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Invited Paper

Technologies of Governance in Context: Four Global Windows Into Neoliberalism and Audit Culture in Higher Education

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Abstract

This partial special issue of *Qualitative Inquiry*, titled "Technologies of Governance in Context: Four Global Windows Into Neoliberalism and Audit Culture in Higher Education," examines various aspects of the academic impact of neoliberal technologies from four context-specific locations that include Australia, Mexico, the United Kingdom, and the United States, in addition to my own Canadian perspective in this introduction. It is based on a similarly themed plenary panel that was held in 2018 as part of the 14th Annual International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry at University of Illinois, Urbana–Champaign titled "The Politics, Places, Forms, and Effects of Accountability, Quality Assurance, and/or Excellence Frameworks in these Global Troubled Times."

Keywords

audit culture, higher education, neoliberalism, politics and culture, New Public Management

Critical university studies (CUS), as it has now widely come to be known, is the coalescing of various fields of study which in one way or another deal with

> reporting on and analyzing changes besetting higher education . . . [and taking a] . . . stand against some of those changes, notably those contributing to the "unmaking of the public university," in the words of the literary critic Christopher Newfield. (Williams, 2012)

In recent years, CUS has exploded as a field boasting at least three book series, including Berghahn Books (http://www.berghahnbooks.com/series/higher-education-in-critical-perspective), Johns Hopkins University Press (http://ihum.innovate.ucsb.edu/sites/secure.lsit.ucsb.edu.engl.d7_ih/files/sitefiles/CUS%20Announcement.pdf), and Springer: Palgrave-Mcmillan (https://www.springer.com/series/14707), in addition to numerous articles, special issues, conferences, and symposia. Key themes addressed under the CUS umbrella include corporatization, neoliberalism, New Public Management (NPM), audit culture, managerialism, labor rights and unionization, marketing, branding, rankings, student debt, precarity, and, perhaps more recently, decolonization, activism, and mobilization.

A Quick Review of a Few Pertinent Concepts

Neoliberalism

The term "neoliberalism" is employed to describe a wide variety of phenomena—diminishing its precision as well as its utility—but in its present usage, at neoliberalism's theoretical core is

> a rearticulation and reconfiguration of the eighteenth and nineteenth century liberalist argument that market exchange captures an essential and basic truth about human nature and the creation and maintenance of social order (Dean, 1999: 159; Harvey, 2005). As such, it should become the model for conducting and managing a host of activities that were previously deemed "outside of" or "above" the intrusion of the marketplace . . . . This new "greater good" was seen as being brought about not through cooperation and the governmental leveling mechanisms of the past but through the self-interested activities of actors each working independently and unknowingly . . . empowered consumers-citizens and taxpayers whose desires and self-interest would lead them to demand low costs, accountability and transparency from all of those who provided them with products and services, including the state. (Ward, 2012, pp. 2-3)

NPM

NPM is taken to generally consist of (a) the adoption of private sector management practices, (b) the introduction of market-style incentives and disincentives, (c) imposing a customer orientation coupled with consumer choice and

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branding, (d) devolving budget functions while maintaining tight control through auditing and oversight, (e) outsourcing labor with casual, temporary staff (Ward, 2012), (f) unbundling the public sector into units organized by product, and (g) emphasizing greater output performance measures and controls (Lapsley, 2009; Lorenz, 2012).

Audit Culture

Schwandt (2015) characterizes audit culture as being

> . . . closely associated with neoliberal theories of governance and the reform ideology of New Public Management (NPM). The general thrust of the reform is to improve the efficiency and performance of public sector organizations by making services more responsive to users or consumers, applying private-sector management techniques with a strong focus on benchmarking and measured performance, and creating a performance-oriented culture in the public sector. (p. 9)

Neoliberalism, NPM, and audit culture are mutually reinforcing, intertwined, and inextricably linked forces altering almost every aspect of our campuses, although the specific nature of these changes is dependent on governmental structures, traditions, and local contexts as this current partial special issue will help illuminate.

Pre-Neoliberal University

However, before any further discussion, there must be an acknowledgment that even if the clock could be dialed back to the pre-neoliberal university, it would still not be sufficient. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2018) reminds us,

> It is important not to romanticize the pre-neoliberal university as one that did not measure research performance or was disinterested in society and the economy. From an Indigenous perspective, the pre-neoliberal university and the current neoliberal university can both be viewed as part of an unbroken line of cultural imperialism that characterizes the academy. . . .The old liberal university actively excluded difference, carefully rationing the rare appearance of social diversity, including students from the working class, women, and anyone racially different. Elitism was a characteristic of the old liberal university, and the fostering of research and teaching programs, many based on eugenics, supported these elitist structures of privilege. (pp. 22-23)

Similarly, Chatterjee and Maira (2014) underscore that "Empires of knowledge rest on the foundation of racial statecraft, militarized science, and enduring notions of civilizational superiority . . . . [and] these processes must also be understood within the epistemologies of 'othering' being constructed by disciplines" (p. 14).

