

FORUM



Student-led demonstration, University of Wisconsin Milwaukee, February 4, 2015. Overpass Light Brigade, Joe Brusky photographer. Source: overpasslightbrigade.org/love-light-for-uw-fight-the-cuts/.

Anthropologists in/of the neoliberal academy

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2016 | ANUAC. VOL. 5, N° 1, GIUGNO 2016: 41-90.

ISSN: 2239-625X – DOI: 10.7340/anuac2239-625X-2437



Neoliberalisation and the “Death of the Public University”

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ABSTRACT: The advance of neoliberalism is often linked to what many authors describe as the “death of the public university”. Taking up this theme, we explore the idea of the “neoliberal university” as a model and its implications for academia. We argue that this model is having a transformative effect, not only the core values and distinctive purpose of the public university, but also on academic subjectivities of the professional ethos that has traditionally shaped academia.

In February 2016 the Delhi University sociologist Satish Deshpande published an article in the *Indian Express* entitled “Death of the Public University”. Deshpande argues that India’s once robust public university system – one of the few vehicles for social mobility in the country – is fast being destroyed. He cites three main reasons for this: first, the rise of an increasingly detached Indian elite «who can afford first world fees, and who no longer care about Indian institutions»; second, the encroachment of private players into the lucrative Indian higher education market; and third, the steady erosion of governance structures that has fuelled *ad hocism*, incoherence and a chronic lack of care in policy-making. Academic autonomy, he says, has now become a «shield for the arbitrary authoritarianism of pliant academic administrators eager to implement every whim of the regime in power». He concludes «The net effect of all this is that the public university is shrinking in stature; instead of the confident, open and liberal institution that it once was, it is becoming insecure, narrow-minded and conservative» (2016).

Deshpande was writing about India, yet his criticisms could equally be applied to England, Chile, Australia or New Zealand. These countries have also witnessed the opening up of higher education to private providers, the complicity of politicians in dismantling the structures of governance that previously guaranteed autonomy and academic freedom, and the domination of once self-governing institutions by a bloated administrative caste of senior managers for whom higher education is to be treated as a business, much like any other commercial enterprise. These developments are the cumulative outcome of a steady series of reforms, initiated during the 1980s by successive neoliberal-inspired governments, which have sought to make public universities more economic by rendering them more “responsive” to markets, commercial interests and private providers. Prompted by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and

Development (OECD) and other international agencies, many governments in the 1990s embraced the idea that the future of their countries lay in a “global knowledge economy”. To these ends they set about transforming higher education into the engine for producing the knowledge, skills and graduates to generate the intellectual property and innovative products that would make their countries more globally competitive. These reforms were premised on the idea of turning universities into autonomous and entrepreneurial “knowledge organizations” by promoting competition, opening them up to private investors, making educational services contribute to economic competitiveness, and enabling individuals to maximize their skills in global labour markets.

As Deshpande shows for India, however, these reforms are contradictory and often produce chaos and corruption rather than efficiency and effectiveness. They are also re-defining boundaries of the university as its core values and distinctive purpose rub up against those predatory market forces, or what Slaughter and Leslie (1997) termed “academic capitalism”. Recasting public universities as transnational business corporations introduces new risks and market disciplines. Universities now face growing pressure to produce “excellence”, deliver quality research and innovative teaching, improve their world rankings, forge business links, and attract elite, fee-paying students. Many are buckling under the strain and increasingly struggle to maintain their traditional mandate to be “inclusive”, foster social cohesion, improve social mobility, and challenges received wisdom – let alone improve their records on gender, diversity and equality.

To what extent can we explain these trends in terms of “neoliberalism” or the rise of the “neoliberal university model”? Neoliberalism is a problematic concept. Excessive use of the term as a portmanteau for explaining everything that is wrong with contemporary capitalist societies has rendered it an empty signifier devoid of analytical value. As a noun, it suggests something universal and ascribes uniformity and coherence to an assemblage of processes and practices that are far from uniform, consistent or coherent. Like Peck and Tickell (2002: 463), therefore, we prefer to use the term “neoliberalisation” as it highlights the multi-faceted and continually changing set of process associated with neoliberal reform agendas, which assume different forms in different countries. That said, these reforms usually bear close “family resemblances”, to paraphrase Wittgenstein. These include an emphasis on creating an institutional framework that promotes competition, entrepreneurship, commercialisation, profit making and “private good” research and the prevalence of a metanarrative about the importance of markets for promoting the virtues of freedom, choice and prosperity. In Australia, New Zealand and elsewhere this narrative has typically been framed as taking an “investment approach” to higher education, one that recasts public spending on education in the short term and instrumental language of “return on investment”. This philosophy is also epitomised in the withdrawal of government funding for the arts and humanities and corresponding emphasis now placed on promoting the supposedly more “economically relevant” fields of Sciences, Technology, Engineering and Medicine (the STEM

