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# Feminist Theories of Agency and Emotion in Academia: A Feminist Historical Materialist Reading

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**Abstract**

Higher education, academic work, and gender relations in academia have, as a result of higher education reforms over the past three decades, become increasingly defined by capitalist logics and purposes. My empirical investigations of gender in academia for the past decade have, to a large extent, drawn on Institutional Ethnography, a method-of-inquiry developed by Marxist feminist sociologist, Dorothy Smith. This method-of-inquiry has largely oriented me towards the language-driven social coordination of academic work as this has been shaped in the context of academic capitalism and neoliberal higher education reforms. However, these explorations revealed complexities in the dynamics of compliance, buying into and resisting the social organisation of academia, which called for a theorisation of emotion. This essay, starting from an account of my historical materialist ontological and epistemological premises, explores and evaluates three approaches to agency and emotion: (1) Feminist Governmentality, (2) Feminist New Materialism, and (3) Feminist Practice Theory. I argue that a feminist practice theoretical conception of agency and emotion is most coherent with the historical materialist premises and the anti-ideological purposes of Institutional Ethnography.

**Keywords**: Emotions; Materialism; Power; Feminist theory; Academia.

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## 1 Introduction

The role of universities and academic work within the social institutional order of capitalism is defined in ongoing "boundary struggles" between ontologies of economic productivity, on the one hand, and knowledge commons and implicated social reproduction of maintaining relations and academic communities, on the other. The balance between these "distinct but interrelated social ontologies" (Fraser, 2022, pp. 20–23) takes a particular form under the current global neoliberal capitalist regime of accumulation, in that it privileges economic productivity and increasingly disinvests in the kinds of activities that maintain the social and creative fabric of the university and, indeed, productivity itself (relations, creativity, timeless time) (e.g., Ylijoki & Mäntylä, 2003; Aarseth, 2022). Higher education reforms under the current regime of accumulation have focused on transforming universities into key players in a competitive global knowledge economy by developing standardised performance measures and disciplinary technologies on which countries, universities, departments, disciplines, and academics are compared, ranked and instrumentalized (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004; Wright, 2016). Consequently, academic knowledge production, work, and cultures have changed; epistemic orientations, ways of knowing, and creative slow practices — often associated with the humanities and interpretive social sciences — that do not align with the metrics, become excommunicated or devalued (Aarseth, 2022; Blackmore, 2022; Lund et al., 2024). Capitalist logic and practices have entered the academic field to such an extent that the future of the public university seems increasingly precarious (Collini, 2012; Wright & Shore, 2017).

My research on universities has primarily been influenced by the ontological and epistemological premises of Institutional Ethnography (IE), a method of inquiry developed by Marxist feminist sociologist Dorothy E. Smith (Smith, 1987, 1990, 1999, 2004 & 2005). In this essay, I offer a particular reading of IE, emphasising its entry point in Marx's materialism and Merleau-Ponty's development of this, Marx's critique of ideology and the materialist method for scrutinising the production of ideology.[1]

> Body is the site of consciousness, mind, thought, subjectivity, and agency as particular people's local doings. By pulling the mind back into the body, phenomena of mind and discourse, ideology, beliefs, concepts, theory, ideas, and so on — are recognised as the doings of actual people situated in particular local sites at specific times (Smith, 2005, p. 25).

Human beings are what they *do*; their practical, embodied activities define their consciousness and perceptions, and these embodied activities constitute the social. From this, it also follows that human beings are fundamentally social beings and that the social world is a product of people's conscious coordination of practical embodied activities. Language and symbolic interactions are theorised as embodied practical inter-individual dialogical activity (see Lund, 2023). Institutional Ethnography then moves from this premise to explicate how people's consciousness activities in particular local settings become socially organised in broader ideological processes under capitalism, enabled by textually mediated discourses, logics and categories (McCoy, 2021). Through ideological processes, language becomes an abstract system disconnected from people's everyday activities and life; language is not abstract and disconnected by definition. From this follows a particular understanding of ideology articulated so clearly by Himani

1. See Himani Bannerji (2020) for an excellent account of Marx's concept and scrutiny of ideology and its implications for feminist research.

