

2017 | ANUAC. VOL. 6, N° 1, GIUGNO 2017: 47-52

FORUM



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.

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"A strange modernity": *On the contradictions of the neoliberal university*
2017 | ANUAC. VOL. 6, N° 1, GIUGNO 2017: 47-52.
ISSN: 2239-625X – DOI: 10.7340/anuac2239-625X-2980



“A strange modernity”

On the contradictions of the neoliberal university

Martin A. MILLS

University of Aberdeen

ABSTRACT: While many commentators see neoliberalism as a monolithic force changing universities into businesses, in reality its shared veneer of rhetorical vocabulary obscures profound and irresolvable practical contradictions – contradictions that make university life impossible, even in “business” terms.

In his short revisionist essay, “The Fourth World War has begun”, subcommandante Marcos, the anonymous but charismatic spokesman of the Zapatista liberation movement in Chiapas, contemplated the wars that have raged on earth over the last century: not between empires or nation-states or religions, which were mere ciphers, but between the impersonal engines of global finance and the very populations they were originally meant to serve. The First, Second and Third (Cold) World Wars were merely means to pull recalcitrant populations out of their traditionally autonomous domains, and into the shadow of global administrative finance. Globalisation, he argued, «is merely the totalitarian extension of the logic of the finance markets to all aspects of life. Where they were once in command of their economies, the nation states (and their governments) are commanded - or rather telecommanded - by the same basic logic of financial power, commercial free trade. And in addition, this logic has profited from a new permeability created by the development of telecommunications to appropriate all aspects of social activity» (Marcos 2001). Marcos’ observations on “war” are most unsettling because of the conceptual range he deploys to understand the term. Because war is violence, we often mistake it for the merely physical transformation of bodies, but in truth violence – as we understand it both legally, politically and socially – is in essence the forced transformation, not just of bodies, but of persons.

What we see in universities today is exactly that: a new battleground for the nature of who we truly are as scholars, academics and students, as the

logic of scholarship is transformed, apparently, into the remorseless logic of business. As we stand in our seminar rooms and lecture halls, the world seems to shift around us. When once academics and students were united, at least in principle, in the shared pursuit of scholarship and understanding, we are now divided from one another in the very quality of our personhood within a larger economic game. What were once students intent on learning and truth have become customers folded around the ambitions of hoop-jumping and career-building; while we ourselves have shifted subtly within our academic skins to become cost centres and service providers, similarly engaged in burgeoning games of administrative hoop jumping just to put food on the family table. Inasmuch as we go along with it (and thankfully, not all of us do), this game changes us in ourselves, and changes our relationship with what we hold most dear, and to which we once committed our lives. We try to resist, but in this new global war, it often seems that the odds are stacked against us.

However, as with physical conflict, the fog of war looms over the battlefield, and it is often far from clear what is actually happening, and who is on what side. Much of the academic literature that critiques “the neoliberal academy” assumes that what is at hand is a straightforward battle of wills between two distinct world-views: on the one side an ancient ideal of the university as a «space where speculative thought can be freely pursued without regard to its financial value» (Thomas 2011); while on the other is the neoliberal vision that universities «should provide education and research on the model of corporations delivering “goods” in a market» (Rustin 2016: 159). The test of who has “won” here is the degree to which universities have been turned into “businesses”. But is this really true, and if it is, why is it that those universities that have gone down this path seem so unsuccessful in business terms, so increasingly burdened with costs that they end up losing the very engine of their own productivity – their academics?

In my own experience, the economic dynamics at work in these changes are far more unclear, and the rhetoric of neoliberalism and ‘business’ hides considerable confusion, suggesting that it is something of a red herring. Of course, as many have commented, the capitalist logic of customer, service provider and product is something of a chimera. As I (and many others) have argued before (Mills 2007: 15), there is some disagreement over who is who in this increasingly destructive drama, as new capitalism is squeezed into the old world of academia.

In the UK, whilst the idea of the student as customer has increasingly dominated public discussion of tertiary education, my own experience of or-

ganisations such as the UK's Quality Assurance Agency was that policymakers regarded the taxpayer, business and indeed government itself as the primary customers when considering the distribution of national financial resources. This view rendered students not as customers, but as products for consumption by the external economic marketplace. To a large extent this is explicit within the logic of the 1997 Dearing Report on higher education, despite its headline message of students as customers (Dearing 1997).

