

How Biopower Puts Freedom to Work: Conceptualizing ‘Pivoting Mechanisms’ in Biopolitical Organizations

Abstract

Management researchers have turned to Michel Foucault’s concept of biopower to explain new forms of regulation in organizations, revealing that employee *freedom* is a significant medium for this. Exactly how these freedoms are oriented and steered towards managerial goals requires closer theorization, however. Towards this end, the paper develops the concept of ‘pivoting mechanisms’ and uses the academic labour process (in the neoliberal university) as an illustrative example. Five implications are discussed to provide a deeper understanding of how biopolitical regulation and freedom coincide in 21st century workplaces.

Key Words: Biopower; Freedom; Foucault; Entrepreneurship; Neoliberal University; Resistance; Work Organizations

Introduction

Although Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1975/1977) has attracted the lion's share of attention in management and organization studies, his later works (between 1975-1984) are increasingly being evoked too, particularly the notion of 'biopolitics' (as a regime of government) and 'biopower' (its attendant techniques) (see Ahonen, Tiernari, Meriläinen and Pullen, 2013; Fleming, 2013, 2014; Weiskopf and Munro, 2011; Moisander, Groß & Eräranta, 2018; Norbäck, 2019; Moonesirust and Brown, 2021; de Souza and Parker, 2020; Walker, Fleming, Berti, 2021).

Foucault discusses biopolitics in the final chapter of *The History of Sexuality* (1978) and three lecture series delivered at Collège de France, published in English as "*Society Must be Defended*", 1975-76 (2003), *Security, Territory Population, 1977-78* (2007) and *The Birth of Biopolitics, 1978-79* (2008). For him it represents a new form governmentality or 'art of government' that emerged in the late 18th Century, evolved in the 19th Century and matured in 20th Century (Foucault, 2008: 68). As individual freedom prompted an indirect style of liberal government ('government from a distance') new statistical sciences appeared on the scene tracking the biological status of populations (i.e., births rates, susceptibility to disease, life expectancy, mortality, etc.). Economic concerns triggered this fixation with biological security. Disequilibrium is expensive. Soon the scope of biopower grew to include social aspects of *bios* too. Habitat, lifestyle, unemployment and consumption patterns could facilitate the 'controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production and the adjustment of the phenomenon of population to economic processes' (Foucault, 1978: 141).

Biopolitics is not a synonym for the state apparatus, however, and can be examined at various socio-economic levels. In his 1978-79 lecture series, *The Birth of Biopolitics* (2008), the personification of neoliberal economics - *homo oeconomicus* or 'economic man' - captures

Foucault's attention. It is this rendition of biopower that organizational researchers find appealing for explaining novel forms of regulation in the workplace. Biopower does not contain or discipline human behaviour. Nor does it seek to sculpt new selves. Instead it manages people as they already are and 'enrols our wider life practices, be they private interests, independent social abilities and person aptitudes' (Fleming, 2014: 876). Individual agency – customarily treated with suspicion in the factories and bureaucracies of yesteryear – is now summoned as a key resource in contemporary organizations (Hanlon, 2007). A central medium of biopower is nominal autonomy, reflected in Foucault's (2008) fascination with neoliberal reason and its fetishization of rational choice: 'power relations are possible only in so far as the subjects are free. If one of them were completely at the others disposal and became his thing, an object to which he could wreak boundless and limitless violence, there would be no power relationship' (Foucault, 1984/1997: 294).

Pertaining to the workplace, employers obviously must channel this individual agency towards productive ends, otherwise it could be used to avoid or even resist management. To conceptualize this, Weiskopf and Munro (2011) argue that biopower 'defines the frame within which choices can and must be made. It is associated with a specific type of organization, which allows freedom of movement but channels that movement and its flows in specific directions' (also see Munro, 2012). The idea has been adopted in recent empirical studies of biopower in management scholarship, with the gig economy and entrepreneurial identities central motifs for explaining how freedom is tilted towards managerial goals (e.g., Moisander, Groß & Eräranta, 2018; Norbäck, 2019; Moonesirust and Brown, 2021; Walker, Fleming and Berti, 2021).

The 'framing' spatial metaphor is useful but has limitations. This paper develops the mechanical metaphor of *pivoting* instead and demonstrates its utility by drawing on 'critical university studies', with particular reference to biopower in higher education. The concept of

pivoting mechanisms has three conceptual advantages. First we are able to present a more multidimensional picture of how agency is channelled, where manifold modes of occupational freedoms (in the same job) are steered by employing institutions. Second, we avoid the tendency in both management and critical university studies to rely on a catchall ‘subjectification’ process to explain self-regulation, which often implies that biopolitical freedoms are illusory. Biopower is insidious precisely because the agency it regulates is not manufactured or the result of indoctrination (Foucault, 1982; Lorenz, 2012). And third, this helps us explore biopower beyond the gig economy (where it has mainly been investigated in management studies) and in employment settings that do not brashly tout the virtues of entrepreneurship (another key focus in extant research). While entrepreneurial motifs certainly pervade the neoliberal university and may assist the functioning of biopower, it is not essential to biopolitical regulation per se.

The paper is structured as follows. First I introduce the notion of biopower and its recent applications in management studies. Next the concept of pivoting mechanism is developed to theorize how occupational freedoms are regulated in ‘biopolitical organizations’. I then draw on the illustrative example of academic labour in the neoliberal university to illuminate this. Finally, the paper discusses five key research implications for extending our comprehension of biopower and freedom in 21st century workplaces.

