Life Shaping, Habits of Mind, and Social Institutions

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Abstract: According to the enactivist view of the mind, there is close connection between being alive and being cognitive: to be alive is to be capable of cognitive engagements. The living organism does not passively receive and process stimuli from an external world, but rather helps to determine what counts as useful information on the basis of its structure, needs, and the way that it is structurally coupled with its surroundings. Sense-making is the process whereby it interprets environmental stimuli in reference to its survival needs. However, gauging meaning and significance in a complex social world such as ours goes well beyond mere survival and self-maintenance, and has much to do with *adapting* and *faring well* in a specific socio-cultural context. The achievement of human goals requires coordinated movement, which leads to the formation of built-up patterns of engagement and response. Over time, these characteristic patterns of movement and behavior become more engrained and come to comprise an individual's habitual manner of sense-making. Learning and socialization play a significant role, and habits of mind are formed via interaction with values, cultural norms, and other people. Once habits form and become more engrained, there is a sense in which social norms are *internalized* and sedimented in the body. Cognition and affectivity therefore are best seen as socially embedded and heavily modulated by relationships and norms. This environmental influence can either (i) cultivate adaptive habits of mind that promote human flourishing, or (ii) contribute to maladaptive habits of mind that alienate people from deep-rooted human needs and interfere with overall well-being. One setting in which habits of mind are profoundly modulated is the college or university. Inside higher educational institutions guided by neoliberal ideology, individuals are habituated to toxic interaction patterns and modes of valuation. Rather than cultivating critical thinking and promoting self-realization, these institutions often undermine such capacities. College and university settings in contemporary neoliberal democracies such as the United States thereby give us a powerful example of how social institutions sometimes serve to cultivate habits of mind that impede human flourishing.

Keywords: enactivism; neoliberalism; higher education; embodied cognition; habits; social norms.

1. Introduction

In *Embodied Selves and Divided Minds* (2015), I appeal to insights from enactivism and embodied cognition to examine the notions of subjectivity and selfhood. As articulated by theorists such as Weber and Varela (2002) and Thompson (2007), enactivism asks us to trade in a Cartesian view of mind in favor of a more Aristotelian approach that emphasizes the *biological* character of mentality (Hutto 2011, 45). According to this view, there is close connection between being alive and being cognitive: to be alive is to be capable of cognitive engagements. One striking aspect of living systems is that their patterns of interaction with the environment have much to do with their own viability constraints. A living system always has to make sense of the world and supplement itself with what it lacks in order to remain viable. What Varela and Maturana call 'cognition' and what Thompson has referred to as 'sense-making' is meaning generation that takes place from the concerned perspective of a living organism (Froese and Di Paolo, 2011, p. 7), and is the process whereby it interprets environmental stimuli in terms of their "vital significance." The living organism does not passively receive and process stimuli from an external world, but rather helps to determine what counts as useful information on the basis of its structure, needs, and the way that it is structurally coupled with its surroundings.

Of course, gauging meaning and significance in a complex social world such as ours goes well beyond mere survival and self-maintenance, and has much to do with *adapting* and *faring well* in a specific socio-cultural context. Among human animals with sophisticated nervous systems, objects of desire and need that are placed at a distance in space and time are conceptualized as "goals," the achievement of which require coordinated movement; and pursuit of one's interests and goals often leads to the formation of built-up patterns of engagement and response. Over time, these characteristic patterns of movement and behavior become more engrained and come to comprise an individual's habitual manner of engagement and sense-making. Learning and socialization no doubt play a huge role, and habits of mind are formed via interaction with values, cultural norms, and other people. As Dewey (1988) rightly notes, habits are socially acquired responses, formed under the influence of other people, which we come to amass over the course of a lifetime. By virtue of being causally embedded in a social environment, we form *habits of mind* in accordance with the demands of that environment. Once habits form and become more engrained, there

is a sense in which social norms are *internalized* and sedimented in the body. Our living bodies thereby become "socially saturated" and socio-normatively laden.

Cognition and affectivity therefore are best seen as socially embedded, environmentally influenced, and heavily modulated by relationships and norms. Importantly, the influence of the social environment can be beneficial or detrimental. Existing social norms and dynamics can either (i) cultivate adaptive habits of mind that promote human flourishing, or (ii) contribute to maladaptive habits of mind that alienate people from deep-rooted human needs and interfere with overall well-being.

One of the "expanded zones of contemporary life" (Slaby, 2016b, p. 2) in which habits of mind are profoundly modulated so that the cognitive, affective, and behavioral dispositions of an individual fall squarely in line with prevailing social norms is the college or university setting. When they do their job best, higher education offers students the opportunity not only to learn new skills, but also to develop the capacity "to think and act critically about each and every aspect of the social world" (Bush, 2017, p. 22). Universities have the potential to cultivate certain interpersonal habits (e.g. cooperation and active listening) and a particular kind of affective stance, one which centers on perspective-taking, empathy, openness, curiosity, and imagination. However, inside higher educational institutions guided by neoliberal ideology, individuals are habituated to toxic interaction patterns and modes of valuation. Rather than cultivating critical thinking and promoting self-realization, these institutions often undermine such capacities. College and university settings in contemporary neoliberal democracies such as the United States thereby give us a powerful example of how social institutions sometimes serve to cultivate habits of mind, behavior, and modes of valuation that impede human flourishing.