The problem here is that these two visions do not cohere; indeed, in many respects they are contradictory. The student qua customer is looking, in return for their fees, for the requisite qualifications that will procure them a lucrative job on graduation, and may be prepared to go to considerable lengths (including complaints, litigation, and even plagiarism) to achieve that goal. At the same time, universities – lacking the legal or financial resources to hold off litigious students or police a growing pattern of plagiarism – are increasingly forced to compromise their academic standards in the face of such pressure. By contrast, the requirement – exemplified in the recent thinking, speeches and policies of both New Labour and Conservative governments – produce a workforce for the future knowledge economy that is characterised by excellence, critical thinking, innovation, transferable skills, research-led expertise (and so on), imply a year-on-year *increase* in standards at UK universities.

The tension between these countervailing flows of expectation is experienced most practically on the floor of university senate chambers or behind the closed door of the exam board. The resolution of the dialectic is duplicitous, but disturbingly simple: to treat students as customers when they apply, but as products when they leave. Thus, in the UK many universities place pressure on staff to recruit as many PhD students as possible (even when they are interested in projects outside a supervisor's academic expertise) in order to boost fees income, while at the other end of the spectrum trying to get those self-same students to submit their doctoral theses within the overall deadlines set by national funding bodies, with any over-run to do so being seen as a failure of supervision. Academics, in other words, are set up to fail, one way or another.

Such blatant contradictions bedevil modern university life at all levels, while attended by a rhetoric that presents such changes as “obvious”, “practical” and “realistic” in the face of obscurantist academic resistance and special pleading. Some years ago, I participated in a research investigators workshop, the opening morning of which was designed to introduce us to the “new economic context” of our research work. In the first speech, a noted

vice-principal of an ancient university explained about the straitened times we now live in, and how vital it was that we provided “value for money” in our research, by which he meant that we engage competitively in getting large research grants, preferably of the kind that included substantial overheads for our host institutions. We got the message. He was then followed by the head of a national funding body, who explained again what straitened times we now live in, and how vital it was that researchers provide “value for money” for their national economies, by which he meant that research projects should produce their results for as little as possible, because there wasn’t much research money to go around. In other words, while presented under the veil of identical rhetoric, the practical messages they were supplying contradicted one another completely, but both nodded enthusiastically as the other spoke. At the end of the morning, several of my colleagues expressed the view that the two speeches, which were clearly intended to motivate us, had actually caused them to seriously contemplate a different career.

But how do those academics amongst us, those that continue to believe in the fundamental value of what we do and wish to continue in our commitment to it, survive in such an increasingly erratic and no-win environment? When I wrote on this question back in 2000 (Mills 2000), I rather facetiously quoted Scott Adams (author of the Dilbert cartoons), when he noted that, when faced with such a dilemma, «the rational employee will divert all available resources away from accomplishing things and towards the more highly compensated process of lying about accomplishments» (Adams 1996: 269). To be honest, Adams remains bang on target. Caroline Humphrey observed similar tendencies when studying reindeer herding collectives in Siberia during the Soviet period: when asked to do two contradictory things at the same time, reality forces one to develop more and more elaborate narratives to cover up the inevitable and growing discrepancies (Humphrey 1983). In bureaucratic terms, this is called “reporting”, and involves the lengthy and time consuming process of manufacturing metrics, targets, financial statements and attendant narratives that fit with the appropriate rhetoric. When dealing with large collectives like universities, it involves a growing number of administrative personnel, and growing obfuscation of actual reality. As David Graeber has observed in his recent *Utopia of Rules*: «History reveals that political policies that favor “the market” have always meant even more people in offices to administer things» (Graeber 2015: 32).

The requirement to respond bureaucratically to governmental requirements to “promote quality” within universities clashes hard against the pos-

sibility of expanding those institutions financially. Precisely because such quality requirements are so expensive in terms of time and energy, they generate a burgeoning administrative segment, and internal reporting structures that use up increasing quantities of academics' time, often precisely at the mid-point of their careers, when they would otherwise be most productive in research terms and effective in teaching terms. University populations thus end up being dragged in two different directions, vastly increasing their internal workloads and costs. At the same time, the comparative size of university administrations is growing apace, precisely given over to plug the gap between growing expectations and reducing resources with a powerful flurry of carefully crafted words, numbers and flagship "initiatives" designed to mollify senior management teams, university courts, national REF panels, national student survey and international quality league tables, government ministers and ombudsmen and indeed potential 'banks of mum and dad', while simultaneously telling university staff how terrible things are.

Precisely in the name of accountability and transparency, in other words, looming walls of increasingly meaningless words are being built between depleting resources and "world-beating" rhetorics. It has become the new real, not only toppling universities over with the weight of their administrative workloads, but also generating divisive "rhetoric gaps" between those that must persuade and those that need to be persuaded. The result, therefore, is a veneer of rhetorical production that has become the central task of university existence, which serves to solve everything and nothing at the same time.

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