Biopower and Freedom

Foucault often defines biopower by contrasting it with medieval sovereign power (the power of death over life exercised by a monarch) and disciplinary power (confinement, training and surveillance in prisons, factories, schools, etc.). Biopower does not negatively suppress action but permits and even incites certain forms of individual agency, exerting a ‘positive influence

on life that endeavours to administer, optimize, and multiply it (Foucault, 1978: 136-137).

Biopower refers to,

... a new art of government of mechanisms with the function of producing, breathing life into, and increasing freedom, of introducing additional freedom through additional control and intervention. That is to say, control is no longer just the necessary counterweight to freedom, as in the case of panopticism: it becomes its mainspring. (Foucault 2008, p. 67).

Importantly, biopower does ‘not simply do away with the disciplinary technique, because it exists at a different level, on a different scale, and because it has a different bearing area, and makes use of very different instruments’ (Foucault, 2003: 242). That ‘different bearing area’ is individual agency, the things people *can do* (within predetermined limits) as opposed to cannot. This is no celebration of libertarian agency, however. Foucault is deeply suspicious of liberal individualism, including its classical and neoclassical variants. Personal freedom, or at least a putative form of it, becomes highly instrumental for effectively controlling populations. Power best succeeds in regulating behaviour, Foucault suggests, not by saying “no” but by letting subjects decide for themselves, albeit with nudging in certain directions. The vaunted liberalist principle of ‘negative freedom’ (or freedom from outside interference) therefore cloaks a formidable mode of control that economizes the population in an impressive fashion. Additionally, such freedoms are not the product of ideological conditioning as Marxian critiques aver: ‘power is not a function of consent’ (Foucault, 1982a: 788, also see Lemke, 2011). Biopower proceeds with the assumption that freedom is a real and *a priori* characteristic of actors (in liberal societies at least), and thus potentially unpredictable.

The idea is elucidated in Foucault’s famous synopsis of neoliberalism, *The Birth of Biopolitics* (2008), which is the go-to text for management scholars studying biopower. Foucault argues

that neoclassical ideas like Human Capital Theory assume people manage themselves as independent micro-capitalists. *Homo oeconomicus* is a consummate ‘entrepreneur of himself’, living and breathing the marketplace day and night (Foucault, 2008: 226). Hence the economy begins to encompass life itself, eroding longstanding divisions between self and income, love and money, the public and private spheres. Biopower involves,

... generalizing the ‘enterprise’ from within the social body or social fabric... The individual’s life itself – with his relationships to his private property, with his family, household, insurance and retirement – must make him into a sort of permanent and multiple enterprise (Foucault, 2008: 241).

What differentiates the 18th Century incarnation of *homo oeconomicus* – or someone ‘who must be left alone... an atom of freedom in the face of all conditions...’ (Foucault, 2008: 270) from its neoliberal counterpart is that the latter ...

appears precisely as someone who is manageable, someone who responds systematically to systematic modifications artificially introduced into the environment. *Homo oeconomicus* some who is eminently governable... a correlate of governmentality (Foucault, 2008: 270).

Management scholars have found this notion of ‘managed freedom’ useful for explaining how biopower operates in the new economy. As Weiskopf and Munro (2011: 696) remark, biopower establishes an environment in which ‘selves are allowed to unfold their potentials and entrepreneurial creativity within a specific frame’. In addition, biopower ‘allows space for discretion; however, it defines the frame within which choices can and must be made’ (pp. 687). This interpretation requires closer attention I suggest.

Framing Processes in Management and Organization Studies

The question of how individual freedom (as agency, choice, autonomy, etc.) both maintains its formal status (as freedom) but is nevertheless utilized or channelled by biopower is crucial to fully understanding it. Empirical examinations in management studies have generally relied on Weiskopf and Munro's (2011) framing metaphor. Moreover, given the emphasis on entrepreneurship and economic individualism in *The Birth of Biopolitics*, it is understandable why researchers have concentrated on these themes when studying it in the workplace. Let's briefly survey what they have found in order to help us develop the concept of 'pivoting mechanisms'.

Moisander, Groß & Eräranta (2018) investigated biopower in a large sales firm - 'CloudNine' - that employs workers as independent business owners (or IBOs): 'by biopower, we understand here a "nondisciplinary" form of power that targets the lives of free individuals' (Moisander et al., 2018: 377-377). Unlike conventional organizational controls, biopower does not,

target individual workers directly but the environment in which they operate. These types of techniques of managerial control allow the enterprising capacities of subjects to freely unfold, take their shape, and produce their effects, but also direct and channel these processes (Moisander et al., 2018: 380).

The freedoms that IBOs practice unfold within parameters prefixed by the firm, especially its *contractual work design*. This aims to 'enhance and deploy people's possibilities of agency in ways that turn their desire to govern their own conduct freely into a productive force and organizational resource ... these techniques are deployed to enable the distributors to make sense of themselves and their interests as entrepreneurs' (pp. 377). The network-based business model championed by CloudNine reinforces this. It 'embeds the workers into a market network

of socially and economically interdependent enterprises... who willingly relate to others as business partners and to their own lives as entrepreneurial projects' (pp. 377). Furthermore, this framing process leads workers to actively consent and even celebrate their precarious condition (like entrepreneurs), viewing it as a liberating situation rather than an exploitative one.