2. Enactivism, Sense-making, and Affective Framing

Enactivism centers on the notions of autopoiesis and autonomy and holds that mindedness is rooted in structural dynamics associated with metabolism, self-regulation, self-maintenance, and adaptation[1]. In simplest terms, autopoiesis is the process whereby the

[1] Theorists such as O'Regan and Noë (2001) have articulated an alternative theory of enactivism that centers on the way in which perception rests on knowledge of sensorimotor contingencies. However, my paper focuses primarily on what some theorists have called "autopoietic" or "autonomic" enactivism.

constituent processes of living systems "produce the components necessary for the continuance of those same processes" (Thompson, 2007, p. 98). Thompson's (2007) work explores how autopoiesis serves as the basis for the conscious minds of living organisms and describes living beings as autonomous agents that actively generate and maintain their own coherent patterns of activity. *Basic autonomy* is the capacity of a system to manage its own flow of matter and energy so that it can regulate and control both its own internal, self-constructive processes, as well as its processes of exchange with the environment (Thompson and Stapleton 2009, p. 24).

Central to this enactivist view is the notion of *sense-making* and the idea that cognition is a process of ongoing, active engagement between a living organism and its surroundings. It is the organism itself which determines what stimuli in the environment to which to be sensitive and responsive (Merleau-Ponty, 1962) given the nature of its receptors and bodily organs. Physical and chemical phenomena only take on meaning to the extent that they relate positively or negatively to the "norm of the maintenance of the organism's integrity" (Thompson, 2007, p. 70). By defining itself and distinguishing between self and world, "the organism creates a perspective which changes the world from a neutral place to an *Umwelt* that always means something in relation to the organism" (Weber and Varela, 2002, p. 118).

Colombetti (2014) has examined how sense-making is bound up thoroughly with *affectivity,* emphasizing that a living organism always makes sense of things from the standpoint of its own concerned perspective, in light of its *adaptive interests*. It is the *precariousness* of metabolic processes, in particular, which is crucial to the development of a concerned point of view. In order to monitor and metabolically regulate themselves with respect to their conditions of viability, living systems must be able to discern what is suitable for their continuation (Colombetti, 2014, p. 19). The ability to make sense of things involves "the capacity to be personally affected, to be 'touched' in a meaningful way by what is affecting one" (Colombetti, 2015). This basic mode of affectivity, which Colombetti (2014) calls "primordial affectivity", is rooted at some basic level in the appropriative activity of metabolism. An entity that is *interested* in surviving, and *concerned* about getting the material resources it needs for its own continuation, projects this concern onto its surroundings.

While many enactivist theorists seem open to the idea that low-level organisms such as bacteria are capable of subjectivity, I argue that while life is necessary for mind, it is not sufficient. This is because I have doubts as to whether this minimal mode of sense-making is accompanied by subjectivity or anything closely resembling the "concerned point of view" found among humans or other mammals. Instead, subjectivity emerges out of living biological dynamics in the sense that it is an *enrichment* of those dynamics. Such enrichment does not mean that something gets added from outside life in order to generate subjectivity; instead, "life evolves in such a way as to transform sense-making" (Thompson, 2011, p. 42) such that subjectivity as well as more complex forms of cognition arise. What is required for this evolution, in my view, are the capacity for sensorimotor coordination and the development of what I call *affective framing* patterns.

One way to describe an affective frame is as "affective mode of presentation" whereby "significant events or states of affairs [are] disclosed through diffuse, holistic bodily feelings" (Slaby, 2008, p. 447). Affect operates as the "allure" of consciousness, and implies a "dynamic gestalt or figure-ground structure" whereby some objects emerge into affective prominence, while others become unnoticeable (Thompson, 2007, p. 274). While the prefrontal lobe no doubt plays a crucial role, affective framing also engages metabolic systems, endocrine responses, musculoskeletal changes, and cardiovascular responses. Thus, the notion of affective framing emphasizes that subjects enact meaning and personal significance *in-and-through* their feeling bodies and thereby draws attention to the affective, *essentially embodied* nature of sense-making. The cognitive-emotional interpretations that constitute affective framing are physically grounded in "organismic processes of self-regulation aimed at sustaining and enhancing adaptive autonomy in the face of perturbing environmental events" (Thompson and Stapleton, 2009, p. 27). Affective framing selectively attunes the organism to its environment and allows it to appraise the relevance of particular factors in light of its own particular needs, body size, ways of moving, and current context. This is crucial for survival insofar as it is a means of focusing attention that allows living organisms to deal with the complexity of their surrounding world.

According to the enactivist view, the identity of an autonomous system is somehow self-generated and lies in its dynamic organization. This identity can be understood as a "pattern which, given the adequate initial and boundary conditions, recursively contributes

to its own maintenance" (Moreno and Barandiaran, 2004, p. 13). However, discussions of autonomous organization should not be limited to basic biological organization or metabolic self-maintenance. After all, as noted earlier, human engagement with the environment takes on an especially sophisticated form and adaptivity goes well beyond mere survival and self-maintenance. A human subject also strives to fare well within a particular socio-cultural context and must navigate through the surrounding social world. Adaptive regulation of environmental engagement therefore is not simply subordinated to viability constraints imposed by "survival conditions", but also is governed by the need to maintain neuro-dynamic and behavior organization. This can be understood in terms of the self-maintenance of coherent behavior patterns (Barandiaran, Di Paolo, and Rohde, 2009, p. 11).

