

CENTRE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION AND EQUITY RESEARCH

# Changing the Shape of Higher Education: Troubling Neoliberalism and Imagining Alternativity

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# The Affective Ecology of Deconstruction: 'Grievance Studies'?



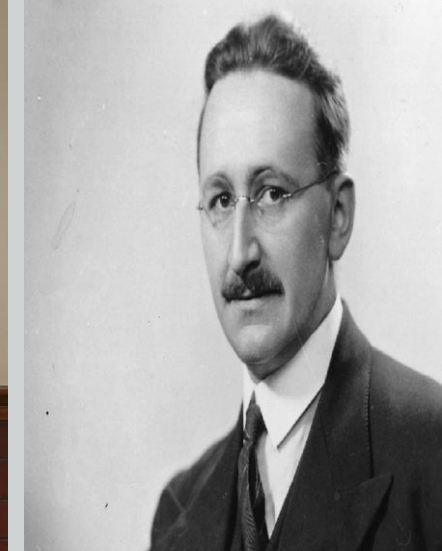
Naming the Problem, you become the Problem.

## How do we:

- Analyse the Political Economy of Neoliberalism without activating misery narratives?
- Acknowledge and celebrate resistance without relying on a compliance or critique binary?
- Imagine a post-neoliberal university?

# The Political Economy of Neoliberalism: Whose Imaginary?

- Linguistic Omnivore/  
Overdetermined/  
Anthropomorphised Category/  
Conceptual Aggregation?
- Late Capitalist Economy  
(Deregulation/ Markets)
- Globally Circulating Cluster of  
Policy Measures (Privatisation)
- Cultural Regime/ Governing  
Rationality that Privileges Price  
and Profit  
(Uberisation/ Unbundling/ Precarity/  
Disposability/ Gig Economy)



# Entangling and Installing Neoliberalism in Higher Education



## MATERIAL

- ✓ **Funding:** linked to policy narratives/priorities
- ✓ **Audit:** condensed quality indicators
- ✓ **Employment Regimes:** Performance pay/ tenure/ promotion = epistemic hierarchies

## DISCURSIVE

- ✓ **Truth-telling:** peer review/ impact/ appraisal/ search agencies/ esteem/ reputation
- ✓ **Closure** of the political universe/ TINA Effect
- ✓ **Performative** Repetition
- ✓ **Reputation** and Impression Management

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# The Affective Economy

- Drive for **Distinction/ Differentiation**
- **Crisis Discourse/ Disaster Capitalism/ Catastrophising**
- **FOMO** in Policy Formation
- Affective **Contagion/ Circulation**
- **Shame/ Guilt / Pride / Fear/ Desire/ Happiness**
- How do these **interact** with structures of inequality?
- **Trial** by public exposure
- **Success / Failure** narratives
- **Competition** erodes solidarity?
- Neoliberalism cultivates and optimises (and disparages) **differences**
- **Passionate Attachment/ Pleasure**
- **Rewards and Injuries.**

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# Provocations: Neoliberal Intellectual Culture is ...

- Making academic labour, activity and productivity intelligible via metrics and norms?
- Eroding counter-hegemonic knowledges?
- Reducing leadership to the amplification of dominant messaging systems?
- Creating and promoting ontological antagonisms?
- Re-evaluating value?
- In a market calculus, what is not measured? Gender Equality?



# (Lack of) Resistance?



*Neoliberalization is generally more termitelike than lionlike* (Brown 2015: 35/36)

- Capillary Power – everywhere and nowhere
- Governmentality - regulate ourselves
- Monetarising desires and makes us desire what is monetarised
- Sacrifice/ austerity/ regulation via finance
- *Illusio* = investing in the game involves performativities
- Assemblage of discursive, symbolic and material rewards for those servile to the priorities of the market.

# The Accelerated Academy

## Cognitive Triage

*The incapacitation of daydream or of any mode of absent-minded introspection that would otherwise occur in intervals of slow or vacant time*

**(Carrigan 2015)**



# Capitalism Masquerading as Democratisation/ Participation/ Consumer Rights?



Linguistic hijacking disguises class power: choice, diversity, freedom, excellence, inclusion.

## Universities

- Cultivating populist approaches to students/ research funders.
- Relying on customer satisfaction surveys/ evaluative data to promote services in competitive markets.
- Encouraging microentrepreneurs (who often lack employment rights).
- Providing digitally mediated, transnational services.
- Re-purposing participation and inclusion.

# Governing Through Unhappiness



*Heat Up The  
Floor To See  
Who Can Keep  
Hopping The  
Longest*

**(Davies 2014)**

# Resilience



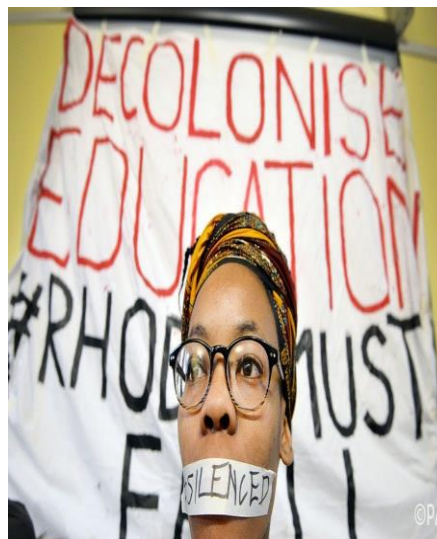
- Embracing danger/ precarity/ austerity as inevitable.
- Plasticity and Ontological Antagonisms: Contort rather than Challenge.
- Responsivity over Signification.
- Encouraging unhealthy practices – narcissism, self-promotion, boasting, attribution.
- Mental Health = technologies of self-management - mindfulness, positivity.
- Fragility and Vulnerability.
- Distractions from policy failures?

# Scholars at Risk: Suffering at a Distance?



- Globalisation = Global Obligations?
- The Criminalisation of Knowledge
- Anti-intellectualism/ Censorship/ Retaliation
- Erosion of Academic Freedom
- Exile and Displacement
- Calls for Democracy = Sedition
- Affective Overload/ Receptivity?

# Democratic Disruption and Denunciatory Analyses?



- Opposition/ Industrial Action to Neoliberal policies- privatisation, pension reform, student loans
- Alternative Sites of Higher Education: Occupy movements/ People's Universities
- Decolonisation
- # Me Too/ Time's Up!
- Ironic productivity of critical texts

(1000 academic articles between 2002-2005)

# Constituted by Discourse? Making Alternativity Imaginable: How Can We ....



- **Trouble** neoliberal realism
- **Expand** the horizons of possibility and purpose
- **Fashion** a new political imaginary
- **De-commodify** social and intellectual imaginations
- **Identify** new discursive formations / lexicons/ knowledge for imagining alternative higher education futures?



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