Norbäck (2019) provides a similar reading of the biopolitical framing process in her investigation of Swedish freelance journalists. As the term indicates, freelancing plays on the apparent benefits of economic self-reliance. According to Norbäck (2019: 5), a salient identity of entrepreneurialism infuses this work because, 'life becomes an infinite bundle of (economic) opportunities and possibilities; it is up to the individual to make the most of these possibilities.' Biopower functions by inculcating workers with a selfhood that accentuates personal responsibility, initiative and enterprise as a key attribute. Journalists 'are made to embrace a subjectivity that enforces competition, personal responsibility and autonomy' and 'the self becomes an entrepreneurial subject defined and ruled by the ideas of personal responsibility and value maximization, combined with a fundamental understanding that these aspects are empowering and liberating' (Norbäck, 2019: 3), a discourse that some ineffectively resist.

This emphasis on identity/selfhood is echoed in a third empirical study by Moonesirust and Brown (2021) concerning a Volkswagen company town in Wolfsburg, Germany. Biopower helps explain why town citizens desire to work for a company that is otherwise overbearing and controlling. Biopolitical freedom is framed via the production of desirable selves: 'the modern notionally "free" individual is compelled to produce themselves through and within such relations of power that dictate how the self under such systems should "be"' (Moonesirust and Brown, 2021: 507). VW/Wolfsburg deployed biopower to subtly circumscribe the choices available to workers. As a result, this...

produced individuals who were “entrepreneur[s] of the self”... acting within forms of “regulated freedom” and making economic and social decisions that advanced the objectives of the entire apparatus of VW/Wolfsburg. The *homo oeconomicus* of neoliberal contexts is an economic subject who is “eminently governable” (Foucault, 2008: 270), being given autonomy to shape its self and its life within constraints imposed by dominant discourses and practices that insist on who one should be (Moonesirust and Brown, 2021: 518).

While these studies are extremely useful, I suggest further theorization is required to extend and deepen our understanding of how biopower aligns employee freedom with the economic objectives of employers.

Pivoting Mechanisms, Regulation and Biopolitical Organizations

Several assumptions require closer analysis in this regard.

The first pertains to the reliance on social identity and sculpted selfhoods to explain why individuals direct their agency towards organizational goals rather than elsewhere. No doubt entrepreneurial-ideation does occur in some cases. But it implies that biopolitical freedom is mainly a subjective outlook, residing in people’s heads (through their consent, identification, etc.) and therefore perhaps a chimera. The Orwellian motto ‘freedom is slavery’ comes to mind. However, Foucault didn’t conceptualize biopower as a method of subjective constitution or internalization but a technology of administration. His work on ‘subjectification’ and ‘hermeneutics of the subject’ came later and isn’t considered part of the biopower project (see Foucault, 2005, 1982/1998). We thus require a more ‘materialist’ appreciation of biopoliticized freedoms, adapted to situations that may not coax workers to visibly identify as Richard Branson-like entrepreneurs.

Second is the tendency to view biopower as a technique that ‘frames’ freedom, introduced by Weiskopf and Munro (2011). This has significantly influenced the literature: biopower establishes fixed ‘parameters’ within which employees choose (Moisander et al., 2018: 380); biopower permits freedom within the ‘constraints imposed’ by dominant discourses and identities (Moonesirust and Brown, 2021: 518) and so on. Foucault (2008) refers to *frameworks* - a multidimensional and modifiable juridical/legal system that regulates freedom in a productive fashion - but not an imposed *frame*, like we see around a picture or painting. The difference is subtle but important. A frame signals what we *cannot* do as much as what we can, designating a discernible border. Whereas biopower foregrounds what employees *can do*, operationalizing their autonomy rather than hemming it in. This is why biopower correlates with liberalism and security (Foucault, 2007). There is always the possibility that these *a priori* freedoms might be directed against power instead of serving it, the prospect of which authority seeks to minimize.

Foucault (2003, 2007) suggests that biopolitics is not about policing who people ‘are’ or precluding decisions they may make, but *regulating* the ones they do make and thus ‘optimizing a state of life’ (Foucault, 2002: 246). The term ‘regulation’ is significant. Foucault gleans it from liberal and neoliberal political economy and its approbation of movement, mobility and the circulation of capital, labour and commodities. Biopower seeks not to ‘establish limits and frontiers or fixing locations’ but ‘making possible, guaranteeing and ensuring circulations’ (Foucault, 2003: 38). Regulation (as opposed to discipline) solves a central conundrum for liberal governmentality. How can power appear laissez-faire and yet direct people’s lives in a decisive and continuous fashion? Regulate and even enhance individual freedom rather than constrain it, stressing desirable *outcomes* or ‘events’ over unwanted ones (Foucault, 2003: 249). Hence also why biopower is not interested in inculcating individuals or moulding their agency. It entails too much work. Better to govern a target milieu

so that certain ‘events’, consequences and effects are more likely than others (Foucault, 2003: 249; 2007: 21).

To capture these dynamics more carefully I suggest the metaphor of a ‘pivoting mechanism’ may help. In mechanical engineering a pivot refers to a central point, ball or pin on the end of which something turns, rotates or oscillates. Multi-arm pivots allow for several extensions to turn on the central ball or pin. Adapting the metaphor to biopolitical organizations (as defined below), we can observe how pivoting mechanisms establish an axis or orbit around which occupational freedoms are steered and put to work. Combined, these mechanisms make up a biopolitical regulatory framework.

