



Strange Bedfellows: Austerity and Social Justice at the Neoliberal University

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Abstract

This article examines some aspects of the operation of universities under neoliberalism in Canada and the USA. It begins with a short overview of neoliberalism's impact on higher education, subsequently turning to a discussion of some of the defining characteristics of the twenty-first century neoliberal university. Particular attention is paid to an ethos of corporate managerialism amongst university administrators and how that is manifested in the intersecting strategies of privatisation, monetisation, resource reallocation and the subtle regulation of faculty. Following an exploration of some claims-making about the instrumentalism of higher education, the article highlights the shifting narratives that emanate from universities' communications and strategic planning offices. Paying particular attention to contemporary universities' peculiar brand of progressive neoliberalism, the article concludes with an analysis of the appropriation of social justice in service of undergraduate recruitment.

*Your total ignorance of that which you profess to teach merits the death penalty. I doubt whether you would know that Saint Cassian of Imola was stabbed to death by his students with their styli. His death, a martyr's honourable one, made him a patron saint of teachers.*¹

*Pray to him, you deluded fool, you "anyone for tennis" golf-playing, cocktail-quaffing pseudo-pedant, for you do indeed need a heavenly patron. Although your days are numbered, you will not die as a martyr—for you further no holy cause—but as the total ass which you really are.*²

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² John Kennedy Toole, *A Confederacy of Dunces*. p. 140.

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Introduction

Living as we do under neoliberalism and the extant pandemic lockdown, life at the university has become increasingly difficult and, in fact, borderline intolerable for many of us. To be certain, the work lives of the tenured professoriate are still much better than those of the vast majority of the working population who toil away with considerably less in the way of job security and remuneration. Although this is a truism, it is, in and of itself, an indictment. It is also closely related to the same flawed logic that suggests that incarcerated people who receive three square meals a day and have access to the penitentiary's infirmary live better lives than do the honest poor outside the walls. As critical criminologists, we know that this is not only spurious, but frequently leads to a highly problematic call—not to improve the living conditions of the working poor on the outside—but rather to inflict more suffering upon those on the inside. This is part of a prevalent “race to the bottom” logic that predates both neoliberalism and the pandemic lockdown, but like much of global capitalism's savagery, has been accelerated by them. But I digress. This is not meant to be yet another boo-hoo-poor-professors essay of the sort that periodically appear in our scholarly journals, professional associations' newsletters and other publications designed for the erudite and urbane. Whilst I am tempted to write one of those, the truth is that nobody outside the professoriate cares; nobody—not our students, who have their own set of worries and challenges, chief among them their future laden with crippling debt and precarious work—and certainly not the administrators that run our institutions or their minions in middle management who daily carry out their dirty work.

Fully cognisant of the fact that professors are so far down the list of neoliberalism's victims that we barely warrant mention (outside our own incestuous little circles) this essay seeks to highlight some of the strategies by which the everyday practices of neoliberal hegemony within the university setting are transmuting in an effort to further obfuscate its larger ideological mission. Again, rather than an exercise in collective self-pity, this paper is more so an investigation into the serpentine resilience of neoliberalism within the university setting: a space that, at least on the surface, should offer a great deal of resistance, and how those malignant transformations both reflect extant conditions and harbinger future developments outside academia's hallowed halls.

Universitas Austeritas: Instituit Circa MCMLXXXIV³

A university is a special and unique institution quite different from others. It has a distinct historical legacy of being an independent knowledge production and dissemination centre that ideally operates outside some of the vagaries of the wider society. It is increasingly evident that this hallowed distinction is not sustainable in a neoliberal context (Colaguori 2012). Neoliberalism's assault on higher education is not a new phenomenon but rather an ongoing process that began some four decades ago. Today, the near complete colonisation

³ Admittedly somewhat arbitrary, 1984 was chosen as the “founding date” because it marked the election of Canada's Progressive Conservatives in a majority government, and party leader Brian Mulroney as Canada's Prime Minister. Mulroney's government ushered in a host of neoliberal policies including privatising more than a third of Canada's Crown Corporations including those in vital infrastructure, natural resources, and medical research industries. Mulroney's election is often characterised as one of the series of significant conservative political victories of the time alongside Margaret Thatcher's in 1979 and Ronald Reagan's in 1980.

of once sacred scholarly spaces is daily evidenced to those of us in the ranks of the professoriate. From the corporate branding of lecture series and endowed chairs through advertising blitzes and real-life product placement on campus, global capitalism's tentacles are everywhere. University presidents are increasingly recruited from the corporate world and universities' governing boards are likewise frequently dominated by private sector representatives without a background in higher-education. For example, according to recent data from Canada's top fifteen research universities, almost half (49.1%) of their board members are attorneys, finance professionals, insurance executives and other players in the business world (CAUT 2016). In addition to this strong presence of leaders from the world of private enterprise, we can also count board members who are the universities' own top academic administrators, and at least some representatives from the public sector who, regardless of their specific occupation or background, support and encourage a corporatised ethos. As such, it is little wonder that the voices of frontline university faculty are faint, if not entirely muted, in board of governors' decision making.

