

*Sonja Trifuljesko*

## LECTIO PRÆCURSORIA

### *Weeds of Sociality: Reforms and Dynamics of Social Relations at the University of Helsinki*

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#### ABSTRACT

A lectio præcursoria is a short presentation read out loud by a doctoral candidate at the start of a public thesis examination in Finland. It introduces the key points or central argument of the thesis in a way that should make the ensuing discussion between the examinee and the examiner apprehensible to the audience, many of whom may be unfamiliar with the candidate's research or even anthropological research in general.

Honoured Custos, honoured Opponent,  
members of the audience,

Let me start this lecture by drawing your attention to the building in which I stand before you today. This was the first building of the University of Helsinki to be erected after the Second World War. Its construction began in 1950 and it was finished in 1957. As such, the building is a statement of the industrial boom that Finnish society experienced in the post-war years. The markings of it could be, for instance, observed from the material used in the construction. This was the first larger building in Finland that was built out of factory-made elements. Similarly, plastic, which was a new material at the time, was also employed here (Knapas 1989).

Despite the building's conspicuous industrial references, its exterior, featuring a yellowish ceramic covering, also shows respect to the already existing material markings in

the landscape. By this, I refer above all to the adjacent quarters, which started rising from the 1830s, following the university's transfer from Turku to Helsinki. The connections to the past are, however, clearest in the building's name. This one refers to Henrik Gabriel Porthan, who was an eighteenth century professor and rector of the Royal Academy of Turku, which is how the University of Helsinki was known at the time. Porthan's accounts of Finnish history are considered extremely important for generating a sense of Finnishness, which would solidify a century later. Carrying his name, the building of Porthania was thus intended as an homage to a period in which the university played a particularly important role in national history (Klinge 2010).

Rising several floors above the ground, Porthania was also meant to confirm the leading status that the University of Helsinki continued to enjoy, despite the arrival of other higher education institutions in Finland. Its modernist

architecture was also to speak of a progressive university. And its numerous facilities, which, besides big and small auditoriums as well as rooms and offices, included a student dining hall, a faculty cafeteria, a gymnasium, healthcare facilities, and underground book repositories, were all designed for the influx of students that was already envisioned during the early years of Finland's independence. It is actually to this period that the initial plans for Porthania date back (Knapas 1989).

As someone who got her first university degree in art history, I could speak about this building until the end of my introductory lecture. But, as an anthropologist, I feel I have already said quite enough to claim that the building of Porthania is imbued with social relations. This is hardly surprising. A number of anthropologists before me have already argued that landscapes are constituted by and constitutive of sociality (cf. Berglund, Lounela and Kallinen 2019).

At the same time, Porthania is a good place to start observing the recent reconfigurations of the landscape. This building is, for instance, situated just next to the entrance to the metro station, which, during the course of my fieldwork, changed its name to reflect the university. Above the station in question, and directly connected to Porthania through a set of internal passageways, is the university's main library, which opened its doors a few years prior to the metro stop renaming. Finally, in 2017, a new kind of university space called Think Corner, which at one point even resided in Porthania, found its final destination across from this building, in an edifice that had prior to the start of a thorough reconstruction process served as home to the university's central administration.

These and other new markings in the university landscape, I have argued, are manifestations of an aspiration to a world-class

status (Trifuljesko 2019). Through it, those running the University of Helsinki have been trying to reclaim the hegemonic position of their institution in Finnish society, which the latter gradually lost over past decades. The world-class status of Helsinki was to be attempted through a comprehensive landscape reconfiguration, which, besides material extravagance, entailed major tampering with social structures. Following the global knowledge economy policy framework, the university's landscape was to be cleared from previously existing relationships and reconstituted as such to maximise the exploitation and expropriation of all university entities, whether human or otherwise (cf. Tsing 2012). During the course of my fieldwork, I was able to follow this process through the rise of new research institutes, new degree programmes, and the brand new centralised administration, formed in the aftermath of significant staff reductions. The question that begged for an anthropological enquiry was how all these reconfigurations affected the dynamics of social relations in everyday university life.