By *occupation freedom* I mean the comparative (vis-à-vis other occupations) autonomy and discretion employees practice regarding how, where and when they work. Of course, given the restraints of the modern employment relationship, these freedoms are never unqualified. But as studies of job autonomy indicate, some professions offer more leeway than others, constituting a continuum (Pichault and McKeon, 2019). And building on Foucault’s (2003, 2007) core argument, these occupational freedoms often precede their subsequent exploitation, making them concrete, practical and real. I define *biopolitical organizations* as those that noticeably enrol such occupational freedoms to regulate the productive activities of its workforce, invariably eroding the work/life boundary as a result. Of course, many organizations do not do this, perhaps even the majority. Those that do, however, embrace biopower either out of necessity (e.g., jobs that simply cannot be managed in a strict nine-to-five fashion, such as academia) or by design (e.g., using ‘gig’ economy contracts to replace standard jobs). Regardless, this doesn’t mean that coercive managerialism disappears, often the contrary, a topic we will return to. I propose that biopolitical organizations endorse greater occupational freedoms (compared to other jobs) due to their emphasis on *outputs* over *inputs*, reflecting Foucault’s (2003, 2007) point about ‘events’. Input controls predetermine what flows

into the production matrix, including timing (when the work is done), content (what work is done), method (how the work is done) and effort (how much work is done and to what intensity). This is the forte of traditional management systems. Output controls instead focus on outcomes and results, typically measured by targets, project completion, end-user service quality, etc.

All organizations have a combination of both input and output administration, of course. But the greater emphasis on outputs in biopolitical organizations fits with the self-directing worker that biopower exemplifies. Once *what* the work will be has been established (by employers), then inputs largely manage themselves. Clearly this pertains to the gig economy, but also a range of other occupations that rely on self-organization and the embodied qualities of workers. Analysts use terms like *immaterial labour* (Taranova, 2000; Lazzarato, 2004; Hardt and Negri, 2009) and *affective labour* (Dowling, 2007; Gregg, 2009; Cockayne, 2016) to describe this: namely, the free evocation of professional discretion, emotional intelligence and cognitive/communicative aptitudes by workers in and around paid employment. These abilities are inherent to employees and cannot simply be turned off at the end of a shift. Nor can they be formally possessed by employers. But they can be tapped and harnessed, which is where the concept of biopower enters the picture (Munro, 2012).

Illustrative Example: Academic Labour in the ‘Neoliberal University’

There are a number of reasons why I chose the neoliberal university to gain a more comprehensive understanding of biopolitical pivoting mechanisms. To clarify, I am not presenting a first-hand empirical study, but a theorization based on existing research about the changing nature of academia. A growing body of scholarship therein has drawn on Foucault’s biopower framework, which I think is useful for extending our conceptualizations in management and organization studies too. Furthermore, the university presents a fairly

straightforward professional workplace, broadening our analytical scope beyond the gig economy, etc. And finally, like most readers, I am an academic: studying biopower in this context may also uncover important features of our own working lives in these troubled times.

The neoliberalization of higher education in Western countries was triggered by major changes in government policy (towards marketization, corporatization and financialization) and sector-wide initiatives like national/international league tables. How these changes played out in local institutions has been scrutinized in ‘critical university studies’. This literature is now vast and cannot be adequately summarised here. Suffice to say that what’s been dubbed the ‘corporate university’ (Aronowitz, 2000; Collini, 2012), ‘academic capitalism’ (Slaughter and Rhoades, 2009), the ‘toxic university’ (Smyth, 2018) and even ‘The Great Mistake’ (Newfield, 2018) has been severely criticised, especially in relation to authoritarian management hierarchies (at the expense of collegially) (Deem, Hillyard, Reed, 2007; Ginsberg 2014); the use of performance metrics, coercive auditing and competition in publishing, teaching and academic career development (Lorenz, 2012; Bottrell and Manathunga, 2019); the transformation of students into fee-paying customers (Collini, 2017); the expansion of zero-hour contracts and casualization (Childress, 2019); labour intensification, overwork and associated mental health problems (Morrish, 2019) and the list continues.

In light of these reforms, talk of occupational freedom in the neoliberal university may seem out of place. However, that’s the curious part since it remains an important facet of the profession (Olsson, 2005, 2006; Cannizzo, 2018), which is why Foucauldian applications of biopower are apt. Besides the digital mobility encouraged by email, these occupational freedoms predate neoliberalization (Newfield, 2011). Today they are a salient medium through which biopower regulates academics. The pivoting mechanisms orienting these freedoms have been touched upon also, although not systematically in this literature. For example, Gill’s (2009) powerful feminist critique of the neoliberal university highlights *responsibilization* as a

significant mechanism (also see Davies and Bansel, 2010; Peters, 2013; Jankowski and Provezis, 2014). This is where professional conscientiousness and an intrinsic love of reading/writing are integrated with performance management metrics, leading to ‘endless self-monitoring, flexibility, creativity and internalisation of new forms of auditing and calculating’ (Gill, 2010: 241). Even if disgruntled as a result, academics need little direct supervision and ‘can be accorded the autonomy to manage herself in a manner that is a far more effective exercise of power than any imposed from above by employers’ (Gill, 2010: 233).

Morrissey’s (2015) study of biopower at the National University of Ireland, Galway notes something similar. For him, biopower functions by ‘linking the autonomous performing individual to the performing institution is a strategy that is clearly driven by a strong desire to be competitive, productive and integrated in a broader neoliberal economy’ (Morrissey, 2015: 620). Raaper (2016) confirms the observation. Academic autonomy and freedom are regulated by a). transforming university work into a competitive enterprise (vying for better publications, student evaluations, grants, etc.), and b). subjecting workers to constant quality-assurance audits so that their agency is always cognizant of external benchmarks (also see Hamann, 2009; Bansel, 2014). Academic occupational freedom is subsequently repackaged as economic individualism, propagating the ‘illusion of freedom and a responsibility for one’s success’ (Raaper, 2016: 189, also see Raaper, 2018).