Among creatures like us, with sophisticated nervous systems that are capable of internally-mediated proprioception and coordinated movement, there develop enduring affective framings and patterns of bodily attunement. A human subject's habitual way of framing objects and events comes to be embodied in characteristic facial expressions, gestures, postures, movements, and overall bodily comportment. The pursuit of goals requires complex movement sequences and often leads to the formation of recurring modes of engagement and response. Orderly form and structure appear where previously absent and lived bodily dynamics come to exhibit certain characteristic patterns. Along these lines, Di Paolo (2005) describes a kind of self-sustaining, self-generating dynamic form in animal behavior and in neural and bodily activity that is reflected in characteristic patterns of bodily expressivity and response, perceptual invariants, and organized action. Likewise, Froese and Di Paolo hold that cognition involves "the adaptive preservation of a dynamical network of autonomous sensorimotor structures sustained by continuous interactions with the environment" (Froese and Di Paolo, 2011, p. 18). One paradigmatic example of these autonomous structures are *habits*, which encompass parts of the nervous system, physiological and structural systems of the body, and patterns of behavior. Along these lines, Sheets-Johnstone (2011) describes how, over the course of learning to move our bodies, we forged a large number of dynamic patterns that became habitual. For example, brushing one's teeth, tying a knot, and writing one's name all were woven into our bodies as familiar dynamics.

The top-down constraints of "habits of mind" are selectionist, and reduce the number of ways in which component aspects of our lived bodily dynamics – including brain activity, heart rate, metabolic processes, circulation, etc. – can operate. Bodily dynamics entrain and form integrated configurations, and as the animal interacts with the environment a global pattern of distributed, coherent neural and bodily activity comes to govern its sense-making activities. This includes the operation of integrated neural-somatic systems, sensorimotor processes, hormones, the circulatory system, and the respiratory system. Over time, various elements of the musculoskeletal system become "entrained", and the whole human body, and not just the brain, behaves as a "pattern-forming, self-organized system governed by nonlinear dynamical laws" (Kelso, 1995, p. 6). But in my view, habits include not only characteristic patterns of movement, but also characteristic ways of attending to and interpreting the surrounding world. Such patterns constitute a subject's particular *bodily-affective style* or *temperament* and the "form or structure of comportment" (Thompson, 2007, p. 80) whereby she shapes her environment into a meaningful domain. In creatures that are sufficiently neurobiologically complex, these affective framings and highly integrated patterns of behavior become quite extensive and sophisticated, giving rise to a characteristically human form of life.

3. The Life Shaping Thesis

It is important to acknowledge that the development of habits depends upon both external and internal constraints. Biology, developmental factors, and environmental influences all play a role in shaping a living animal's neurobiological patterns, interpretive tendencies, and characteristic bodily responses. Learning no doubt plays a huge role, and over time a living creature becomes selectively attuned to certain aspects of its surroundings and develops specific behavioral tendencies. Among humans, in particular, habitual modes of engagement and response are formed, modulated, and transformed as an individual interacts with her social environment and modifies her behavior in accordance with norms, expectations, and cultural values. More needs to be said, then, about the way in which our habits of mind are not just fully embodied, but also socially *embedded*.

My proposed *Life Shaping Thesis* says that insofar as we are essentially *social* minded animals, the affective framings that comprise our human form of life are all *partially determined*, or *shaped*, by our social surroundings. By a "partial determination" or "shaping" of our essentially embodied minds by something *X*, I mean that *X* affects us, and thereby has an influence on us, as minded animals, in a salient, significant way that is at once

(i) causal,

(ii) itself partially determined or shaped by means of self-reflexive feedback-loops, and

(iii) irreducibly normative

What is *causal influence*? I hold that *X* has a *causal influence* upon *Y* just in case:

(a) *X* has some sort of necessary, efficacious role to play in the production(at a time, or over time) of some mental or physical properties of or facts about *Y*

(b) there is some sort of general, distinctively rule-like or lawlike connection governing the production of *Y*-properties or *Y*-facts by *X*, and

(c) had X not existed, then those Y-properties or Y-facts would not have existed.

Thus, to suppose that social interactions and forces have a causal influence on mindedness is to suppose that these social factors have a necessary, efficacious role to play in the production of a subject's desires, beliefs, emotions, etc. and that without the contribution of these social factors, these various dimensions of mindedness would not have existed.

So far, this account of "partial determination" or "shaping" is quite similar to Rupert's (2004) hypothesis of "embedded cognition," which says that "cognitive processes depend very heavily, in hitherto unexpected ways, on organismically external props and devices and on the structure of the external environment in which cognition takes place" (Rupert, 2004, p. 393). Similarly, according to Sterelny's scaffolded mind hypothesis, "many animals intervene in their environment, shaping it in ways that improve the adaptive fit between the agent and the world" (Sterelny, 2010, p. 466).

However, while both Rupert and Sterelny focus exclusively on cognition, there is good reason to think that environmental resources also support and amplify human affectivity. What Colombetti and Krueger call "affective niches" are "instances of organism-environment couplings (mutual influences) that enable the realization of specific affective

states" (Colombetti and Krueger, 2014, p. 4). Individuals are drawn into certain modes of interaction, often by way of attunement and habituation to interaction patterns, modes of valuation, and feeling patterns that are customary for that domain. What Slaby calls "relational affect" is not primarily a matter of the affective experience of individual persons, but rather an "intra-active dynamic that inheres in social domains of practice" (Slaby, 2016a, p. 15). Other people have a strong influence on us, and it seems clear that "engaged, active collectives are capable of exerting a forceful affective pull on individuals" (Slaby, 2016a, p. 10) that shapes their affective framings and interpretive habits.

In addition, neither Rupert nor Sterelny examines the irreducibly *normative* aspect of the causal contribution made by environment. In a basic biological sense, norms are linked to vital requirements (i.e. biological self-maintenance). The living organism regulates its coupling with the environment according to norms established by its own viability conditions (Barandiaran, Di Paolo, and Rohde, 2009, p. 8). Normativity arises from the self-production and self-maintenance of a precarious system; and "through its ongoing individuation, the system intrinsically determines" which interactions support its continued existence, and which interactions threaten its survival (Barandiaran, Di Paolo, and Rohde, 2009, p. 8). Thus, at a basic biological level, what is good or bad for a living organisms, i.e. its norms of self-maintenance, are determined by its own internal organization.