In keeping with Smith (2018), Chatterjee and Maira (2014), and others (e.g., Grande, 2018; Tuck, 2018), and too important a point to risk eliding, we must curtail and critique any naive illusions of the pre-neoliberal university being a "golden time" for all. A point raised mostly for the benefit of White men (like myself) in the academy who by virtue of their privilege might actually find *cough* it coming as a surprise. With naive illusions in check, this collection is most certainly a global call-out for scholars to continue to fight for the university in all its aspirational ideals—perhaps even jettisoning unsalvageable parts while reimagining others as we interrogate the neoliberal university and collectively respond to the dream and promise of a post-neoliberal university.

Critique to Action

Following the International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry (ICQI) panel in 2018, one of the panelist and contributor to this special issue, Coni, asked me an insightful and disturbing question: What has changed? We've been talking about neoliberalism for three years in a row at ICQI to no discernible effect. Coni's question opens up an important, and often, absent aspect of this conversation. If CUS is more popular than ever, why are we not experiencing a proportionate improvement?

Echoing Coni's question, and similarly noting the "virtual burgeoning of critique, but very little resistance," Bacevic (2017) offers the following penetrating analysis and caution:

> If critique is divorced from its capacity to incite political action, there is no reason why it cannot be appropriated—and, correspondingly, commodified—in the broader framework of neoliberal capitalism. It's already been pointed out that **critique sells**—and, perhaps less obviously, the critique of neoliberal academia does too. Even if the ever-expanding number of publications on the crisis of the university do not "sell" in the narrow sense of the term, they still contribute to the symbolic economy *via* accruing prestige (and citation counts!) for their authors. In other words: the critique of neoliberalism in academia can become part and parcel of the very processes it sets out to criticise. **There is nothing, *absolutely nothing*, in the content, act, or performance of critique itself that renders it *automatically* subversive or dangerous to "the system."** Sorry. (If you want to blame me for being a killjoy, note that Boltanski and Chiapello have noted a long time ago in "**The New Spirit of Capitalism**" that contemporary capitalism grew through the appropriation of the 1968 artistic critique). (Bacevic, 2017)

In the greatest of ironies, critique may actually serve to support the neoliberal university by keeping us busy, rewarding us, playing even to our rebellious posture, yet leading to little structural change. In another twist, from my Canadian vista, it is mainly our labor unions, rather than administrations and Boards of Governors, that are increasingly defending the aspirational ideals of the university. In

this spirit, the following pieces offer a vocabulary, context, and nuance to our collective awareness. Seasoned and novice scholars alike are invited to better understand how these technologies of governance, and the forces of colonialism, neoliberalism, New Public Management, and audit culture, work on us, shape us, as well as become us—both in the academy and in the larger polities in which we are nested. May each window help lead us from awareness and understanding to local and global action, only to then take us full circle to evaluate whether our collective resistances, actions, and radical hope have had the desired effects we seek in our context-specific locations. Here, I am reminded and comforted that resistance may take many forms and levels of perceptibility; the iceberg can be deceptive when considering the diversity of tactics people choose to deploy as they are afforded or constrained.

Reviewing the Current Partial Special Issue

Each paper that follows sheds light on how neoliberalism and audit culture operate as technologies of governance in a variety of contexts. It is our hope that these articles help us (a) understand and make sense of how these technologies of governance operate on us and through us, (b) how they morph and take shape according to context, and (c) lead us to better tactics and effective actions.

To begin, Bronwyn Davies, in "Life in the Neoliberal Institution: Australian Stories," examines her own silencing and the impact of these neoliberal technologies on Australian academics who, she explains, have naively colluded and helped maintain these neoliberal structures. As Davies highlights, audit technologies do not simply represent what is present, but rather shape what may be produced as they hollow the moral compass of the work of scholars. Scholars who resist are marginalized and/or positioned as "dead wood" under the guise of quality assurance and productivity. In so doing, any resistance is individualized and pathologized. More optimistically, her paper aims to dispel our sense of powerlessness, challenging us to mobilize our agency and reaffirm our collegial and collective practices as we strive toward a post-neoliberal academy. She concludes her paper by urging us to move beyond the "seemingly depressing picture of naive collusion and adaptations to neoliberal technologies" toward the development of new ways of thinking and new collegial and collective practices.