Bannerji: "[...] *while all ideology is a form of thought, not all forms of thought are ideological*. The production of ideology is a very specific form of mental activity towards a particular result" (Bannerji, 2020, p. 39). Both practical and ideological forms of consciousness *can* be and *are* continuously refined and specialised. Under capitalism, this specialisation "creates the appearance of disconnection and qualitative difference between mental and manual labour and the impression of autonomy and predominance of concepts/ideas over reality" (*ibidem*).

The key to an anti-ideological analysis lies in using embodied experiences as the starting point for mapping local social relations and ultimately, the broader ideological and trans-local relations that shape them.[2] This approach reveals how ruling ideologies emerge from practical everyday activities but — through complex processes — come to appear universal, generally applicable and unquestionable (Smith, 1987). Dorothy Smith's notion of the "bifurcated consciousness" captures this as a "a point of rupture" or "disjuncture" between "the world directly felt, sensed, responded to" (Smith, 1987, p. 49) and conceptual ideological modes of consciousness associated with capitalist society (Smith, 1999), which does not necessarily serve people's real interest. Yet, despite this, Smith's emphasis on language-based coordination results in a somewhat interactional bias that cannot explain the role of emotions in the encounter with, or resistance to, ideological modes of reasoning disconnected from everyday practical knowledge.

This became clear from some my own institutional ethnographic investigations in academia. In some of my empirical work on the university, I have explored how the ideological code of the "ideal academic", implicit in the standardised performance measures of academic capitalism, becomes a focal point for several textually mediated discourses that individuals activate and translate into concrete activities, allowing them in increasingly alienating manners to evaluate themselves as approximating or diverging from the institutionally mediated ideal; as good or failed/derailed academics in ways that are both gendered and classed (e.g., Lund 2012 & 2018). During my empirical investigations, it became clear that people's practices could not be comprehended through language-driven social coordination only. It was necessary to explore how the activities of complying, buying into, or resisting the social organisation of academia were also organised, emotionally articulated directly or (most often) indirectly, as experiences of thriving and crumbling. Smith's materialist method and her connected understanding of knowing and experience, reduces emotions to what can be dialogically accounted for: what is actually happening and can be observed. An expanded understanding of emotions would take into account how disjunctures could play out in subtle or indirect practices of meaning ascription. This would require moving beyond pure descriptions of actual activities and engaging in some degree of interpretation. Given IE's grounding in a Marxist ontology and epistemology, I had to identify a way of theorising emotions that would be consistent with its emphasis on the dynamic between the material and ideological, and anti-ideological knowing and practice, as key to intervening into capitalist social organisation of everyday life. In what follows, I will review and discuss three approaches: (1) Feminist Governmentality, (2) Feminist New Materialism, and (3) Feminist Practice Theory. In this short essay, I cannot do any of these the justice they deserve. However, I hope to provide some insights for contemplating the implications of these theories regarding subjects, power, agency, transformation, and the position of emotion in that regard. Each of the three approaches offer tools with which we can understand emotions in academia: Emotions as an effect of discourse

2. For instance, academics engage in concrete local embodied activities such as writing, teaching, and interacting with students and colleagues. However, these activities are also "hooked" into trans-local ideological processes and discourses, such as those meditated through neoliberal higher education reforms, the OECD, the European Union, and elsewhere within capitalist society.

and subjectivation; Emotions as affects that move between intention-free agents and shape moods; Emotions as a practice and source of agency shaped in the dialectic between subjective motivational energies and social formations.[3]

## 2 Feminist Governmentality

This approach theorises an anti-essentialist body and anti-materialist understanding of language and the social. While this has been a promising path for feminists and queer scholars wanting to avoid the risks of biological determinism and pre-discursive essentialism, I argue that it also results in a limited account of agency and consequently the role of emotion.

Inspired by the work of Michel Foucault,[4] feminist governmentality studies explore how people become subjects through how discourse includes/excludes them, and how institutional technologies of auditing, self-monitoring, and accountability mediate such discourse in the disciplining of subjects.[5] The human body is, in a Nietzschean sense, "at the centre of struggles for power and domination", continuously reinscribed and resignified by discourse and technologies of power (McNay 1991, p. 126). Foucault's understanding of the body, similarly to Smith, is also based on a deconstruction of the Cartesian mind-body dualism, but placed in a different ontological and epistemological framework this has other implications. As articulated in *The History of Sexuality, vol. 1*, Foucault suggests that we cannot know the body's materiality, because it is thoroughly saturated by cultural inscriptions, discourses and technologies of power:

> [...] deployments of power are directly connected to the body — to bodies, functions, physiological processes, sensations, and pleasures; far from the body having to be effaced, what is needed is to make visible through an analysis in which the biological and the historical are not consecutive to one another [...] but are bound together in an increasingly complex fashion in accordance with the development of the modern technologies of power (Foucault, 1990 [1978], pp. 151–152).