These studies adumbrate the biopolitical pivoting mechanisms in the neoliberal university, but a more systematic classification is required. Furthermore, and similar to management/organization studies, there is a tendency to rely on ‘subjectification’ (derived from Foucault’s final ‘hermeneutics of the subject’ period) as a blanket explanation for why academics ultimately direct their autonomy towards managerial objectives: ‘neoliberalism gets into our minds and our souls, into the ways in which we think’, according to Ball (2012, p. 18). Once reconditioned into neoliberal selves, academics may be frustrated and dissatisfied, but

continue to misrecognize their servitude as freedom nevertheless. This is probably why Raaper (2016: 189), Davies (2006: 427) and Morrissey (2015: 261) dismiss those freedoms as ‘illusory’. I take a different approach. Biopower is effective in the neoliberal university because the freedoms it operationalizes are concrete and real (not imaginary), involving an *a priori* agency that isn’t necessarily contingent on academics reimagining themselves independent entrepreneurs, although that can still occur of course.

To demonstrate, I posit four interrelated types of occupational freedom in the neoliberal university. Each correlates with specific pivoting mechanisms that not only regulate the academic labour process, but squeeze as much time and effort from it as possible. *Bios* is hence put to work. For each type I describe a). the specific form of occupational freedom enacted, b). the biopolitical activity that corresponds to it, c). the managerial pivoting mechanisms used to steer this freedom towards university objectives and d). the intended outcomes the university seeks. Together they make up a biopolitical regulatory framework (see Table One).

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First is *contractual freedom*. For all the discussion about academic identity and selfhood, analysts sometimes forget that income and its contractual conditions are an essential tool for linking self-governance to managerial prerogatives. The neoliberal university’s controversial use of casualization and adjuncts is a case in point (Childress, 2019; Kezar, DePaola and Scott, 2019). Casual academics are technically ‘free’ to choose their assignments, switch between multiple employers and determine the amount of work undertaken. The biopolitical activity evident here is the struggle *for more* work and constant self-monitoring to avoid wage theft, which frequently spills over into family/private life, as Gill and Donaghue (2016) and Kezar and DePaola (2019) demonstrate. The resulting anxiety and stress can take its toll on casual academics (Morrish, 2019; Loveday, 2018). This contractual freedom is pivoted towards

managerial goals by the offering/withholding of future income, usually based on past quality and future demand. The intended outputs are successful course delivery, labour cost savings (i.e., pensions, holiday pay, etc.) and on-demand access to staff.

Tenured academics enjoy a guaranteed monthly salary, which significantly reduces their contractual autonomy compared to casual employees. They are considered ‘free from’ economic insecurity, which wouldn’t be consequential if not for the rapid growth of insecure jobs. But this type of freedom still engenders biopolitical activity I propose. As Gorz (2012: 91) remarks, the ‘floating salariat’ is ‘paid for their availability and their capacity to intervene, not the actual work done’. This expectation of availability can easily see academics voluntarily working beyond contracted hours, being contactable whenever supervisors call (even in the weekends) and so-forth (Gill and Donaghue, 2016). Combined with the additional mechanisms discussed below, this can precipitate what Gregg (2009) terms ‘function creep’, where formal duties inexplicably multiply (also see Wright and Shore, 2018). Indeed, some tenured academics find it more difficult to say “no” than casuals given their availability is perceived to be open ended (Alexander, 2020; Gannon, 2020). This contractual autonomy is pivoted towards managerial objectives via departmental workload allocation models and supervisory expectations of availability and cooperation, which are meticulously documented in annual performance reviews (Shore, 2008; Lorenz, 2012).

Second is *spatial-temporal occupational freedom*. Notwithstanding the hierarchical and technocratic climate of the neoliberal university, academics remain comparatively free to decide when and where they work, within limits of course (Nikunen, 2012; Cannizzo and Osbaldiston, 2015). The COVID-19 pandemic saw universities leverage this mobility as private residences were converted into *de facto* lecture halls. But even during normal times advanced communication technologies have routinized remote working (Woodcock, 2018). Like other professions, academics experience this freedom as a mixed blessing, with spatial-

temporal autonomy often prolonging rather than shortening the working day, as Gill (2010) observes. It is also more likely that wider life processes - *bios* - are tapped and/or sacrificed to support one's ability to work, including private time, personal resources and familial networks. According to Gill, the highly *cognitive* quality of academic labour makes it susceptible to such presence bleed. Digitalization means that work can literally be undertaken anywhere, anytime. Building on the notion of 'immaterial labour' and the observation that work/life have considerably comingled today, Gill refers to *academia without walls*: 'alongside the intensification of work in academia, we are also experiencing its marked extensification across time and space' (Gill, 2010: 237, also see Jarvis and Pratt, 2006). The COVID-19 pandemic clearly amplified this 'extensification' and its concomitant anxieties (Gewin, 2021), highlighting the negative *corporeal* effects that cognitive labour can have in the neoliberal university (like 'stomachs churning' and 'hearts pounding', as Sparkes [2007: 522] also notes). Extensification is not an automatic process, however. It requires pivoting techniques to ensure that academics use their spatial-temporal autonomy to meet institutional expectations rather than simply disappear. The management of outputs over inputs is essential once again, assisted by the so-called 'digital leash' of modern communications technology. Task and target deadlines (for grading, journal paper submissions, programme delivery objectives, etc.) take precedence, typically accompanied by sanctions for noncompliance (Kallio, Kallio, Tienari and Hyvönen, 2015). The neoliberal university is now notorious for dramatically ramping up these output requirements (e.g., farming out more classes, more marking, etc.) with excessive working hours increasingly pervasive. In the UK, a 2016 University and College Union study found that academics regularly work two unpaid days per week, with professors working on average 56.1 hours per week and Principal Research Fellows 55.7 hours (Grove, 2016). Astoundingly, one in six academics under the age of 25 work 100 hours per week.

