Act (MUB) put an end to academic self-government and according to Tromp gave the seal of approval to mandatory subjection to the authority of "professional education bureaucrats." Officially, the act was meant to counter the continued growth of university democratization by curtailing the right of students to participate in decision making. But, warned Tromp, the act not only shut the students out of the administration, but also the teachers and researchers. This act replaced the University Governance Reform Act (WUB) from 1970. The WUB, a genuflection to the occupiers of the Maagdenhuis in 1969, had been designed after the ideal of the "council university." The administration of the university was run by elected councils, on which the academic staff, the students and the support staff each had one third of the seats. The board of governors (CvB) carried out the decisions of the university council. The MUB got rid of the university council and gave administrative authority to the board of governors, after which the "results policy" was allowed free rein. See www.barttrompstichting.nl.

21. We have taken these figures from Rutger Bregman, 'De Promovendifabriek', *De Correspondent*, 4 November 2013.
22. Gerald Raunig, "In Modulation Mode: Factories of Knowledge," *EIPCP* 08 (2009) www.eipcp.net. See also Gerald Raunig, *Factories of Knowledge, Industries of Creativity* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2013).
23. George Caffentzis and Silvia Federici, "Notes on the Edu–Factory and Cognitive Capitalism," *EIPCP* 05 (2007), www.eipcp.net.

Crosslinks

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Capitalism, Commons, Democracy

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