This anti-essentialist understanding of the body has been an invaluable resource for feminist and queer scholars, who would explore gender or sexuality without falling into either biological determinism or pre-discursive essentialism. At the same time, however, "the materiality of the body loses its explanatory power" in Foucault (McNay, 1991, pp. 128–130). This has implications for the concept of experience, in that no experience has not already been discursively inscribed. In the same way, emotions, desires, experiences and social interactions of individuals are also reduced to the effects of discourse.

3. I will shift between referring to affect and emotion in this essay. Whether one refers to emotions or affects, tends to depend on the tradition one belongs to. "Affect" is *usually* used by those belonging to posthumanist, poststructuralist, and new materialist traditions, whereas "emotion" is *generally* used by others. Usually, this implies different ways of theorising about the relationship between the body and the wider social processes. Margaret Wetherell's (2012) book *Affect and Emotion: A New Social Science Understanding* offers some very useful distinctions, however one should be aware that they are evaluated from her own particular onto-epistemic position.

4. These studies also often draw on Jacques Lacan and Judith Butler that share Foucauldian premises language, power and the body.

5. This approach to language is rooted in Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of language as an abstract system of distinctions and relations between signifier and signified, existing independently of the actual use (see Moi, 2017).

Foucault argued in *The History of Sexuality, vol. 1* that there is no such thing as power without resistance, and that power and resistance exist in a dynamic and dependent relationship. There are no pre-discursive forms of social interaction *outside* power from where resistance may gain its motivational energy; rather, resistance occurs from *within* the cracks and blind spots of power itself, revealing that power is never complete (Foucault, 1990 [1978], pp. 95–96). Resistance is not identified through intentions or normativities, but through effects in the form of *counterconduct* (Foucault, 2007 [1978]). In the *History of Sexuality, vol. 3*, Foucault explores the subject's role in resisting or countering restrictive norms, arguing that this creative process, aesthetic, or ethics of the self, necessarily happens in close entanglement with discourse and biopower. However, as Lois McNay (1992) has pinpointed, without a materialist theory of the social, the aesthetics of the self becomes an "intense subjectivism" that "prioritises an isolated individuality, rather than demonstrating how the construction of the self is intrinsically bound up in various processes of social interaction" (McNay, 1992, p. 165). When it comes to resisting the political, economic and social structures that may restrict self-expression, it becomes unclear *how* we might distinguish between "a radical exploration of the self" and "an arbitrary stylisation of life" (McNay, 1992, p. 165). For self-expression to be radical, it would require material social interactions that could drive emancipatory social change.

For instance, Rosalind Gill (2016), drawing on this Foucauldian tradition, explored the neoliberalisation of academia and the making of the neoliberal subject within it. She argues that academics exemplify ideal neoliberal subjects because they are generally self-motivated, work long hours, are concerned with the quality of their work, and are drawn to the promise of autonomy and self-expression that academia offers. Neoliberal discourses of individualised responsibilised academics, combined with imported technologies of evaluations, audits, and rankings, extract increasing amounts of labour without compensation and reduce academic freedom (Gill, 2016, p. 53). Academics have internalised the accountancy logics and are so overworked that they do not resist. The "seductive promise of autonomy" and the "myth of the good life", combined with the individualised responsibility for success or failure, result in academia being saturated with and driven by stress, anxiety, and shame (Gill, 2016, p. 53).

While it is hard to disagree with the analysis offered by Gill, it depicts a totalizing effect of discourse. The study shows how logics of accountability become increasingly embedded in the subject's embodied practices (technologies of self) and morph into second nature, despite their corrosive effects on well-being and academic work. Because the subject is constituted and shaped by discourse/language, choice of action is made based on whether a discoursive field includes or excludes one's subjectivity. The implicit assumption is that the subject, by activating the neoliberal discourses and technologies, is emotionally driven only by the need for recognition from others. As a result, the subject will engage in the self-positioning and directing of emotional energies that will most likely lead to such rewards, resulting in stress, anxiety and shame. Emotion, as an effect of discourse, becomes an extension of language and technologies of power.