I have heard anecdotal evidence from colleagues about additional methods universities use to regulate academic spatial-temporal freedoms. For instance, what we might term *presence confirmation rituals* see managers monitor email response times, issue attendance rolls for meetings and even make random phone calls. Overall, universities gain considerable outputs from this type of occupational freedom, such as a lengthened working day, labour intensification (with personal life invariably enlisted to contribute) and increased teaching capacity (e.g., online classes not limited by physical room size, etc.).

Third is *professional occupational freedom*. Academics typically practice discretion over how they perform their job well, drawing on collective experience and judgment *apropos* norms of best practice (Kenschaft, 2008; Ibrahim, Mansor and Amin, 2012). Importantly, these professional standards are community-based and may circumvent the technocratic templates disseminated by administrators. Informal cooperation, knowledge sharing and quick-fix solutions (to problems often caused by managerialism) typify this (Harney and Moten, 2013; Raaper, 2016). Also think here of the goodwill and substantial effort involved in journal reviewing/editing, which is indispensable to the profession yet seldom unrecognized by employers. According to Gregg (2009), this unsettles the stereotypical image of the solitary scholar striving alone. While academic professionalism certainly requires individual technical ability, interpersonal ‘affective labour’ is vital too: namely, communicative and emotional intelligence that is often invisible to managerial metrics. Spurred on by email and performance pressure, this professional diligence can absorb ever greater swathes of the self, as one professor admitted to Gregg (2013: 126): ‘I think I’m a bit too either addicted or compulsive about it or obsessive about it ... I worry that I’m going to miss something that I ought to be attending to.’

The biopolitical activity manifest here is the independent use of professional judgement, discretion and collegiality to ensure tasks are completed well (which may not always occur, of

course). As studies of professionalism have shown more generally (e.g., Maravelias, 2003; Kenschaft, 2008), this type of freedom is particularly important in knowledge-intensive occupations where contingences arise and require self-organization. The mechanisms deployed to pivot professional freedom towards management objectives are today a familiar refrain of lament: the surfeit of quality metrics/regulations that scrutinize teaching/research outputs (e.g., student satisfaction scores, journal rankings, paper citation ratings, etc.) (Mingers and Willmott, 2013; Willmott, 2011; Macdonald & Kam, 2007; Butler and Spoelstra, 2012). Confusingly, senior university management may also evoke the language of professionalism to enforce this ‘metrification’, including quality assurance, benchmarking and compliance. More often than not, however, this only grates with academic professional norms since metrics are deemed a proxy for (conformity to) managerial authority rather than best practice (Cannizzo, 2018, 2011; Morrissey, 2015). This is doubly so if overseen by administrators who have never taught a class or written a research article in their lives.

Fourth is *vocational freedom*. Most academics are free to choose the research they pursue and the time spent honing their expertise. Teaching too will generally reflect such intrinsic interests (Ekman, 2016). The term ‘vocation’ derives from the Latin *vocare* or ‘to call’ (Robbins, 2003). Like other professions, an academic calling is more than just a source of income. Reading, research and teaching are inherently rewarding and fulfilling, reflecting a sizable investment of time and energy (Barcan, 2018; Elangoven and Hoffman, 2021). Scholars may even personally identify with their vocation, viewing it as an extension of their personhood (Gill, 2010).

As with the other types of occupational freedom, vocational autonomy is often compartmentalized from the many tedious bureaucratic tasks academics must undertake in the neoliberal university. This explains why Osbaldiston, Cannizzo and Mauri (2016) noted early-career academics proclaiming they hated their *jobs* (due to excessive management and

administrivia) but loved their *work*. The bifurcation becomes tricky, however, when such vocational ‘work’ consists of debunking the very managerialism that has colonized academic ‘jobs’ (Bristow, Robinson and Ratle, 2017). And although academics might mentally separate their vocational enthusiasm from the metrics-saturated world of the neoliberal university, Cannizzo (2018: 93) found employers implicitly encouraging it in the academic community. After all, a vocational ‘labour of love’ is a formidable productivity driver. As Gregg (2009: 211) observes too, this might explain ‘the extraordinary ability of academics to excavate working hours from a range of times in the day’.

The biopolitical activity identifiable here is the voluntary effort to advance the scholarly domain that preoccupies and fascinates any given academic (Davies, 2005; Lawless, 2018). This frequently involves considerable extra-contractual activities like self-training/discipline and working outside office hours (e.g., reading and writing articles in the weekend, etc.) (Edwards, 2020). I propose that universities pivot this vocational freedom towards measurable outputs by pegging it to rewards such as career progression, institutional esteem and recognition (also see Labaree, 2017, 2018). Tenure confirmation, promotion and prestige awards are obvious examples. But we might also include the lure of academic ‘stardom’ that has been cultivated in the contemporary university (Smyth, 2018). Here the ideology of entrepreneurship may indeed feature as a pivoting mechanism, as academics seek to differentiate themselves from the pack through self-promotion and personal branding, a theme I return to below. In any case, incorporating these recognition premiums into individual career paths was a shrewd tactic for enrolling academic agency into the neoliberal project, which has simultaneously normalized performance anxiety and insecurity within the profession (Clarke and Knights, 2015). The intended university outputs are superior research and wider institutional kudos, which may then also attract external grants and income.