However, the origin of *social norms* does not lie fully within the individual; instead these norms are acquired in other self-sustained, psychological or cultural modes of life. This is to say that adaptive agency in a complex social world such as ours goes well beyond mere survival and self-maintenance, and concerns faring well in a particular socio-cultural context. Social norms provide a framework within which we form values, attitudes, and desires, think thoughts, and execute intentions; and social institutions enhance specific patterns of thought, feeling, and behavior by providing a normative framework that rewards, reinforces, or discourages certain kinds of stances and behaviors. The concrete material and discursive arrangements of a social domain (which include physical layout, explicit rules, informal codes of conduct, and favored styles of interaction) "exert formative pressures on individuals to habituate in line with the dynamic patterns prevalent in the domain" (Slaby, 2016a). Some interactions are good for the socially situated subject and some are bad; some regulations and modes of coupling with the sociocultural world are adequate and adaptive insofar as they

enable the individual to fare well in that social environment (to gain status and social recognition, for example), and some are maladaptive (insofar as they involve heavy penalties, sanctions, or social disapproval). Social norms thereby modulate sense-making and mold subjects' overall bodily comportment.

The influence of social factors should not be understood exclusively in cognitivist terms. Particular social institutions often involve a web of shared norms and practices and a particular affective atmosphere that incentivizes participants to feel, think, and behave in certain ways rather than others. Individuals are drawn into certain modes of interaction, often by way of *affective attunement* and habituation to interaction patterns and modes of valuation that are the norm for that domain. The norms that shape the participant's feelings and patterns of valuation are not the principles chosen by individuals, but rather the "various operating logics are normative principles" that are prevalent in – and partially constitute – the social institution in question (Slaby, 2016a, p. 15). While some institutions foster highly dialogical collaborative activities, empathy, and cooperation, others encourage hyper-competitiveness or toxic group interaction. By virtue of participating in a social institution, subjects come to be bound together in a certain kind of social interaction that is characterized by specific norms and a particular affective atmosphere, so that the social environment serves as "the organizing plane" on which the cognitive and affective lives of individuals unfold (Slaby, 2016a, p. 21).

Still, although the origin of social norms does not lie fully within the individual, there is a sense in which the individual *internalizes* them. I argue that the notion of habit helps to make sense of the idea that social influences and norms can become *sedimented* in the body. Since our bodily habits and interpretive tendencies are dependent on social norms, and since we make sense of the world in and through our living bodies, norms thereby bring about "life shaping." Via the development of integrated patterns of behavior and attention, the living body "becomes normatively laden by societal expectations and mores" (Higgins, 2017). Higgins (2017) points to gender as an example. Due to expectations and norms regarding the enactment of "feminine" and "masculine" activity, individuals routinely adopt gendered mannerisms and habitually come to regard and experience their bodies in particular ways. Building on these ideas, I maintain that "internalizing" norms of "masculinity" and "femininity" centrally involves the adoption of specific habits of interpretation, movement, expressivity, and response. There are characteristic modes of speaking, walking, gesturing,

dressing, and interacting with others associated with "femininity" and "masculinity," and boys and girls begin to develop these habits from an early age.

Habits develop in part because social institutions encourage the adoption of certain patterns of bodily and affective engagement while discouraging and sanctioning others. In the case of gender, there are serious penalties associated with displaying habits that run counter to socially prescribed gender norms. Another example is the way in which workplaces enhance particular affective tendencies and inclinations by providing a normative framework that rewards certain kinds of stances and behaviors. People sanction or encourage particular kinds of actions, shape others' behavior, and thereby reinforce the kinds of practices that they endorse. In response to these pressures, subjects may develop what Buhrmann and Di Paolo (2015) call "sensorimotor strategies" or "schemes". These "schemes" can be understood as organizations of several sensorimotor coordinations (habits), which typically are deployed against the backdrop of some normative framework (e.g. considerations of efficiency) and influenced by social and contextual factors.

Importantly the relationship between habits of mind and normative practices is reciprocal. I hold that something *X* is itself partially determined or shaped *by means of self-reflexive feedback-loops* just in case *X*'s characteristic properties and facts are partially determined or shaped reciprocally by our own active and reactive contributions and responses to *X*. A minded subject is not only shaped by the social world, but also helps to shape the social environment through her active and reactive contributions and responses. Individual behavior and patterns of attention thus are both anchored in, and contribute to, these shared normative practices. When people accept prevailing norms and sanction or encourage particular kinds of behavior, they thereby reinforce those practices and norms. Individuals begin to comport themselves jointly in ways that are conducive to the smooth operation of the social domain in question, and through the broad participation of many different individuals, "meaning is enacted collectively and in line with the functioning principles" and values of that particular social institution (Slaby, 2016a, p. 17). It is important to note, however, that although subjects do often act so as to reinforce particular social practices and norms, they also have the capacity to defy and undermine them, in a range of different ways and to varying degrees. Sometimes the contribution made by a particular agent or group of agents may result in a modification of the social world, so that norms that once were dominant

begin to fade away and new sociocultural practices, norms, and values begin to take their place. Although individuals do often get "locked into" particular modes of movement and engagement as affective framings become more engrained, these patterns are not fixed or static, but rather *loosely assembled* (Colombetti, 2015) and susceptible to ongoing change. This means that there is always some potential for people to shift their affective framings and develop new habits of attention, thought, feeling, and bodily response.