Resistance towards the powerful forms of governance and normativities is identified via its effect, not its intention or normativity, an understanding rooted in Foucault's anti-essentialist view of the body. Experimental self-questioning, self-making and self-improvement through sensuous experiments may challenge and subvert the restrictive neoliberal subjectivities in contemporary academia. Experimental writing, feminine writing, artistic engagements, support networks, using sick leave as resistance, or otherwise, are pertinent examples of such attempts. While I am highly sympathetic to such experiments, I still wonder which tools we can use to distinguish between change and radical subversion. If neither intention nor normativity is in-

volved, how do we ensure that changes do not simply lead to a deepening hold of neoliberal subjectivities? On what basis do we evaluate feminine writing as better or less restrictive than masculine writing, for instance? And are all features of social life best understood through the prism of including or excluding: might there be a third path, such as the dynamic between alienation and contact (see also Rosa, 2019; Whitebook, 1999)? From a Smithian viewpoint, such experiments would merely be starting points, not the end points of analysis and emancipatory social transformation.

## 3 Feminist New Materialism

Feminist new materialism is an umbrella term for research (see Alaimo & Hekman, 2008) affiliated with the performativity and governmentality tradition outlined earlier, yet adding to it significantly by suggesting that words and discourse are entangled with material and affective movements. This materialism is *new* because it is based on scientific advancements within quantum physics, digital technologies, and biotechnologies. It embraces a posthuman ontology of distributed (intention-free) agency and agentic entanglements, in which a decentered human is affected and entangled with the nonhuman technology or nonhuman nature. Humans should not, for instance, seek to *understand* the nonhuman (because that would imply a binary and human superiority), but rather become *affectively attuned* to its vibrancy and agentic capacity. The goal is to explore how human and nonhuman agents — e.g., technology, plants, soil, animals — are entwined, co-affecting, and co-constituted, and to cultivate more positive affective movements. In Ruth Leys' words, affect is within this tradition theorised as an "unstructured, non-signifying force or 'intensity' separated from human cognition" (Leys, 2011, p. 442). This approach grants matter, affective energies, and the non-human explanatory power, yet in an undifferentiated manner, because it is articulated as unpredictable, indeterminate, and dynamic forces with intention-free agency. The nature-culture, human-nonhuman, discourse-affect co-emerge and are entangled. This is a very appealing theory for the deconstruction human-nature dualisms, for challenging nature-culture hierarchies, and for addressing the impact of technology and science at the ontological level. Yet, I argue that the rejection of normativity, downplaying of the relative stability of matter and social structures, also characteristic of this approach, does not provide the tools I need for distinguishing between change and social emancipation.

One of the highly influential thinkers in this tradition, is eco-feminist techno-science philosopher Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (2017), who has developed a post-human speculative ethics for caring and living well in a damaged world. She starts from feminist debates on care (e.g. Tronto, 1993), arguing for an expanded vision of care that perceives it as happening between human, nonhuman and material forces (de la Bellacasa, 2012, p. 197). She suggests that we, instead of narrowing in on a definition of care as "labour/work" or "affect/affections" or "ethics/politics", should insist on all three dimensions and, more specifically, the *tensions* between them, emphasising the *ambivalence* of care (de la Bellacasa 2017, p. 5). Keeping with Donna Haraway's (1988) situated knowing, de la Bellacasa maintains that they must avoid becoming normative for knowledge and other relational practices to be caring. Instead of asking, "how can we care more" we should ask "what happens to our work when we pay attention to moments where the question of 'how to care?' is insistent but not easily answerable", and "what might be the meaning of care in *as well as possible worlds*" (de la Bellacasa 2017, p. 7). A speculative ethics of care becomes thus a *situated* matter of "staying with the trouble" (de la Bellacasa 2017): By staying "attentive" to the ever-changing materialities, unexpected turns,

ambivalence of care (de la Bellacasa 2012, p. 212); By remaining alert to the "vulnerability" and "non-innocence" of any claim to be "as well as possible"; By maintaining scrutiny of essentialising, idealising and romanticising risks of thinking with care in a feminist theory and politics. De la Bellacasa realises that the distributed intention free agency, the rejection of normativity, and the emphasis on the ever-changing, unexpected, tensions and ambivalences come at a price of consistent social critique:

