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The Academy as a Logistical Institution

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Over the past decade, I have conducted a series of research projects on the topic of logistics. Understood as the art and science of moving people and goods in ways that benefit communication and transport efficiencies, logistics has become a key discipline of contemporary economy and society. Funded by the Australian Research Council (ARC), the projects I have led with my colleague Ned Rossiter have asked how logistical techniques and technologies shape labour, lives and the constitution of global space and time. Much of this research has focused on shipping ports, which are key sites of global trade where the material bulk of exchange is manifest and software-driven patterns of optimisation subject labour forces to regimes of surveillance, control and coordination. Our research has not been limited to shipping ports, however, and has extended to many other sites and institutions where logistical practices are evident, including circuit board factories and recycling villages in China, new towns on the edges of Indian cities, special economic zones, Chilean copper mines and data centres in Hong Kong and Singapore.

Over the course of these projects, I also spent six years working in institutional roles in the administration of research in cultural studies and related fields. From 2009–2010, I was Director of Western Sydney University's Centre for Cultural Research. Following that, I served as Research Director of the Institute for Culture and Society (2013–2016), the Centre for Cultural Research's successor institute at the same university. In this article, I reflect on what my research practice in studying logistics has taught me about my research governance roles. There can be no doubt that logistical techniques and technologies, from enterprise resource planning systems to ranking tables, have affected conditions of labour and life in the contemporary academy. Tracing such patterns of influence, however, should not blind us to the ways in which the university has become a site in which flexible work practices

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and the infrastructures that enable them have been developed and exported to other kinds of institutions and organisations. That many technological companies have come to brand their facilities as campuses and introduced 'no collar' regimes of workplace attendance and performance is only one register of this flow.

My intervention in this piece limits itself to observing two ways in which the tightening bind of logistical to academic life has shaped research practices in cultural and communication studies over the twenty years since the establishment of the Australian Academy of the Humanities (AHA) cultural and communication studies section. In particular, I am interested in how systems of supply and classification have played crucial roles in enabling and guiding research in these fields.

LOGISTICS GENEALOGIES

Definitions of logistics are rife. Trade and technical manuals tend to emphasise the effort of getting the right thing to the right place at the right time. Within the recent critical literature on logistics, two definitions stand out. The first understands logistics as a way of organising society that questions the distinction between institutions and infrastructures.¹ The second approaches logistics as a mode of power active in the governance of labour and life.² These definitions converge, at least insofar as they both treat logistics as a set of actions and knowledge practices that extend beyond the organisation of transport and communication. Understanding logistics in this wide scope does not mean, however, that issues of transport and communication are irrelevant. Anna Tsing sees logistics as part of supply chain capitalism. She argues that exclusions and hierarchies that emerge from outside of supply chains discipline workforces as much as their internal governance standards.³ In any case, logistics is central to the transformation of production in a globalised world. No longer a means of moving goods to market at a sunk cost, it has become productive in its own right. The assembly of goods and services across different global sites, with objects and knowledge travelling between locations, has made the lines between production and distribution increasingly indistinct.

Logistics, then, is a commercial practice. The question of when and how logistics crosses with commerce is an issue of genealogical importance. Stefano Harney stresses the continuity of commercial interests and motivations across the long-term evolution of logistics.⁴ For him, logistics finds its origins in the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The more usual story is that logistics derives from the military sphere and becomes a commercial matter only with the advent of the 'logistics revolution' after World War II. According to military historian Martin van Creveld, logistics arises as part of Napoleonic warfare when standing armies begin to receive supplies from trailing magazines.⁵ Understood as a means of avoiding the 'tyranny of plunder', or the need for armies to survive by raiding the territories through which they move, this vision of logistics' origins stresses the role of supply in transforming military operations and, indirectly, the course of history. Today, the arts of supply no longer liberate us from plunder but make us dependent on logistics for the provision of goods and services and the sustenance of life.