Next, amid a colonialist-capitalist-neoliberal hegemony, Maria "Coni" Consuelo Chapela Mendoza weaves together historical, national, collective, and personal threads that follow the trajectory and the marks neoliberal policies have imprinted on the Mexican and Latinoamerican public university. Interspersed with moving and deeply personal autoethnographic entries in "Double Blow to Scientific Research and Academic Freedom in Latinoamerica: Debt, Then Flames," she provides a creative, engaging, and disturbing journey that traces neoliberalism's spread and transformative effects on the Mexican academic tradition. One haunting entry explains, in part, the 5,000-point system per year to achieve a bonus pay threshold to make up for inadequate standard salary shortfalls. She explains,

> An article in a journal edited in my university, with national distribution, gives me 900 points. A paper in English, with international distribution may give me 2, 400 points. A term where I teach 20 hours a week is worth 700 points . . .

She dares us to peer through the window only to reveal how a hidden colonial, classist, and androcentric culture has merged with meritocracy, the arithmetic value of academic work, and the disintegration of university life.

Patti Lather in "Updata: Post-Neoliberalism" provides a concise update to her earlier engagement with post-neoliberalism (Lather, 2018). Taking place against the backdrop of resource exhaustion and climate change, Lather's update is located in the space where post-capitalism wrestles with the restoration of market hegemony. She examines the directions and possibilities of a post-neoliberal world, including the human–nature relationship. Hauntingly, she concludes, "Whether this goes in the direction of a deepened democracy or a post-capital neo-fascism is the great question before us."

In "The Research Excellence Framework (REF) in the UK: Processes, Consequences and Incentives to Engage," Harry Torrance walks us through the development and current operation of the United Kingdom's REF, one of the most long-standing and institutionalized national research evaluation systems in the world. Torrance provides an extensive overview of the workings, impact, and consequences of the REF for whole institutions, disciplines, departments, and individuals; these include the privileging of older, traditional research-intensive universities, devaluing the dull-but-worthy outputs of science (replication, negative results, not "world-leading"), the devaluing of books and book chapters, the concomitant extra-valuing of journal articles, and more. He notes that successive generations of scholars have now had to engage with the performance review and that successful inclusion in the REF has become an integral part of any academic career path. Based on his own experiences as a "manager" at two different institutions, Torrance breaks away from the commonplace Us versus Them frame to highlight how the REF can produce the possibility of new income and improved reputation for newer universities. He notes,

> It can be argued that one flawed system of resource distribution (the neoliberal REF) has simply replaced another (the "old boys' network") but there is no going back, and, with respect to narrow elites rewarding themselves, nor should there be.

Conclusion

This special issue is both an ominous warning and a roadmap of hope. Each article provides unique, yet complementary facets into colonialism, neoliberalism, NPM, and audit culture from four disparate higher education vantage points.

To foster the conditions for radical hope, I leave you, dear readers, with a resistance list based, in part, on previous work (Spooner, 2018) for you to augment, reject, adopt, adapt, take forward, and/or enact. It is my hope that it allows us to take our efforts beyond the audited confines of the academy, to assume the responsible long view, to face head-on our own domestication and query the purposes and consequences of knowledge production, consumption, and engagement from graduate school to post-tenure. This is a list that not only invites, but demands, your participation if we are to make the meaningful change so many of us seek and that our world requires.

Resistance. YES. But how?

1. To start, our resistance ought to be proportional to the academic privilege we enjoy.
2. As suggested by Shore and Wright (2000), we must reappropriate "key concepts such as 'quality', 'accountability', and 'professionalism' so that they reflect our meanings rather than those of accountants and managers" (p. 80).
3. It is past time to expose the nature and coercive effects of audit culture and the manner in which it increasingly shapes and governs our selves, academies, and societies.
4. Indeed, we ought to permit ourselves to view our own and our colleagues' scholarly productivity from a broad and long-term perspective that spans an entire career.
5. It is incumbent upon us to resist disassembly, facile reductions, or "benchmarking" by adopting the practice of supplying our own narrative responses as often as possible.
6. It is worth bearing in mind that effective resistance often necessitates collective action, not the individual responses we have been conditioned to believe through neoliberalism's systematic assault on the commons of every sort, including our will to seek solidarity, affinity groups, and collective support and strength—including labor unions
7. Highlight that this list is not exhaustive.
8. Refrain from romanticizing the pre-neoliberal university to better perceive rot from root.
9. Whichever acts of resistance that are ultimately enacted—allowing for context, privilege, and desired effect—reclaiming the academy as a public good and a welcoming, plural space for critical and creative scholarship must be paramount as we collectively expose and discredit audit culture's suffocating and dehumanizing practices both in the academy and in society.

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Marc Spooner specializes in qualitative research at the intersections of theory and action-on-the-ground. His interests include: learning/trying to decolonize, audit culture and the effects of neoliberalization and corporatization on higher education, as well as social justice, activism, and participatory democracy. He tweets at @drmarcspooner.