Much of the philosophical work that addresses the contribution of the social world describes how our cognitive and affective lives are "scaffolded" and supported by social institutions and relations. For example, Gallagher and Crisafi (2009) describe how our cognitive systems are enmeshed with and enabled by "mental institutions" such as legal systems and scientific practice. In the case of legal systems, jurists, judges, and lawyers rely on principles, precedents, and procedures as a set of tools that can help them to resolve disputes. As a result, they do not have to think through cases alone, but rather can build upon others' previous cognitive work. Similarly, the scientific community's practice of sharing and comparing theories and hypotheses provides scientists with cognitive resources and tools to build upon and modify scientific research. According to contemporary sociologists, political scientists, and cognitive scientists, c*ollective intelligence*[2] is an emergent property that is constituted by the cognitive capacities and activities of a group of people, especially including group-reasoning, group brain-storming and innovation, the social production of written texts and other kinds of social media, group deliberation, and participatory decision-making. When there is a relatively high level of social group coordination, creativity, problem-solving, and productivity, people often are able to achieve things that they would not be able to achieve on their own, and display what might be termed 'collective wisdom.'

However, precisely because social institutions have the potential to scaffold, support, and positively contribute to cognitive and affective processes, they also have the potential to *distort* these processes and thereby detract from our well-being. While "enabling" social structures "work toward setting up mental patterns that are in the long run empowering [and] conducive to individual and collective flourishing", "deforming" social structures create "unhealthy dependencies, tie us to oppressive routines, sustain inequality, destroy communal

[2] See, e.g., *Wikipedia*, "Collective Intelligence," available *online* at: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Collective_intelligence>. Access 2018 jul.

bonds, or lead to […] mental habits that are detrimental to us or our kin" (Slaby, 2016b, p. 11). The notion that one can form "bad habits" by spending time with the "wrong people" is a prime example. Moreover, sometimes habits and affective framings that are adaptive in the short-term insofar as they help the subject to cope with her surroundings (e.g. smoking as a way to alleviate feelings of stress, or adopting a competitive stance as a way to get ahead in the workplace) prove to be maladaptive and harmful in the long-term. And some social institutions systematically shape our lives in such a way as to alienate us or even undermine our mental health. They do so by cultivating habits of mind and behavior that prevent people from satisfying their deep-seated human needs and impede human flourishing.

However, if these harmful affective framing patterns become more engrained, the continuation of these patterns of engagement can become goals in themselves (Froese and Di Paolo, 2011, p. 19) and it becomes increasingly difficult for individuals to modify their "bad habits." Indeed, some social institutions mentally enslave people in the sense that they cultivate habits that are detrimental to people's fundamental well-being and yet incredibly difficult to resist. In part this is because people are rewarded for adopting these habits and punished for rejecting them. Moreover, these habits of attention, valuation, and response shape people's sense of what is relevant and important to such a great extent that it becomes difficult even to question them or imagine things otherwise.

Of course, habituation and the modulation of affective framings is the result of influence from a variety of social institutions and continues over the course of a lifetime. We learn who we are largely through interactions with others, and all of society's institutions are part of this self-creation process. But some social institutions "seek out" individuals in order to "turn them into bona fide exponents of the domain's operative processes" and encourage them to conform to the routines and demands of that domain (Slaby, 2016a, p. 2). Such institutions cultivate framing patterns and habits of mind that exert a strong pull on the subjects involved and implicate them in the workings of this institution "even if that runs counter to their avowed interests or is in other ways detrimental to their well-being or flourishing" (Slaby, 2016a, p. 8). In these cases, affect functions as a "shrewd mechanism [for] keeping subjects attached to oppressive or otherwise pathological conditions" (Slaby, 2016a, p. 8).

To illustrate how "engaged, active collectives are capable of exerting a forceful affective pull on individuals" (Slaby, 2016a, p. 10) in ways that run counter to their interests and give rise to unhealthy forms of life, I look to the example of higher education in the United States. I will suggest that the habits of mind, behavior, and modes of valuation that are cultivated by the neoliberal university are detrimental to learning, undermine human flourishing, and serve as a powerful example of what Slaby (2016b) calls "mind invasion." Among those who participate in such institutions, "affect is profoundly and irresistibly molded, often in ways contrary to how individuals would feel, act, and comport themselves" (Slaby, 2016a, p. 24) if they were not bound by the norms of those institutions.

4. Neoliberalism

To understand what I mean by the "neoliberal university," it is important to highlight some of the operating logics and normative principles that have come to govern the workings of such institutions. The concept of neoliberalism is a many-membered *set* of concepts, and, when that set of concepts is applied in the real world, its effective policies and practices operate at local, state, national, and global levels. While these facts can make it difficult to define neoliberal ideology, there are some broad beliefs and commitments that unite these various ideas, practices, and policies.

First, neoliberalism is a return to and extension of laissez faire capitalist economic theory. Its central tenets are that the free market is benevolent, that state intervention and regulation of the economy should be minimal, and that the individual should be understood as a rational economic actor. On this view, the market is inherently efficient and competition naturally leads to economic growth and prosperity that will necessarily benefit all individuals. Any inequality that arises will be due to the "hard work" and natural abilities of individuals. Any intrusions into the market should be avoided given that they restrict proper market operations and prevent individuals from freely engaging with the market.

