



Student demonstration against fees and cuts, Aberdeen. Credits: <http://anticuts.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Aberdeen-student-left-banner.jpg>

Anthropologists witnessing and reshaping the neoliberal academy

Edited by

Tracey HEATHERINGTON & Filippo M. ZERILLI

Contributions of

Virginia R. DOMINGUEZ, Sam BECK, Carl A. MAIDA, Martin A. MILLS, Berardino PALUMBO, Alan SMART, Ger DUIJZINGS, Alexis M. JORDAN & Shaheen M. CHRISTIE, Boone W. SHEAR, Alex KOENSLER & Cristina PAPA, THE RECLAIMING OUR UNIVERSITY MOVEMENT.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons © ALAN SMART

Profit, prestige and the liberal arts in the “neoliberal” academy: Observations from Canada

2017 | ANUAC. VOL. 6, N° 1, GIUGNO 2017: 59-62.

ISSN: 2239-625X – DOI: 10.7340/anuac2239-625X-2982



Profit, prestige and the liberal arts in the “neoliberal” academy

Observations from Canada

Alan SMART

University of Calgary

ABSTRACT: I argue that the Canadian academy, at least, is not neoliberal in the sense of acting as a profit-seeking corporation. Rather it serves the agenda of the corporate sector while operating under what is better seen as a symbolic economy of prestige and status.

In the first set of essays on the neoliberal academy, Cris Shore and Sue Wright stressed that in current academic conditions, «what “counts” are those things that can be “counted”, quantified and translated as financial returns to the institution» (2016: 48), while also noting that reforms are contradictory, producing chaos and corruption rather than efficiency. In my comments, I will suggest, at least in Canada where my professional experience has been concentrated, that these divergent observations can be partly reconciled by recognition that post-secondary institutions are being pressured to provide service to profit-making corporations but have not been operating as one would expect profit-oriented capitalist enterprises to. In particular, I want to stress that in the absence of generous research overhead payments, the STEM fields (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) are rarely profitable for Canadian universities, while many liberal art disciplines are profit centres but are systematically starved of resources. This is the result of senior administrators operating in an economy of prestige and fast policy (Peck 2002) rather than one that rewards profits.

In 2008, I wrote an entry, perhaps more of a rant than a scholarly essay, for the GlobalHigherEd blog (Smart 2008). Little appears to have changed since that time, so I will draw in part on my arguments there. The administration at the University of Calgary where I have taught for 28 years has adopted a strategic vision based on moving up the ranks of research intensive universities. The main benefits have gone to the STEM disciplines, particularly Medicine and Engineering. This could be seen as a sign of the corporatiza-

tion of the university. I would agree, but only in the sense that the university concentrates on things that the dominant business community would like to see done, not in the sense that the university is acting like a profit-seeking enterprise. James Turk (2016) provides a detailed account of a scandal around a Centre funded by the pipeline company Enbridge, which led to a Board of Governors inquiry into conflict of interest by University of Calgary President Elizabeth Cannon, who had been a Director at Enbridge.

At a university that acted like a corporation, rather than for a corporate agenda, we might expect to see investment in profit centres at the expense of other units, but it tends to operate the other way around. In 2008, the Faculty of Social Sciences, with the most students, had a budget basically equal to the tuitions paid by its students, even though Alberta policy is that tuitions should not be higher than 25% of the operating budget. Social Sciences (and the other core arts and sciences to a somewhat lesser extent) are a cash cow for Faculties that cannot cover their own costs. The situation has changed in 2017 only to the extent that Social Sciences has been merged with Humanities and Fine Arts in a much larger Faculty of Arts.

One could point to the substantial research funds brought in by Medicine in particular, but this has little positive effect on the university's financial situation since grant overhead payments are very low in Canada, unlike the United States. In any case, the usual pattern when a medical researcher has a breakthrough or receives a major grant is that they get offers from other institutions and turn to the administration to say that they couldn't justify staying without a new lab, additional colleagues, postdocs, graduate students, etc. This doesn't produce any real advantage to the administration's budget, unlike the large number of bums on seats in the arts and sciences faculties. Especially when those bums on seats are being taught by sessionals. A sessional being paid \$5,250 for a one-semester course with 400 students paying \$500 each for that course generates a profit of \$194,750, or a return on investment of 37 times. What profit-oriented business would turn down returns like that? Yet, because tuition goes to the central administration without any direct return to the department or faculty offering the course, such courses provide no benefit to the unit offering the course, despite intense student demand. The current response to budget problems in 2017 has focused on cutting sessional teaching (for cost saving reasons, not social justice ones, I must stress).