> This journey does not add up to a smooth theory of care with no loose ends [...] imaginaries of care can help to expose how many other than humans are involved in the agential intra-activities that together make "our" worlds, existences and doings, and that get earthlings through our interdependent days, taking care of myriad vital processes [...]. Across complex life-sustaining webs, the care and the neglect that are put in a world will flow and circulate through living matter and processes [...] there is no one size fits all path for the good. What *as well as possible* might mean will remain fraught and contested terrain where different arrangements of humans-nonhumans will have different and conflicting significances [...] while we do not know how to care in advance or once and for all, aspiring speculatively for situated ethicalities is vital because no "as well as possible earth" is conceivable without these agencies [...] (de la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 221).

One example of work done in this tradition on academia, is by Dorthe Staunæs and Katja Brøgger (2020). The authors draw on governmentality, feminist new materialism and speculative feminist storytelling. The authors argue that measurements and data, defining universities and academic work today, cannot be treated as ontologically separate from academics, but constitute, generate, or "world us" both in terms of what we are and what we might become in terms of our research and writing (Staunæs & Brøgger 2020, p. 430). Data technologies govern priorities and produce affective environments (Staunæs & Brøgger, 2020, p. 432). Drawing on de la Bellacasa (2017), they argue that data works as a soft governance that imposes upon us and creates wounds making us "receptive for the affect circulating around [...] triggering competitive pressure, the vanity and eagerness to perform of each academic" (Staunæs & Brøgger, 2020, p. 435). Notably, the authors argue that even when no data is present, the mere possibility or potential that anything can be turned into data "haunts" us and shapes motivations and activities. The problem is not, the authors argue, data itself, but that it converts affective energies to negative emotions, producing moods that "make academic life unlivable"[6] (Staunæs & Brøgger, 2020, p. 431). Rather than calling for dismantling the data regime, the authors ask us to "stay with the trouble" (Haraway, 2016) and speculate whether data could shape our lives as academics in different ways. In line with de la Bellacasa, they focus on data as "matters of care and mutual interest", arguing that care is not a normative endeavour of presuming the needs of another, but an impure reciprocal exploration of what the other may need (Staunæs & Brøgger, 2020, p. 439).

On this basis they speculate whether it could be possible to "nurture other moods, affective economies, and energies", "nurture feelings of commitment and admiration while minimising uncomfortable or malign aspects of the affective complexes" (Staunæs & Brøgger, 2020, pp. 436–437). Data might involve creative, warm, sensuous, bodily attunement to the movements of others, a way of collaborating and connecting with others. In this way, the data would constitute academics not as competitors, but as mutually responsible and in touch.

6. Staunæs & Brøgger define moods as "longer lasting states of mind and body" (2020, p. 431).

Staunæs and Brøgger offer a sympathetic approach to addressing key challenges in contemporary academia. Nonetheless, from my standpoint, it is theoretically unclear *how* the unpredictability of matter, the ontological inseparability of human and technology, and the ambivalence of care should be the basis for social transformation. This situational and multi-agentic view does not provide tools to distinguish between the kinds of difference, dynamics and changes that are an unquestionable part of life on this earth (and in academia), and the kinds that would bring about emancipation. As Lena Gunnarsson argues, from a Marxist and thus ultimately humanist perspective,[7] it is only towards "*relatively* stable transhistorical structures, forces and needs, that change — or status quo — become meaningful" (Gunnarsson, 2013, p. 12). While care is often an ambivalent and fraught terrain, it *also* represents a fundamental and relatively stable necessity for human and many nonhuman species. It serves as a vital socio-emotional commons of any functioning society. Framing care as first-and-foremost defined by, or (dis)organised by, ambivalence can obscure the everyday, empirical realities, in which people engage in caring practices that are not necessarily marked by ambivalence. A purely situational, multi-agentic perspective risks overlooking care as a fundamentally social activity — one that involves coordination and sometimes dialogue. The embodied practices of coordination and dialogue do not erase difference or tension; rather, they presuppose it, and open up possibilities for change. To suggest that such a humanist approach to care entails a "static", "one-size-fits-all" or "once and for all solutions" (de la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 221), is a caricature. In practice, conscious and socially embedded individuals are actively involved in making care happen, responding to the particular needs of people, of communities, and of nature. A Marxist feminist critique, however, cannot stop at the micro-levels of care. It must also interrogate the broader social conditions shaping care's current forms, and ask which forms of social organisation could foster mutuality and enable emancipatory practices of care. This means questioning how embodied activities are socially organised into gendered relations of productive and reproductive labour, and how the ontological specificity of care — as something we all need — should be shielded from capitalist expropriation (see also Fraser, 2022).