Second, the market comes to be viewed as the governing mechanism that should encompass every aspect of society. The emphasis on economic rationality therefore applies not only in the marketplace, but also in the social sphere. As a result, "in a neoliberal world, there is no longer a distinction between the market and the state, between the public and

private, and between the individual and the social" (Saunders, 2010, pp. 45-6). Individuals increasingly see everything they do in terms of maximizing their "human capital." This sort of "free market fundamentalism" emphasizes "winning at all costs, ruthless competitiveness, hedonism, and individualism (Giroux, 2010, p. 185). Within the context of higher education, some of the trends that reflect a neoliberal stance include decreased support for programs of study that are not business oriented, reduced support for research that does not increase profits, the replacement of shared forms of governance with business management models, the ongoing exploitation of faculty labor, and the use of student purchasing power as the vital measure of a student's identity and worth (Giroux, 2014, p. 22).

One could argue that higher education has always intentionally or unintentionally served capitalism, and to an important extent. Nevertheless, "what is new to the neoliberal university is the scope and extent of these profit-driven, corporate ends, as well as how many students, faculty, administrators, and policy makers explicitly support and embrace these capitalist goals and priorities" (Saunders, 2010, p. 55). They do so, for example, when they talk about the education "market", "return on investment," and "value for the money". However, this explicit embrace of neoliberal attitudes almost always takes place without people ever mentioning the term "neoliberalism". Administrators, faculty, and students rarely state they are neoliberals or that they believe in neoliberal ideology. How, then, can this ideology be so influential? In fact, it is precisely because people do not typically notice the impact of neoliberal ideology that is it able to exert such a strong influence. Neoliberalism has modulated our habits of mind to such a great extent "that it defines our common sense beliefs and becomes indivisible from our basic ideas and fundamental assumptions" (Saunders, 2010, p. 49). These affective framing patterns become especially influential "guiding frames" that are long-lasting and deeply entrenched, and which influence many of our more momentary framings and temporary patterns of attention.

Some patterns of cognitive-affective engagement properly align with the particular range of activities, interactions, and expressions that are expected or permissible in the context of the neoliberal university, while others do not. Those that do align are effectively rewarded or encouraged, while those that do not are effectively discouraged. What results is the cultivation of a particular sort of "bodily-affective style" (Colombetti and Krueger, 2015) and particular affective framings that are structured and sanctioned by that social institution.

This occurs in part by way of "emotional contagion, various synchronic, mimetic responses on a basic affective-bodily level," and "explicit demands and sanctioning on the part of the established domain members" (Slaby, 2016b, p. 9). People who become immersed in the neoliberal university will reinforce a market-oriented cognitive-affective orientation "by way of mimic[ry], gesture, [and] affective-bodily styles that signal approval or disapproval, encourage or discourage, reward with warm connection or punish with subtle hostility" (Slaby, 2016b, p. 9). Newcomers will be habituated in accordance with the affective patterns present within the institution.

Note that it is not that certain kinds of affect simply *accompany* or *color* our habituated human experience inside the neoliberal university. On the contrary, we can rightly speak of a far-reaching "mental infrastructure", one which involves "complex patterns of affect and affective relations" (Colombetti and Krueger, 2015) that shape and structure people's affective tendencies and modes of relating to others. In particular, neoliberalism encourages people to experience themselves as isolated agents, motivated at all times by instrumental rationality, and to regard everything as a competition. It encourages them to focus on the economic dimension of human life while downplaying other social and relational values such as empathy, cooperation, and collaboration, and to view all of their pursuits merely as a way to increase their "human capital" and advance their economic ends.

The pervasiveness and normalization of capitalist economic logic, and the expansion of exclusively instrumental rationality into cultural, political, and social spheres, help to create the appearance that this is the "natural" approach to the world – that this is simply the way things are. This is because neoliberal ideology has "infiltrated our institutions, discourse, and common sense" (Saunders, 2010, p. 53), engulfed people's framing tendencies, and thereby permeated every aspect of life. This culminates in "saturat[ion] of our consciousness, so that the educational, economic, and social world we see and interact with, and the commonsense interpretations we put on it becomes… the only world" (Apple, 2004, p. 4). The fundamental assumptions of neoliberalism thereby are embedded into our consciousness by way of engrained affective framings, which comprise habitual patterns of thinking, valuing, and behaving.

5. Neoliberalism and Higher Education

I'll now turn to a discussion of how neoliberal ideology has come to govern colleges and universities in the United States, and how the resulting *commodification and mechanization* of higher education contribute to false consciousness and widespread unhappiness.

Commodification

Neoliberalism urges use to view all social institutions as markets in which we make myriad choices, investments, and cost-benefit calculations. The subject enmeshed in a neoliberal university comes to frame and organize everything in her social life as a material good to be bought and sold, even if this perverts the true value of the object in question and distorts its sense of meaning for the individual. People come to conceive of higher education "as the faculty production of credit points (input) and the student consumption thereof (output), usually in the form of standardized units called courses or modules" (Lorenz, 2012, p. 612). As education comes to be viewed in relation to market norms and values, students begin to view themselves as consumers, and colleges and universities emphasize "value for the money."

The primary goal of education is to get a job, and higher education increasingly is focused on "return on investment – in monetary terms – in the form of a higher future income stream" (Busch, 2017, p 26). A student deciding whether to go to a given university will weigh the rankings of that university on one or more measures, e.g. the success of graduates in obtaining suitable employment. Majors, courses of study, and faculty research, are all judged primarily terms of their ability to contribute to the market and private interests. Faculty come to view themselves as providers of a saleable commodity such as a diploma, a set of workplace skills, or some other credentials. Professors also come to be viewed by outsiders as *sellers* of that good. If faculty do not sufficiently "market" their courses and students fail to show up in sufficient numbers, then the faculty are held responsible for that failure, and judged accordingly by their administrators (Lorenz, 2012, p. 622).