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To explain to you how I went about answering this question, let us return to Porthania once again. Four years ago, I sat in the auditorium next door and observed an information session dedicated to the external review process of the changes the university went through between 2015 and 2017 (Scott 2017). This review process was, in fact, launched through an initiative from my very own custos and supervisor, who both as a university professor and an anthropologist felt there was a need for a forum that would, among other things, enable university staff members to process the traumatic developments they had collectively experienced. The general feelings, as I indicate at the beginning of my thesis, were those of distress. Even within the

banal framework of classificatory fellowship, the university as a community seemed to have been broken.

Yet, while all this social destruction was happening, I could also observe new forms of sociality being born out of the landscape's ruins. Following anthropologist Anna Tsing (2005; 2015; 2017), I have designated these as weeds. On a freezing March morning in 2015, a group of people, protesting the promotional spectacle that spearheaded the celebration of the university's 375th anniversary, gathered in the small square in front of the Porthania building to deliver their own homage to the old institution through a set of lectures displaying erudition. From that very same square, some two months later, I departed, marching with another protest group, this time to oppose the introduction of tuition fees to international students. Finally, four months later, members belonging to these as well as some other groups marched back into the Porthania building, which, on that occasion, ended up being historically occupied for eight full days.

All of this has only confirmed my conclusions about the effects of the contemporary reforms on university sociality, which started to emerge from my ethnographic fieldwork conducted among doctoral candidates. It was their social life that I set out to study in the first place. This was because, at the beginning of my research endeavour, I could not even imagine the dramatic developments that later ensued, but also because the transformation of doctoral education, being central to the global knowledge economy policies, preceded all of the other mentioned reforms at the University of Helsinki. As such, it was a good entry point for an ethnographic investigation, since the beginning of my fieldwork coincided with the launch of the new doctoral programmes and schools. In addition, the position of doctoral

candidates presented itself as particularly conducive to my study. Being both students and researchers, occasionally even teachers, doctoral candidates provide a vantage point from which to study university sociality as a whole.

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Six years ago, I sat in this very same lecture hall from which I am speaking to you today. On that particular occasion, I observed a panel session held for doctoral candidates in the humanities and social sciences and their supervisors. The topic at hand was finishing PhD studies within four years. Crucial to this, as I was able to conclude upon reflection, was a reconceptualisation of the PhD studies from a relational and transformative process into a segregated and standardised project, ready for enhancement. In particular, the temporality inherent in the project design, I would come to realise, helps accomplish the university managers' aim of turning doctorates into enhanceable collections of knowledge resources. Alongside the products of their work, prospective PhD holders were also to perceive themselves in this way, as I could deduce by observing numerous sessions arranged for doctoral candidates across the University of Helsinki. At the heart of the doctoral education reform, therefore, lies the common managerial preoccupation with the expansion of knowledge assets (cf. Gershon 2011).

Just as in the broader university landscape, the attempt to cancel pre-existing social relationships during the process of the doctoral education reconfiguration also created a commotion among university communities. Old forms of sociality among doctoral candidates, particularly those based on disciplines, have clearly been institutionally weakened. However, they have not been completely eradicated. Moreover, in certain places, I could even observe

their strengthening, which was a result of survival endeavours triggered by the disturbance. At the same time, novel social formations amongst doctoral candidates started to emerge out of the ruins created by the doctoral education reform. In the thesis, I follow these through mobilising efforts around the rising PhD Student Association, collectives of grant holders, and an organisation of international students at the University of Helsinki.

To make sense of these novel social formations, I primarily drew on reconceptualisations of sociality carried out by Vered Amit (2002a; 2002b; 2012). Unlike many other anthropologists in the past several decades, who primarily focused on the work of imagination in the process of community construction, Amit has also stressed the importance of practical efforts to mobilise social relations. That this entails engaging with joint commitments, a sense of belonging to a collectivity and a specific associational form is confirmed by my account of the PhD Student Association at the University of Helsinki.