The assumption that attunement with matter and remaining attentive to change and difference can lead to more democratic and caring environments is difficult to understand, if no *relatively stable* concept of human consciousness and social conditions are the basis of evaluating it as such. The approach ends up obscuring the history and effect of the social organisation of capitalism, as the social institutional order generates human and nonhuman nature as something that can be exploited, expropriated, and cannibalised for purposes of profit (Rekret, 2016). The social organisation of labour under capitalism has produced nature as something mechanical, lifeless, and extractable in the first place. And indeed, the abstract epistemologies associated with modernity's science and philosophy have historically been inseparable from the capitalist mode of organising society, because it has provided the basis for controlling human labour and nature (Rekret 2016, pp. 8–9). In casting something as nature — such as the body, traditional or indigenous knowledges, reproduction — it is made available for capitalist disavowal, control, expropriation, and exploitation. Yet, it is also that which capitalism designates, that becomes the source of alternative ontologies and grounds for resistance to capitalism itself (Federici, 2020; Fraser, 2022). Indeed, the body cannot be "reified all the way down" (Fraser, 2016), and from this perspective, data and measurements (and other disciplining and ideological instruments within academia) are, in fact, ontologically separate from academics. Academics are shaped in a dialectic engagement with them; they coordinate activities

7. Something which does not mean that Marx's theory is not of relevance for addressing the ecological disaster (see Foster, 1999; Salleh, 2010; Barca, 2019).

to meet the institutional ideological intentions they mediate. While the relation between body-thought, life-matter, subject-object, and knowledge-affect may take on increasingly blurred forms in late capitalism, the blurriness may also hide increasingly deepened splits and expropriations. Data and measurements are a product of attempts at organising, structuring and appropriating human powers. If ideology critique is replaced with affective attunement with data and measurements, the matters of care may deepen capitalist expropriation of human energies within academia.

## 4 Feminist Practice Theory

This approach treats the material body and emotion as phenomena shaped in a dialectic relation to the social and discursive. The material body and emotion maintain their explanatory power by being shaped by, and in turn shaping, the social. This maintains a distinction, without falling into a dualistic or hierarchical relationship, between nature-culture and material-culture. This approach to theorizing emotion and agency offers the most convincing basis for a coherent social critique and social emancipation.

Practice-theoretical psycho-social theory is rooted in a materialist understanding of the human being, associated with Marx and Merleau-Ponty, as a sensuous and vulnerable social animal who becomes what they are through what they do. Human emotional structures and motivational energies are shaped by the particular historical societal formations and social relations we are part of. Humans and human necessities, and their specific form, vary across socio-cultural contexts, and can certainly change, but not boundlessly so. The materiality of the human body is what activates new ways of knowing. Still, it also poses certain limitations and constraints, making the body a key site of resistance towards capitalist modes of social organising for increasing expropriation of human powers (Federici, 2020; Fraser, 2022; Gunnarsson, 2016). Social institutions and formations "compel subjects to direct their energies in particular ways" (Gunnarsson, 2016, p. 13), "igniting reifying and defensive, or life-promoting motivational energies" (Aarseth, 2024, p. 863). A practice-theoretical approach perceives emotions as a social activity (Aarseth, 2016). We might say that emotions are a prerequisite for meaningfully engaging in the social coordination of activities. This understanding has its roots in the Merleau-Pontyean rejection of the Cartesian mind-body dualism:

> [...] perceptual consciousness is a sensuous relationship to the world, effected through embodied interactions with it and the habituated schemas such interactions manifest (Merleau-Pontyean, 1962, quoted in Crossley, 2001, p. 73).