As education comes to be understood as a service provider-customer relationship, universities become obsessed with rankings, product differentiation, and "innovation." There is pervasive talk of "competitor" schools, the "market" in higher education, and the need to engage in advertising and marketing campaigns to promote "the brand." Administrators

overtly pretend to be concerned with the quality and intrinsic value of instruction; however, their primary focus typically is on how much money professors bring into the university, whether via externally-funded research grants or via "increasing enrollments", aka *putting bums on seats* (Washburn, 2009, p. 227).

Also commodified are research results, discoveries, and creations: increasingly, we describe users as "consuming" information and we treat knowledge as a form of capital. While academics traditionally have spoken of "contributions" to the literature that anybody can access and share, intellectual property rights treat information and knowledge as a form of private ownership. This, in turn, significantly inhibits research creativity and progress. Fruits of research are no longer integral parts of a general quest for knowledge, but instead become units of "intellectual property". Publicly funded research increasingly is privatized and sold for profit on the open market. Due to this commodification of knowledge and information, there are fewer opportunities for collaborative research and less value placed on "communities of scholars"; this undermines scholarly research as a public good and as part of "the intellectual commons".

In addition, research becomes more and more dominated by economic ends: instead of asking whether it furthers our understanding of the world or promotes some public good, it is increasingly guided by corporate and commercial interests and the goals of industry. Ideas and research products come to be validated and valued "for their success in attracting outside funding while developing stronger ties to corporate powers" (Giroux, 2010, p. 187). Knowledge production also is a means to promotion and tenure, and thus part of the pursuit of waged labor and promotions; and "the value of information and knowledge as a public good for intellectual and social progress is now secondary to its primary rationale for economic enhancement" (Lawson, Sanders, and Smith, 2015, p. 15), both for the individual researcher as well as the institution.

Mechanization

As universities become increasingly dominated by market mechanisms, organic social processes are transformed into codified, rote processes. In the context of neoliberalism, things begin to be framed in quantifiable terms and evaluated in terms of input-output "efficiency" and the maximization of profit. Due to this increased focus on efficiency,

systems of shared governance become overshadowed by more hierarchical, business-oriented models. In the past, administrators tended to be academics, but more and more universities now hire administrators with managerial backgrounds whose focus is on "efficiency" and making the institution more "competitive". This is because "the redefinition of educational issues as economic issues removes the need for those knowledgeable in education to be meaningful members of the decision-making process" (Saunders, 2010, p. 59). In addition, the shift toward markets and competitions "has pushed administrators to govern universities as much as possible by numbers" (Busch, 2017, pp. 43-4). Curricula, teachers, and information are transformed into what amounts to machine parts (Giroux, 2014, p. 36). Purely instrumental, economic metrics are used to evaluate universities, and terms such as "efficiency" and "sustainability" come to govern academic program development, course scheduling, and the restructuring of academic departments. For example, a department's "performance" is measured by the number of graduates, number of students taught, and academic outputs (publications or citations, patents, or grants secured by the department). Information about a university's "efficiency" in the use of State funds, the graduation rate of students, the time required to complete a degree, and the salaries of recent graduates, often is used to determine its ranking and may be translated into a financial reward or sanction for academic departments or institutions.

Neoliberalism also asks us to assume that within all organizations, including colleges and universities, there are individuals who either do the bare minimum to receive a paycheck or engage in activities that are largely unrelated to the goals of the university. Since all individuals invest their human capital only as necessary and simply wish to maximize their own personal goals and not those of their employer, this creates a "moral hazard" (Busch, 2017, p. 19). The "solution" to this problem is increased management and surveillance in the form of audits, departmental program reviews, performance metrics, and self-evaluation mechanisms. In order to enhance accountability, efficiency, and transparency, administrators are urged to collect massive amounts of data on the "productivity" of university faculty. Rhetoric that emphasizes "accountability" requires faculty to provide verifiable documentation of their "productivity" via norms and metrics established by their "managers". Because they must provide all-too-frequent verification of their efforts, faculty members eventually and ultimately lose their capacity to determine their own behavioral norms and

make decisions about how best to utilize their time. Instead, faculty must devote a growing proportion of their time to administrative tasks and fill out a seemingly endless barrage of forms of about virtually every aspect of their work. Such forms "encourage those who are audited to think about and enact their work in certain ways, to note how their activities conform (or not) to certain norms implicit in the forms" (Busch, 2017, p. 36). The information that faculty supply then is used by administrators to grant or deny tenure and promotion, grant or reject merit pay, and "make what are usually called market adjustments in the salaries of individual faculty" (Busch, 2017, pp. 38-9). Those who conform are rewarded, while those who work against the grain or resist being audited are sanctioned or sacked.

The upshot is that colleges and universities increasingly are governed by free market rhetoric together with intensive, coercive managerial control practices. It appears that "the illusory solution to the fiscal crisis in higher education is to monitor, regulate, and reduce the costs of intellectual production, but to do so requires an ever larger, and more coercive, administrative apparatus" (Busch, 2017, p. 36). Associated trends include higher numbers of administrators, structural reorganization, the constant threat of spending cuts, more emphasis on marketing and business generation, moves toward performance-related pay, and the ranking of citations (Lorenz, 2012, p. 607). Shared governance between faculty and administrators diminishes and there are few attempts to affirm faculty as scholars who have autonomy and power. Any criticism of core practices is interpreted as lack of loyalty to the institution and therefore viewed as fundamentally subversive (Lorenz, 2012, p. 610). As "disobedient trouble-makers", critical intellectuals are in very real danger of being denied tenure, fired, publicly shamed, blacklisted, or relegated to part-time appointments that pay extremely low wages (Giroux, 2014, p. 31). At the same time, there are salient rewards associated with compliance and conformity.