If this is a corporate model, it would seem a very dysfunctional example of one. But I think it is corporate only in the sense that it provides research and

training subsidies which are captured by private firms, and that it follows corporate administrative styles, but not corporate goals of achieving profits. Within the University of Calgary, and apparently in other Canadian universities at least, the pattern of distributing resources follows a different logic, one that I believe is based on status and prestige, not maximizing financial returns to the institution based on what can be counted. Presidents like to brag about their neurosciences or cancer treatment or energy research centres. Transferring resources into sexy high profile fields makes it easier for them to swagger when they get together with other Presidents or potential donors, and hopefully step up to a better job before their house of cards, looking impressive and lofty but without stable foundations that will allow them to withstand even a light adverse breeze, collapses around them. Or to use another analogy, their fiscal operations are like a bicycle, stable only while it continues to move forward.

The desire by University Presidents to invest in shiny research toys and programs is prompted in part by the utility of having such projects to showcase to potential corporate, governmental and private funders. But there also seems to be a growing frequency of national and international events at which university administrators get together to discuss new trends and priorities. This results in less “cutting edge” administrators returning with “new” ideas about “best practices” to try out on their institutions. Similar dynamics have been identified in urban and national governance institutions, leading to increasingly “fast” policy transfer (Clarke *et al.* 2015; Peck 2002; Peck, Theodore 2015)

I believe that it would be an insightful endeavour to examine the competition for prestigious programs, indicators, and research centres in terms of the ideas of economic anthropologists about status economies and conspicuous consumption. Ideas from scholars like Thorstein Veblen, Franz Boas, Bronislaw Malinowski, Marcel Mauss, Karl Polanyi, Pierre Bourdieu, and Georges Bataille might shed a rather different light on the contemporary governance of universities than do the neo-marxist and neoclassical economic perspectives that are usually deployed. Bracketing our usual assumptions about the formally rational character of capitalist institutions might allow anthropology to bring to light very different accounts of what is going on in the governance potlatches of our administrative leaders.

To my mind, the remarkable thing is that really being corporate and pursuing profits, rather than serving as a handmaiden to corporations or government agencies, would encourage the things that universities (at least those without massive endowments) should be doing, providing a well-

rounded education in the liberal arts and sciences, with a smaller set of appendages in the professions doing the far more expensive but “sexier” things. Instead of being seen as essential, the core of the University of Calgary is being gutted to support a host of showcase programs and projects much larger than the modest financial reality can support. How widely this destructive prestige economy and its white elephants and misallocated resources is found in other parts of the world, I cannot say, but it seems likely to me to be far too common.

REFERENCES

- Clarke, John, et al. 2015, *Making Policy Move: Towards a Politics of Translation and Assemblage*, University of Bristol, Policy Press.
- Peck, Jamie, 2002, Political economies of scale: Fast policy, interscalar relations, and neoliberal workfare, *Economic geography*, 78, 3: 331-360.
- Peck, Jamie, Nik Theodore, 2015, *Fast policy*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press.
- Shore, Cris, Susan Wright, 2016, Neoliberalisation and the “Death of the Public University”, *Anuac*, 5, 1: 46-50.
- Smart, Alan, 2008, The ripple effects of the global fossil fuel boom: a view from inside the University of Calgary, GlobalHigherEd blog, January 29, 2008, available at: <https://globalhighered.wordpress.com/2008/01/29/the-ripple-effects-of-the-global-fossil-fuel-boom-a-view-from-inside-the-university-of-calgary/> (accessed on 31/12/2016).
- Turk, James, 2016, University debased, Alberta Views, August 2016, available at <https://albertaviews.ab.ca/2016/08/22/university-debased/> (accessed on 31/12/2016).