According to this, the subjects' understanding, motivations, and desires result from their embodied practical engagements in the world. Within the social ontology of Institutional Ethnography, emotions could be argued to drive this engagement based on the promise of recognition. Within academia, for instance, people are driven by rankings, data and metrics, because they need to perform on these to secure a permanent position or the next research grant. This would, however, be a reductive, utilitarian and overtly structuralist reading of people's motivations. Firstly, there is not always a match between what people do because they feel it is necessary, and what they would prefer to do and find inherently meaningful. Secondly, people often spend time and invest energy in activities that do *not* provide recognition or rewards. To grasp these emotional investments or drives require a notion of reflexivity or agency, enabling a dynamic understanding of the social coordinations. Norwegian sociologist Helene Aarseth

argues that emotions are both imbued with social meaning, and in turn provide the social with such meaning — suggesting that the dialectic between embodied emotions and social institutions/formations can allow us to understand why some activities "turn into an enchantment that energises agents investments in certain fields and not in others" (Aarseth, 2016, p. 95). As such, emotional energies drive and help us organise where and in which activities we invest our energies; thus, we are at the root of complying or buying into ideological logics and discourses, but also at the root of opting out, resisting and identifying other modes of being. Such desires and energies emerge through endowing the world and one's activities with meaning and consciousness. These can be captured by the post-Freudian concept of libidinal strivings or Eros, as "life-instinct or love instinct", where the primary drive is connection, growth and creativity (Loewald, 1980; Aarseth, 2016; Lund & Tienari, 2019), and reaching beyond the present in anticipation of a different future.

In academia, shaped for decades by policy reforms and the import of financial accountancy logics associated with internationalisation, performance indicators, standardisation and rankings (e.g. Wright & Shore, 2017; Collini, 2012; Shore, 2008; Marginson, 2025), there is no doubt that people's energies and emotional investments are compelled and directed towards doing what counts; being self-assertive, competitive, efficient, productive, in manners that may have devastating effects on academia (Alvesson et al., 2017). Yet, this is not the whole picture: there also continues to be investments in the so-called "unproductive", "reproductive", "slow" and "creative" time, including the work of understanding, stitching and connecting, which allows thinking as a necessarily embodied activity to mature. Without this work, no gripping or ground-breaking academic ideas can be produced with which one can compete on the academic performance measures. Despite the continued disavowal of these modes of being and orienting under the social organisation of academic capitalism, and continued efforts to expropriate and control spaces for such unfolding, the productivity machine of academia cannot persist without them. At least, without it, the sector would become something else entirely, and this is at the core of the longstanding struggles around defining the identity and purpose of academia and the university. The emotional investments driving what might be called anti-ideological counter-activities are the source of resistance and identification of other modes of social organising against academic capitalism, and for more democratic and meaningful ways of being a university (e.g., cooperative initiatives as Mondragon University, Social Science Centre Lincoln, and Co-Operative College).

In some of my work (e.g., Lund & Tienari, 2019), I have explored the gendered divisions of emotional labour within academia, specifically between passion and care. For some to be passionately committed to globalised academic performance measures and instrumentalised international collaborations (historically, often men), others do the caring work upholding the local in terms of pastoral care for students, collegial relations, not to mention families, communities, and social bonds in a broad sense (often women). Increasing women's numerical representation happens through standardised criteria shaping practices in ways that have destructive effects on epistemic diversity, effectively camouflaging uniformity as diversity (Lund, 2020). Yet, below these activities are drives and activities that cannot be fully instrumentalised for the benefit of academic capitalism. There are in fact "objective" limits to optimisation, productivity and instrumental thinking in academic work. Not only will it negatively influence the quality and depth of academic work and academic discussions, but people become stressed, burned out, depressed, alienated, and finally it nurtures projective disgust and polarisation (see e.g., Krüger & Aarseth, 2025; O'Neill, 2014). The drive for connecting, belonging, creating and understanding, Eros, provides the conditions of possibility for both passion and care, but

also challenges this very mode of separating and organising labour, and instrumentalising emotions for the sake of capital (see Illouz, 2007). It fuels other ways of doing academic work and ways of relating to others that are not decontextualised, instrumental, and positioning, but embodied, explorative, meaning-seeking, and dialogical. It refers to an ontological mode of being in the world radically distinct from the instrumental and optimisation oriented modes associated with academic capitalism. While this might seem like a romanticising purist depiction of "the other", it is key that we distinguish between what may *appear* purist or romanticising and the concrete embodied practices that *actually* do point to other modes of relating and social organising (Fraser, 2022). These other "ontological grammars" are themselves shaped in and through dialectic interaction with academic capitalism (Fraser 2014 & 2022). People are continuously working to manage the contradictions they are faced with, and this requires large amounts of emotional labour. Within contemporary academia, it is becoming increasingly difficult to find spaces where one can engage in this manner, and engaging in this way is often reduced to resistance or being difficult, explaining why some people crumble.