THE TYRANNY OF SUPPLY

In Carl von Clausewitz's *On War*, logistics is part of preparatory activity for war. While the conduct of war involves strategy and tactics, logistics provides the conditions of possibility for strategy and tactics to proceed.⁶ The distinction between top-down strategy and bottom-up tactics is familiar to cultural studies conceptions of power, as it is within Foucauldian theory, which famously inverts Clausewitz's understanding of war as the continuation of politics

by other means.⁷ If we focus rather on logistics, we get a different conception of power, one capable of rearranging and assembling other forms of power, including the sovereign, disciplinary, biopolitical and governmental powers specified by Foucault. That logistics is always adapting to contingences tells us much about its pervasive power. Adept at negotiating the heterogeneity of global space and time as well as the relations between secular orders such as finance, law and business operations, logistics has become a contemporary form of magic.

A refrain in critical work on logistics is that logistics has begun to lead strategy and tactics. Rather than simply enabling a limited activity such as war, logistics has come to sustain a wide array of forms of life. Whole populations now depend on logistics for their daily survival. Moreover, as Cowen writes, logistics has become a lively system itself, invested with biological imperatives to flow and provide 'resilience' in ways that ensure the production and reproduction of contemporary capitalist life.⁸ The tyranny of supply, if you like, has replaced the tyranny of plunder.

Turning these insights back on to cultural and communication studies' conditions of possibility, at least insofar as the university provides a site for their practice, makes evident this tyranny of supply. Research in the contemporary university registers a primacy of income over outcomes. My work in research administration was largely about ensuring a steady supply of research income from different sources as a means assuring that research could proceed. People who govern universities still like to hear good news stories about research outcomes, for instance, in terms of impact or publication rankings. However, the emphasis on income is stronger. Although this emphasis on research income is not limited to the Australian academy, it is strongly evident in this national context, especially in the case of younger universities that struggle to compete with their more established counterparts. Administered through the device of the (stretch) target, the search for income to enable and support research has become a *raison d'être* of academic life. This push for research income also has important implications for knowledge production, especially when it combines with industry collaboration and commercialisation programs that hitch research to partner organisations' needs and priorities.

The tyranny of supply also explains why the blocking or veto of government competitive grant funding through ministerial fiat, as has occurred recently in Australia, is such a devastating move for research practice. One reaction to this situation is to seek funding from a range of different groups and organisations, and, indeed, institutions now place researchers under pressure to diversify income sources. This situation registers the intersection of financial and logistical factors that now influence the conduct of research across many different fields and disciplines. Cultural and communication studies are especially susceptible to funding blocks and challenges, however, since their commitment to cultural provocation and radical social criticism can serve as a lightning rod for conservative political players seeking to take a stance in 'culture wars'. Consequently, the logistical question of supply is acute for researchers working in these fields.

CLASSIFICATION AND RANKING

Classification is another logistical practice that has important consequences for research in cultural and communication studies. In the classical account of Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss, modern classification is the profane expression of primitive modes of sorting and ordering that reflect sacred conceptions of the universe and unitary understandings of society.⁹ In the more recent account of Geoffrey C. Bowker and Susan Leigh Star, classification systems are never perfect. Rather than reflecting social coherence, they tend to become invisible and

obscure the political and ethical contestations that went into their construction.¹⁰ This view gels with Tsing's account of the role of classification in logistical supply chains. She gives the example of a piece of coal that travels from Kalimantan to India. After extraction from the earth, the coal travels to a port city for sorting and grading. From here, brokers move it quickly to avoid loss of value, and when it finally arrives in India, it must meet the requirements of power plant managers. Shunting the commodity along the chain requires 'not a vague and transcendent "coalness" but rather a step by step negotiation of the possibilities at hand'.¹¹ Classification is key to facilitating mobility and optimising logistical operations.

In the case of the practice of cultural and communication studies in Australia, the political technology of the Australian and New Zealand Standard Research Classification (ANZRC) is a relevant system. Administered by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) and based on the OECD's Frascati system of research classification, the Australian Standard Research Classification (ASRC) was introduced in 1993, and revised in 1998 and 2008 (in this latter year it expanded to encompass New Zealand). Organised as a hierarchical system of Field of Research (FOR) codes, ANZRC is pivotal to the monitoring and allocation of research funds in the private and public sectors across Australia and New Zealand. It allows calibration of research activity across different parts of the economy and allows an ordered generation of data useful to the logistical needs of governments, universities, international organisations, professional and business bodies, and community groups.