Moreover, not all categorical identities result in communities, and many will, at best, amount to personal social networks within the new university landscape, as it turned out to be the case with the grant holders' collectives I was able to observe during the course of my fieldwork. This is because they tend to lack either communal or institutional ground to support their mobilisation. Rather, they are ego-based. As such, grant holders' collectives both within and outside the University of Helsinki are highly sensitive to changes in circumstances, and are very likely to collapse once those who set these collectives up withdraw from them, for one reason or the other.

Nonetheless, even established social groups are vulnerable within the new university landscape, as I have shown in the example of

the organisation of international students. This is another repercussion of dismissing sociality. Failing to provide steady institutional support for maintaining groups that are characterised by a transitory nature and categorical heterogeneity, as is the case with international students, makes their long-term survival highly improbable. This is because they simply cannot rely on a strong communal basis, unlike more enduring and homogeneous social entities.

The experiences of international staff and students in Finland, which I present through the voices of foreign doctoral candidates at the University of Helsinki, also affirm that the impulses towards collectivity lie both within exceptional and mundane discontinuities (cf. Amit 2015). Their everyday lives present one of the most powerful criticisms of the conceptualisation of people as mere economic agents, which lies at the heart of the global knowledge economy policy framework. Nonetheless, such experiences usually play a marginal role in the debates about contemporary university reform. It is high time, I argue, to change that.

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My research on contemporary university reform might seem unusual to some anthropologists, since it does not revolve around the lives of one particular group of people, but rather that of an institution. I have, however, conducted it in a highly typical ethnographic manner—that is, by following actual social relations. My thesis, in a way, goes through my PhD process in reverse. I began from discontinuities in the everyday lives of international doctoral candidates at the University of Helsinki. These triggered an instantiation of sociality with which I started engaging. That soon led me to expand my research focus on doctoral candidate mobilisation, which ended up being yet another

product of relational reconfiguration—that is, the establishment of new doctoral schools and programmes. Soon, I began observing similar dynamics, albeit in different forms, almost everywhere. The dramatic events that unexpectedly started unfolding before my eyes were not in this respect any different. It was this conclusion that also helped me realise that there was a crucial aspect of the contemporary university reforms that was mostly overlooked by other research, which was looking at the economic, political, or organisational sides of these changes: specifically that encompassed how it affected the sociality.

For an anthropologist and ethnographer, social relations are an obvious thing to study. Yet, the reforms that were being made did not appear to consider that sociality is pertinent to university life; quite the opposite as I have already argued. Likewise, the previous research provided only limited insights into the dynamics of social relations. A comprehensive understanding was only possible by carrying out extensive ethnographic research and seeing how multiple reforms at the University of Helsinki were playing out on the ground.

This thesis has provided a detailed ethnographic account of how university reforms that were designed with certain kinds of ideological, economic, and political visions in mind created enormous problems because of their blatant denial of sociality. What my thesis shows—because I took an ethnographic approach towards this study—is that the reforms ended up having such a disastrous effect precisely because they failed to recognise the importance of social relations in sustaining university life. This is a message I hope that at least the designers of future reforms will take from my work.

I also have a specific message to all those concerned with contemporary university developments. If anything, my thesis is a testament to the abundance of non-market social relations. This is the reason why we still have such a thing as a university. It is, of course, quite tempting to turn into a pessimist and see everywhere only a catastrophe. But, that would be wrong, in my opinion, for at least three reasons. First, we would fail to notice the continuous process of translations and conversions of non-market social relations into market transactions. Second, we would unfairly discard all of the remarkable instantiations of social mobilisation that make the ‘global knowledge economy’ ruins liveable. Finally, we would close down space for political mobilisation, because—to have any politics that can make a difference—university trajectories need to stay open (cf. Massey 2005).

SONJA TRIFULJESKO  
POSTDOCTORAL RESEARCHER  
CENTRE FOR CONSUMER SOCIETY  
RESEARCH  
UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI  
sonja.trifuljesko@helsinki.fi

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