subjects). The name of the game is now about generating new income streams – through “export education”, forging partnerships with business, commercialising university IP, leasing or selling university infrastructure, and developing spin-out companies. These have now become normalised and naturalised features of academia. In the new university, what “counts” are those things that can be “counted”, quantified and translated as financial returns to the institution. As one Danish minister summed it up, the aim is speed up the translation of research from “idea to invoice”.

Few countries better illustrate this than Britain, whose Conservative government has gone further than most in its attempt to open universities up to the disciplines of the market and the predatory interests of private capital. Not only are students in universities in England and Wales now charged some of the highest tuition fees in the world (for which most are forced to take on massive levels of personal debt), but the universities themselves are increasingly run as if they are for-profit businesses, chasing market share and preoccupied with advancing up the league tables of world rankings – which have become not only proxies for quality and social capital but also the basis of their credit rating (Wright, Shore 2017). Academics joke (somewhat nervously) that Britain’s leading universities are at risk of becoming financial conglomerates with a sideline in providing educational services.

It would be hard to exaggerate the effect of all these processes on the culture of academia. Just as the mission of the public university is being transformed, so too are academic subjectivities and the nature of academic work. Academics are increasingly required to become more “entrepreneurial”. Indeed, their “performance” is now typically measured in terms of quantifiable output targets to which financial numbers as well as publications in star-rated journals are attached. One in six British universities have imposed targets quantifying the amount of external grant income each individual academic is expected to raise for their institution (Jump 2015). The casualization of the workforce is another visible manifestations of this transformation. In Britain, 54% of academics and 49% of all academic teaching staff are now on casualised and insecure contracts (UCU 2016). This is still far below the US, where even by 2005 over two thirds of all academic labour force were precarious (Kalleberg 2009: 9). This is a rising trend, and not just in Britain.

The British government’s White Paper (BIS 2016), *Success as a Knowledge Economy*, takes these trends even further promising a fundamental redrawing of the relationship between universities, the state, students and research. Its main proposal is to open up British higher education to greater competition from private, for-profit providers by making it easier for new entrants into the “higher education market” to acquire degree awarding powers (“DAPs”). The Minister of State for universities and science justifies this on the grounds that it will provide more choice, competition and flexibility for students as consumers.

There are several business models for extracting profit from publicly funded universities (Wright 2016). These proposals enable private providers to access taxpayer-funded student fees in a business model that has already proved enormously profitable. One private provider grew from 496 students in 2010 to 3,366 students in 2012 with a fee income from public-backed loans totaling £11 million in 2012–2013 – more than any other private provider and more than the London School of Economics (Morgan 2014). Others seek to keep the public university as a carapace that protects its favorable tax and charitable status, and within it develop a “special services vehicle” to run all its functions. Whereas a public university cannot distribute profits, private interests can invest in a “special services vehicle” and extract an unlimited fee.

Another model is to “unbundle” the university’s functions, competences and assets so that these can be re-bundled by external private providers. In other industries, this is usually termed “asset stripping”. As with the utilities, trains and roads, the vultures of private capital are hovering. If the bill is passed, we can expect to see a feeding frenzy as some universities go bankrupt, others are taken over by financial conglomerates, and a plethora of small fly-by-night providers seek to capture the rents provided by the government’s student loan guarantee scheme.

One of the main casualties of this process is the ethos that previously sustained the traditional public university. Collegiality and professional trust are fast being replaced by competition, surveillance and managerialism. These are defining features of what we have elsewhere termed the rise of “audit culture” in higher education. More importantly, neoliberalisation has produced an erosion of academic freedom and the substitution of the idea of higher education as a public good with the notion that a university degree is a private investment in one’s personal career. Unfortunately for those facing a future of debt with a shrinking job market, that “investment” looks increasingly unlikely to deliver the promised returns.

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