In 1998, the same year of the formation of the cultural and communication studies section of AHA commemorated in this issue of *Cultural Studies Review*, communication and cultural studies entered the ASRC as separate FOR codes. This was a significant event, particularly since these fields did not have a statistical presence in the Frascati classification. The result of lobbying efforts by bodies such as AHA, the presence of these codes has been important for research practice in these fields over the past twenty years, ensuring they have a showing when it comes to funding decisions. Aside from the debate among cultural studies practitioners as to whether their field is a discipline, we can say definitively that cultural studies is a statistical code in Australia and New Zealand.

The effect of these codes has been material. For instance, I believe the aforementioned ARC projects on logistics would have been difficult to fund in the absence of a cultural studies FOR. Apart from funding decisions, however, these codes have ensured the inclusion of communication and cultural studies in a range of audit exercises, including the ARC's Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) and Engagement and Impact research evaluation exercises. While these are important undertakings, particularly at the national level, the relevance of official statistical codes, for research evaluation as for many other fields of endeavour, comes under increasing pressure due to the emergence of competing systems, many of them run by private organisations and drawing on digital datasets that are much larger and more regularly updated. National systems not only come to rely on some of these services for their functioning but also risk being sidelined given the international brand recognition of many of these competing systems and their more immediate rhythms of operation, which provide opportunities for continuous updating and monitoring of data. Compared to national statistical systems, which collect data through the device of the sample, these private systems seem more agile and responsive.

Insofar as research evaluation goes, citation indices like Google Scholar and Elsevier's Scopus have an increasing role to play. Ranking tables such as the Jiao Tong Academic Ranking of World Universities and the Times Higher Education Supplement World University Ranking, although not geared solely toward research evaluation, also assume

an importance that often eclipses research evaluation exercises conducted by national governments. Many Latin American countries, for instance, stipulate that only institutions that rank highly on these indices can host students with postgraduate scholarships issued by their governments. In the case of the Institute for Culture and Society, this requirement hampers our ability to recruit such doctoral candidates, since, although Western Sydney University ranks highly for cultural studies in the ARC's ERA exercise, it ranks lowly in the wider league tables.

Communication and cultural studies in Australia thus find themselves in a position where the favourable situation bequeathed by the lobbying of the 1990s meets new ranking and classification systems that interact in complex ways with national programs of research evaluation. Speaking in logistical terms, we might say that these systems are not necessarily interoperable. Different and sometimes contradictory measures are often at stake. For example, the ARC does not recognise Google scholar citations in its ERA exercise, but prefers to use Scopus, which is supposedly less open to manipulation. Yet many applicants for ARC grants frequently cite Google scholar figures, which tend to be higher than the figures for the same publications listed in Scopus, to support their funding applications. In any case, the growing importance of privately owned ranking and classification tools poses challenges for national research evaluation systems. A consequence of this for bodies like the cultural and communication studies section of AHA is that its advocacy and lobbying efforts need increasingly to extend beyond Australian government peak bodies if they are to be effective. The Academy may hold tight to its mission of 'championing the contribution humanities, arts and culture make to national life', but such an aim can no longer be achieved within a limited national perspective.¹² Increasingly, it becomes necessary to liaise with information and technology firms, publishers, and other organisations that operate in the international sphere. At the very least, knowledge about logistical factors that govern the interlinking of national and other systems must come into play.

Seeing the academy as a logistical institution may seem a cold and overly technical approach to issues of culture and communication that practitioners usually interpret through the fullness of everyday life. However, this approach has the advantage of adding clarity of vision when it comes to future challenges confronting cultural and communication studies in Australia.

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Notes

1. See, for instance, Keller Easterling, *Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure Space*, Verso, New York, 2014.
2. See, for instance, Deborah Cowen, *The Deadly Life of Logistics: Mapping Violence in Global Trade*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2014.
3. Anna Tsing, 'Supply Chains and the Human Condition', *Rethinking Marxism*, vol. 21, no.2, pp. 148-76.
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