Discussion: On the End(s) of Freedom at Work

This paper builds on the supposition that biopower is a valuable theory for helping us understand certain features of contemporary organizations. When *bios* is put to work, three interrelated effects are observable: the *vertical* extension of productive activity ‘within’ individuals (whereby immaterial and largely unquantifiable cognitive, affective and social capabilities are marshalled); the *horizontal* extension of productive activity beyond contracted hours (utilizing personal space/resources and/or social networks to successfully accomplish tasks); and the reliance on *self-organization* within in the workforce. Pivoting mechanism are crucial for theorizing these elements of biopower. They function as managerial levers for connecting freedom to labour intensification and compliance, forming a regulatory framework guided by output indicators. In drawing on management/organization and ‘critical university studies’ to gain a deeper appreciation of how this happens, five implications are pertinent for future research.

First is the idea of pivoting mechanisms as opposed to a unitary frame seen in management/organization studies. Occupational freedoms are not enclosed but aligned via a regulatory framework. Pivoting mechanisms allow employers to do this in a laissez-faire yet assertive fashion because the agent him or herself bears the regulation (with reference to externally established output targets or ‘events’ to use Foucault’s terminology). Occupational freedoms thus retain their practical integrity even when enmeshed in a formidable control matrix. We observed this in the academic labour process. Contractual, spatial/temporal, professional and vocational freedoms are set into ‘orbit’ around the university production hub rather than framed. This is a dynamic process that interlocks academic agency and *bios* to rigidly monitored outputs, as depicted in Figure One.

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Second, this approach does not rely on ‘subjectification’ as a catchall explanation for why academics direct their freedom towards sometimes exploitative outcomes, which I have problematized in the literature. In management/organization studies a related difficulty emerges. Biopolitical workers are frequently viewed as brainwashed advocates of the marketplace - *homo oeconomicus* - whom happily identify with their supposed freedoms. Some resist (see Norbäck, 2019), but most accept the mythos of the market. Investigations of biopower in critical university studies offers an important counterbalance here. Indeed, one is struck by how few of the academics interviewed are ebullient in this research. Even the most ambitious careerists complain about exhaustion, insecurity and egregious managerialism (Clarke and Knights, 2015). This is the ‘dark side’ of *bios* being put to work, where an unhappy consciousness prevails. Individuals may be regulated by biopower even when they dis-identify with neoliberalism, adding another layer of complexity to the phenomenon.

The third implication is related. Most applications of biopower in management/organization studies focus on how employees are recast (by themselves or others) as self-reliant entrepreneurs, especially in the gig economy. A major motivation for this paper is to broaden the applicability of biopower beyond gig workers and the discourse of entrepreneurship. Notwithstanding this, the ideology of entrepreneurial has clearly penetrated the neoliberal university too, as we indicated regarding vocational freedoms (also see Peters, 2005; Edwards, 2020). The explosion of adjunct instructors (who are treated as IBOs) is also germane. The question is complex, however. Many senior university managers would definitely like tenured academics to identify themselves as IBOs. Imperial College Vice Chancellor demonstrated this when questioned about the suicide of Professor Stefan Grimm: “professors are really like small business owners, it’s a very competitive world out there” (BBC, 2015). And as Styhre (2017)

argues, economic precarization has pushed professional jobs in this direction more generally, with doctors having to act as sales-reps for their therapies, lawyers becoming social media personalities, etc.

It is true that some academics do buy into the fantasy of entrepreneurship with respect to grants, competitive individualism, personal branding or what Sparkes (2021) sardonically calls ‘making a spectacle of oneself’. But my analysis of biopower reveals a more understated dynamic. The transformation of academics (whether precarious or not) into self-organizing agents of the neoliberal university has not needed to brazenly tout the virtues of entrepreneurship. What has happened instead, I believe, is that the concrete logic – if not the discourse – of *homo oeconomicus* has been embedded into the occupational praxis of the academy, propelling a transition from traditional professionalism to ‘biopolitical professionalism’. Pre-existing forms of occupational autonomy, jurisdictional discretion and freedom have been essential to this shift, providing fertile ground for the four pivoting mechanisms theorized in this paper. Hence why secure academics are managed in this manner as much as precarious ones. And why even the most vociferous critic of enterprise in higher education find themselves ‘playing the game’ with respect to the ABS journal list (Butler and Spoelstra, 2012; Knights and Clarke, 2014) and biopolitically managed accordingly (Raaper 2018; Webb, 2018). It is this more ‘materialist’ interpretation of biopower that I maintain has wider purchase for researchers.

Fourth, the way coercive managerialism fits into the biopolitical process requires further attention. In relation to academia, we ascertained that employees are responsible (up to a point, at least) for regulating inputs, whereas output controls are the remit of hierarchical management systems. Failure to meet targets or performance expectations can provoke a Stalinesque response from employers (Brandist, 2014; Jones et al., 2020). But what happens if this micromanagement is directed towards inputs too (represented by the dashed-line in Figure

One)? For example, tracking office attendance, monitoring internet content or even policing the research topics scholars are permitted to pursue (as Critical Management Studies academics recently experienced at Leicester University). This regulation of input-freedoms clearly disrupts the biopolitical dynamic in significant ways and begs the question of how academics may react. For instance, if aggrieved, then ‘working to contract’ is one foreseeable response, restoring the life/labour division to ensure management cannot have their cake and eat it too, thus short-circuiting biopower also. If that occurred, wouldn’t it be yet another case of what critics of managerial authority have long noted? Namely, its proclivity to ‘kill the golden goose’ and succumb to the seductions of total administration.