False Consciousness

In the context of the neoliberal university, subjects experience a transformation of their ordinary set of desires – including both instrumental as well as non-instrumental desires – into a rigid, static set of wholly instrumental desires whose structure mirrors the externally-imposed, wholly instrumental goals of the institution. What was once a loosely assembled, dynamic framework of affective framings is replaced by a rigid set of values and norms

cultivated by the social institution. Identities, desires, and modes of subjectivity are shaped in accordance with market values, needs, and relations (Giroux, 2014, p. 15).

Students learn that their fate is solely a matter of individual responsibility and are taught to embrace self-promotion and hyper-competitiveness; the importance of social bonds and collective reasoning begins to erode and there is little or no room for compassion, empathy, or non-egoistic ethical considerations. While students are naturally curious and want to learn new things, neoliberal values pervert this natural love of learning. Students are encouraged to view their university education as a mere means to a capitalist-driven end: getting a job in the larger capitalist economic system that will bring them a so-called "good living". Similarly, faculty who once valued research for its own sake, as intrinsically valuable, begin to view it solely as a mere means to job security, promotion, and professional status. Performance-related pay replaces their intrinsic satisfaction and desire to contribute to their field with a system of externally driven rewards and a perceived need to compete.

As a result, subjects who participate in neoliberal institutions of higher education gradually come to believe, falsely, that the externally-imposed, rigid, static set of incentivized desires actually are their own, and also begin to have an illusory consciousness of agential sourcehood when they are in fact being externally manipulated by those desires. In other words, they begin to "buy into" this new set of affective framings that has been cultivated by their college and university, and it becomes utterly normalized – *it's just the way that things are*. The subject's own habits of mind and attention become part of the problem. Within educational settings, this sort of "mind hacking" is especially problematic given that the very subjects whose critical thinking skills are needed to question, critique, and challenge what is happening "are themselves the 'targets' – and ultimately, the 'products' – of these formative influences" (Slaby, 2016b, p. 11). As a result, the space for insiders' self-critical assessment of higher education shrinks drastically, and may even disappear altogether. The university itself, rather than defending the importance of educating an engaged citizenry, is in danger of becoming "an ideological bulwark for corporate values, interests, and practices" (Giroux, 2010, p. 189), one which cultivates the habits of mind necessary to sustain the market.

Among professors, there is a tendency to accept and embrace the view that the university is first and foremost a place to prepare students to be competitive in the global marketplace. Many faculty also have come to believe that metrics and quantifiable modes of

evaluation truly reflect the quality of research, that the main purpose of education is employment, and that fields that don't explicitly prepare students for specific jobs (e.g. academic programs in the humanities) are less valuable. They unblinkingly speak of the "market" and their "competitor" schools, and unreflectively view students as consumers whose satisfaction must be promoted at all times. Because they are "beholden to corporate interests, career building, and the insular discourses that accompany specialized scholarship", many professors become entirely comfortable with the corporatization of the university and the new regimes of neoliberal governance (Giroux, 2014, p. 17).

Among students, there is a serious danger that neoliberal ideology creates "a kind of social amnesia that erases critical thought, historical analysis, and any understanding of broader systemic relations" (Giroux, 2014, p. 2). Focused on maximizing their human capital and a cost/benefit approach to their education, students begin to lose the very capacity "to imagine a different and more critical mode of subjectivity" or envision the world otherwise (Giroux, 2014, p. 14). Insofar as neoliberalism's "best trick" is "to convince people to remain attached to a set of ideologies, values, modes of governance, and policies that generate massive suffering and hardships" (Giroux, 2014, p. 2), such ideology makes it difficult for students to challenge engrained affective framings that are detrimental to their overall well-being.

6. Conclusion

Rather than promoting collaborative dialogue and critical thinking, the workings of the neoliberal university often deform people's thinking and feeling so that they view knowledge and education in exclusively narrow, reductive, purely instrumental terms. As people come to frame things in the way that the neoliberal university explicitly or implicitly demands, they are cut off from some of their most basic, deep-rooted human needs and may begin to hate what they used to love. Aristotle maintained that all rational human animals, that is, all human persons, *desire to know*. However, under the influence of neoliberalism, many students are cut off from their natural love of learning and their inborn desire to understand themselves and their world. Students who see their education as a private and very expensive public good, and who view their course work merely as a means to get a

decent-paying job, may grow dissatisfied with the learning process. As rational economic actors, students alter their goals "from what were largely intrinsic, such as developing a meaningful philosophy of life, to largely extrinsic goals including being very well off financially" (Saunders, 2010, p. 54). This results in a loss of intellectual curiosity and diminished enthusiasm for learning.

Meanwhile, faculty experience growing cynicism about what they perceive as ridiculous chores of audit. Dealing with the new performance measures itself becomes a kind of performance, and skillfully performing the dance of satisfying performance measures becomes a fruitful, lucrative strategy in a setting in which only appearances matter (Lorenz, 2012, p. 620). The introduction of permanent coercive control over faculty also introduces a culture of permanent mistrust and an atmosphere of "zero-sum" competition. Those who survive in the system eventually become alienated from their deep-seated desires for social connection, cooperation, and collaboration; and as more and more tasks are viewed simply as a means to achieving some economic end, professor's intrinsic motivations to gain wisdom and knowledge are increasingly replaced by extrinsic rewards, e.g., promotion, tenure, and merit pay. As a result, there is increasing demoralization, loss of motivation, and decreased job satisfaction.

In summary, the influence of neoliberal ideology and the commodification of higher education systematically cultivates and sustains habits of mind that undermine human flourishing. The example of higher education within the United State thereby helps to illustrate how prevailing ideology sometimes shapes people's patterns of thought, feeling, and behavior in detrimental ways.

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