

From the ledger of grievances to a critique of science

thomas berker

Situating our grievances

8^e que pour faire mieux la conuissance
des Caus de ce qui se passe, la commission
deuuee qu'il soit établi un impetum
pouu agréer la Caus de ce qui est de
l'usuel, ainsi que l'aport.

ce qui a été fait & tenu par l'hon-
neur de la dite ville le ouïe par un
sept cent quatre vingt neuf.

Thommas de Brignolle & consors
- Marquis de -
Guillaume de Doumergue & Jacques Delord
Jacques de Rouillon & Rabineau
Barnier de Vermille & Condougnan
Vermille de Jautmes & Jacques
de Bernier & Motins
Jacques de Jautmes & Daniel de Guerd
de Bernier
de Bernier
de Bernier

Critique as an empirical question

- The historical model: *Cahiers de doléance* compiled in the first months of 1789 and submitted to the États Généraux
- In Bruno Latour's "Down to earth" (2018) described as a possible first step out of the current crisis
 - Specific, avoids stale generalisations and moralising rigidity
 - Rooted in lived experience
 - Rooted in a specific place and time
- In a second step related to concerns of other groups, larger processes
- Implemented by Latour in a series of workshops, e.g., with French farmers

Why complain here and now?

- KULT8851
 - Reflection: Why is this a problem (for me)?
 - Navigation: How do I deal with it? What navigational aid do I need?
 - Critique: From my grievances to a better common world (in academia)
- Input to day 6, where I will propose some connections between your grievances and the grievances of other groups in academia

<https://lime.kultwiki.net>

Write down your specific grievance(s) (annoyances, problems, disappointments, suffering) **related to being a PhD student**

This ledger is "public" by design, so please remain anonymous and anonymise your complaints

No problem is too small

Avoid generalisations (for now)

If you are completely without problems take a break and enjoy your life!

Deadline today, 1 pm

Your grievances

according to my reading - you may disagree
(the ledger is now "public":

<https://learn.kultwiki.net/thomas/TOS/src/branch/main/ledger.md>)

- A surprisingly old-fashioned, **hierarchic** organisation with professors on top and PhD students at the very bottom
- A **bad work place**: 3 years is just not enough - working overtime for free is built into the system, one is lonely, and then in the end you are fired
- **Uncertainty**: Am I good enough? Will I manage? Can it be done by people like me? Which sacrifices will be necessary?
- **Duty work** (or other jobs done for others) and **bad supervision**

Sounds like a very bad deal,
why is such a bad deal
offered to the brightest of
their generation (and why
do they accept it)?

A certain autonomy

- (Relatively) high degrees of autonomy for the individual employee
 - where and when to complete tasks and
 - what to think and say
- For many the one big reason to be and stay in academia
- But: Privileges senior and tenured staff, more problematic for new and temporary employees, especially difficult for PhD students with the desire/need to make themselves useful
- And: The absence of clear structures makes potentially everyone in a academia a competitor of everyone: which tends to create unresolvable conflicts and dysfunctional organizational units

How to defend the "good"
autonomy without getting
more of the "bad"
autonomy?

Uncertainty: Contradictory and unclear messages

- PhDs: cheap workforce **and** "our future" **and** a very good deal for a department's budget **and** ...
- Confusion regarding standards: What is good enough - it depends...
- Confused signals from above: excellent teaching, research, outreach, innovation, project acquisition - keeping everyone busy - and producing impostor syndrome in heaps
- Old (authoritarian, collegial) **vs** new (bureaucratic, professional) academia **vs** "norsk arbeidsliv" (welfare state, corporatism) - especially difficult for us foreigners to decode

**Why do you think are there
so many (sometimes
contradictory)
expectations?**

My unsolicited advice regarding:

1. When to refuse duty work (or other jobs)?
2. Adjusting expectations
3. Who will help you?

On duty work (and supervision)

- Echoes from the past: "My PhD student"
 - An honour to be chosen as supervisor by the student
 - The student becomes part of the supervisor's "court" and is supposed to contribute in all kinds of ways ("duty work")
- Today
 - Supervising PhDs usually means that one was successful in attracting funding, then one hires one of (in the worst case) 100s applicants
 - Duty work is usually "owned" by the department
 - But in many cases still no normal labour relations, weak formalisation, little protection, no training, etc.

When to refuse duty work

- A known problem: Bad routines for duty work are one possible explanation for the relatively high percentage of sick-leave among PhD students
- Teaching: PhD students (and all early career teachers in academia) have a tendency to create the teaching that they would have liked as students - which is way to demanding for all involved - less is more!
- Other tasks where you do not learn anything useful (e.g., administrative work): ideally takes less time than allocated, must be tolerated if it takes as much time as you get, intolerable if it takes more
- Your PhD thesis should be main priority - at any time and for everyone around you during the 2.5 years allocated for it

Ambitions and expectations

- Should be oriented towards **the present and present conditions for PhD work**
- This is not the culmination of a life's work any longer but **a series of more or less well-written chapters/articles stitched together by a narrative**
- This is your first book - how can it be perfect at first try?
- Having thought (read, written) about a topic for three years you **automatically** know more about it than almost everyone else
- KH Sørensen: "A good thesis is a **submitted** thesis"

It takes a village

- Supervisor
- Project lead (if you are funded by a project)
- Leader of your PhD program
- Department head
- Union representatives

In case some of these roles are played by the same person you have the right to get someone else to step in

And finally: Leaving you with something positive

- **Autonomy:** enjoy it, not enjoying it will bring you no step closer to your PhD and a job in academia
- **Mixed messages:** exploit the confusion, look at the many different demands more as a menu of possibilities than a task list, keep your eyes on the prize (PhD degree)
- **Duty work:** Can be win-win, even if it does not feel like it in the moment

Back to the ledger

- Complete the ledger of grievances with the grievances of administrative staff, of engineering PhD students, of tenured staff,...
- Identify relations, overlaps, conflicts of interest
- Where possible: Act together! Where necessary: Against each other!

After lunch

The old-fashioned kind of critique:
Follow the money and cui bono?