Dorothy Smith's commitment to anti-ideological critique and emancipation, made her skeptical of any concept or theory that removes attention from people's embodied activities and social conditions. Indeed, Smith's critique of ideology was directed at knowledge production itself, whether it be structuralist, positivist, poststructuralist, or psychoanalytical (Smith, 1999). Concepts such as "motivational energies" might be accused of falling into such a category. Yet, these manifest in concrete people's "meaning ascriptions", embodied activities and ultimately forms of social relations and organising. Taking emotions seriously would involve some degree of interpretive engagement with the practices people provide accounts of and how they endow them with meaning. As such, the researchers cannot entirely escape the risks of objectification, but they may seek to minimise it by making the social organisation of research as reflexive and transparent as possible (Walby, 2007).

On this basis, the practice-theoretical approach to agency and emotion expands Smith's ontology of the subject that is compatible with the epistemic and ontological premises as rooted in historical materialism. It strengthens the dialectic analysis by expanding on "the world directly felt, sensed, responded to" (Smith, 1987, p. 49), as something that may be put into language only indirectly, and helps us grasp "the emotional intensity with which we perceive and invest in the world", and why people are attracted and/or repelled by certain practices as shaped in ideological processes. It points to understanding what kinds of motivational energies are "enabled, offered, incited or enforced under specific social conditions and societal formations" (Aarseth, 2024, p. 870). This approach to emotions, as an expanded theory of experience and agency, points to the emotional basis of why people adapt or buy into ideological ways of knowing and the emotional basis for resisting and emancipatory transformation.

## 5 Closing Remarks

In this essay, I have examined three ways of investigating emotions and affects in academia. I argue that the practice-theoretical feminist perspective is most consistent with my analytical premises, as grounded in Dorothy Smith's Institutional Ethnography. This framework draws on Marx's materialism, his critique of ideology, and a humanistic materialist method for analysing how ideology is produced. I am not claiming that my short accounts of the respective traditions can do them the justice they deserve. Yet, by offering a reading of each tradition from a particular ontological and epistemic standpoint, I hope the essay can offer some insights for

contemplating implications stemming from these theories regarding emotions, subjects and power.

Firstly, I argue that the feminist governmentality anti-essentialist body and understanding of resistance at the level of subjects does not provide a theoretical basis for distinguishing between the kinds of self-transformations that produce change, and the self-transformations that would be an element in a radical transformation of society.

Secondly, the feminist new materialist approach extends on the Foucauldian one, by suggesting a post-humanist approach to matter and the nonhuman, according to which we cannot ontologically distinguish between, e.g., the human and technologies that govern them. Rather than suggesting that we should seek to become ungoverned, we should nurture affective attunement with matter, such as governance technologies, to make the university that fosters positive emotions, a more liveable and caring working environment. Again, I recognise the attraction of these moves. Still, I question whether the instability and ambivalence of relations and affective attunement, without basis in human intentionality and without a systematic critique of the capitalist social organisation of academic life that has produced current emotional states, will produce better and more caring institutions, or will deepen capitalist exploitation and expropriation.

Finally, the feminist practice-theoretical position is rooted in Marx and Merleau-Ponty's materialism, and argues for a dialectic approach between the human motivational energies and socio-historical formations. Human lives and emotions are socially organised by ideology, but not all that is social is ideology. The body, and its emotional investments, becomes a source of capitalist exploitation, but also the source of resistance and social organising for another kind of university. It harbours powers and intentions from which we may meaningfully point to broader societal and institutional formations as relatively good or relatively bad for democratic social organising, well-being and creative self-expression. I argue that such an approach to emotions in the academy would provide a resource for all scholars who seek a social theory of the subject, psychic energies and agency, that maintains distinctions between subject and society, without falling into dualisms. Furthermore, it offers the basis for articulating a systematic social critique of capitalism and modes of social organising under capitalism. This is of relevance in the critique of contemporary academia, and beyond.

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