The fifth implication concerns resistance. Biopower is difficult to oppose because its dominant idiom is ‘freedom’ and how does one resist that? Management and organizational research on biopower in the gig economy reveal a striking paucity of defiance in this respect, with the exception of Norbäck (2019). She observed freelancers attempting to resist biopower by denaturalizing the entrepreneurial subjectivities it imposed, intentionally reducing work hours and sabotaging quality. But rather than improve their precarious situation, these tactics merely eroded future income and made matters worse. Norbäck (2019: 16) pessimistically concludes that resistance to biopower is ‘ambiguous, ambivalent, and contradictory, and often practiced at a personal cost’ (Norbäck, 2019: 16, also see Walker, Fleming and Berti, 2021).

This pessimism inflects investigations of biopower in the neoliberal university too. For Docherty (2016: 22), academics are now ‘among the most conservative, ineffectual and disorganised of workforces’ in the post-industrial economy. Some analysis consider this forestalling of collective dissent a major output of biopolitical regulation (see Figure One), for it confers substantial socio-economic advantages to employers (Davies and Petersen, 2005; Webb, 2018). Opposition is thwarted by biopower in several ways. For example, academics are empowered by occupational freedoms and ‘responsibilization’ to self-organize and

improvise, sometimes transgressing managerial protocols in the process. But this often results in output targets being met nonetheless, sometimes even more so. Raaper (2016: 178) empirically observed this when ornery administrators commandeered faculty assessment procedures. In response, angry academics sought to ‘modify and resist the dominant policy discourses’ by ‘manoeuvring within the regulatory context and flexing the rules’. But this made little difference and probably helped the new regime. According to Bansel and Davies (2010), the trouble is that too much academic resistance aims at protecting the very freedoms that are now the mainstay of biopolitical regulation. It thus signifies obedience to the corporate university, ‘not through a love of neoliberalism, but through a love of what neoliberalism puts at risk’ (Bansel and Davies, 2010: 144).

Perhaps one reason why this body of research finds little hope for resistance is because it hasn’t fully considered the input/output distinction outlined in this paper. By viewing biopower as primarily input-discretion, analysts conclude that academics must resist their own freedoms, which they correctly surmise is unlikely. For instance, Raaper (2016: 187) argues (echoing Davies 2006: 436), ‘it might be difficult to express one’s resistance if it is not completely clear who and what to resist, especially if academics might have to resist their own internalised understandings in relation to themselves and their work in a neoliberal university’. Similarly, resistance for Ball and Olmedo (2013: 93) ‘is about confronting oneself’. But this misses the forest for the trees. There is a clear focal point for those wishing to oppose biopower: senior management’s undemocratic and monopolistic adjudication over institutional outputs, which academics presently have little say over.

Conclusion

Foucault’s concept of biopower holds much promise for developing a unique and often counterintuitive understanding of emergent employment and management practices in the 21st

Century. It especially helps us overcome some ingrained dualisms. Regulation and freedom are not mutually exclusive as often assumed, displacing longstanding beliefs about social emancipation and political liberty. Life and labour might seem like separate spheres, as Marx, Weber and many others have argued. But biopower cunningly blends the two, enlisting *bios* – life itself - into service of an austere economic ideology.

By building on two rich and compelling research literatures - management/organizational and critical university studies - this paper has aimed to strengthen our conceptualizations of the biopolitical mechanisms that can align regulation and freedom, labour and life. Most importantly, I hope this helps us better appreciate how those alignments might be disrupted and contested. As the institution of paid employment is increasingly called into question following the crisis of neoliberalism and COVID-19, I suggest that theories of biopower will offer a powerful critique for those wanting to posit alternatives to the current system.

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TABLE ONE

BIOPOLITICAL REGULATORY FRAMEWORK IN THE NEOLIBERAL UNIVERSITY

DOMAIN OF OCCUPATIONAL FREEDOM (INPUT)	MODE OF FREEDOM	BIOPOLITICAL ACTIVITY	PIVOTING MECHANISM	INTENDED UNIVERSITY OUTPUT
Contractual freedom (fixed and permanent)	Casual - freedom to choose 'gigs', employers and hours.	Casual – struggle for more work and 'working to work'	Casual – Access to future income	Casual – Successful course delivery/labour cost savings/on-demand access to staff
	Permanent – freedom from economic uncertainty	Permanent – constant availability, amenability to demands and 'function creep'	Permanent – Work allocation model, job obligations and managerial expectations	Permanent – At or over-capacity workload responsibilities (less workers doing more) and attitude of willing compliance
Spatial-temporal freedom	Comparative discretion regarding when and where to work	Immaterial labour and reliance on mobile technology	Target and output deadlines	Labour intensification/lengthening of the working day
		Blurring boundary between paid and unpaid labour time	Presence confirmation rituals (email responses, meeting attendance, student feedback, etc.)	Increased teaching capacity and research output expectations
Professional freedom	Freedom regarding how to perform tasks to (agreed) appropriate standards	Initiative, conscientious self-direction and independent judgment concerning standards	Quality/satisfaction metrics concern teaching and research	Heightened personal responsibility over output delivery
		Affective labour (formal and informal cooperation for successful outcomes)	Annual and bi-annual performance appraisal	Increased quality regarding research/teaching outcomes
Vocational freedom	Freedom regarding what one researches/teaches	Self-motivation, intrinsic task satisfaction and a 'labour of love'	Career progression and recognition systems (tenure, promotion, prestige-awards etc.)	Superior research outputs and wider institutional kudos
		Work as a way of life, beyond paid hours	The lure of academic 'stardom' and 'entrepreneurial' competition	Grant applications and external funding

FIGURE ONE
THE BIOPOLITICAL PIVOTING OF ACADEMIC LABOUR