One must consider the impact that this corporatisation of university governance has on the vision, values and priorities of the institutions. The evidence from two decades worth of studies clearly demonstrates that universities are increasingly adopting business or corporate management models and their concomitant values and practices (Brownlee 2015; Frabricant and Brier 2016; Giroux 2002; Gould 2003; Rhoades et al. 2019; Shumway 2017; Spooner 2021; Tuchman 2011). More than a decade ago two higher-education professors, Sheila Slaughter and Gary Rhoades (2010), first wrote of what they term "academic capitalism". Tracking the changes in universities' policies and procedures over a number of years, they describe the emergence of an odd blend of entrepreneurialism, top-down managerialism, and audit culture coming to dominate the daily existence of faculty and staff. They enumerate several fundamental changes in the priorities and practices of universities in the post-industrial economy: the privatisation of the public sphere, shifting resources and support from traditional liberal studies disciplines to disciplines more closely linked to corporate markets, and the managerial control of professors and researchers (Slaughter and Rhoades 2010).

Privatizing the Public

One of the most frequent strategies in aid of privatisation employed under neoliberalism is the euphemistically entitled public-private partnership (P³). This early corporate sortie into the takeover and eventual erosion of public services is profoundly manifested at the neoliberal university in a variety of ways, most frequently through the outsourcing of university services, and increasingly so in infrastructure development. For much of their relatively short history P³s have been slickly marketed to faculty, staff and students (as well as their parents) as a clear "win-win" with not too subtle, though completely empirically unsubstantiated, hints that the university is the *real* winner having taken advantage of the generosity of the philanthropic corporate entity. In other instances, such as during the global economic convulsion of 2008 or the current COVID-19 pandemic, university administrators are loosed to unapologetically push through P³s as necessary evils in allegedly tight fiscal times. In these latter instances P³s are rhetorically and highly ambiguously framed as the only solution to the university's dire financial situation; a wedge against insolvency. Faculty and other frontline staff are told that they should be grateful for the corporate lifeline and that any downsides (e.g. redundancies, downloaded tasks, the diminished quality

of service, the use of substandard materials, dangerous working conditions, etc.), if they are acknowledged at all, will be addressed and most certainly remedied at a later date; an imaginary point in the future when the *crisis* is over.

Driven by the neoliberal myth that the private sector is inherently more efficient and cost effective in its delivery of goods and services than the public sector, universities are outsourcing a range of traditional activities to corporations. Whilst some of these endeavours, such as campus dining services, catering and bookstores have been in place for a couple of decades, others such as student housing and infrastructure maintenance are more recent additions. One of the most recent ventures includes private corporations managing online programmes and influencing course content and delivery under the auspices of brokered courses. The past few years, in what Blumenstyk (2019) refers to as “embedded for profits”, have seen the expansion of corporate intrusion in the form of student counselling, in-service training, and predictive-analytics systems. The capitulation of universities’ Information Systems (IS) and/or Information Technology (IT) departments with global tech giants in the name of securitisation is of particular concern. The outsourcing of these services not only bypasses in-house professionals, but also means that faculty, staff and students’ abilities to access information and communicate electronically as part of their work lives now lies in the hands of private corporations answerable to shareholders—not traditional university stakeholders.

Likewise, as university enrolment numbers swelled in the twenty-first century, many universities, particularly those located in large metropolitan centres found themselves pressed for physical space. Whilst this is not wholly a neoliberal problem, its evermore common solution is unapologetically neoliberal; “innovative mixed-use buildings”. Orchestrated by university offices with names that seem to be inspired by the departments in some multinational law firm, like Land Acquisitions, Real Estate and Capital Development, this solution to space problems often means that the university leases space in existing corporate office locations or builds new spaces in conjunction with a corporate partner or partners. This arrangement usually results in university offices and classrooms interspersed with retail outlets, chain restaurants, dollar stores and other vulgar icons of hyper consumption. For example, one of Canada’s top business programmes (itself named after the nation’s largest telecommunications oligopoly) is housed in a futuristic-looking edifice of glass and steel that was built at a cost of over \$75 million. It abuts North America’s busiest shopping mall and houses on its first two floors an American multinational consumer electronics retailer and a Canadian retailer specialising in hardware, automotive, and sporting goods. Other examples include a university holding some of its daytime classes in mega-plex movie cinemas in exchange for air rights to build over its property, and another in which a university’s student sports and recreation facility is housed above the flagship store of a grocery chain that in 2017 admitted to bread price-fixing for the previous fourteen years (Strauss 2018).

Unfortunately, much of that which was undertaken by the university in the name of cost savings ends up being more costly in the long run. In many cases, the financial hit is palpable as (traditionally) secure, well-paying university jobs are lost, and long-term costs increase. As Wekullo (2017) illustrates, because of the profit factors intrinsic within private enterprise, outsourcing becomes expensive for the universities, who then pass on these increasing costs. This socialisation of risk is acutely experienced by students and faculty. Undergraduate students bear the brunt, with each subsequent cohort paying higher tuition and ancillary fees, whilst graduate students pay in terms of reduced bursaries and fewer opportunities for paid employment as tutorial leaders, research assistants and other positions that are vital both in terms of offsetting the cost of their education as well as

providing valuable on-the-job training. Likewise, faculty lose the help of graduate assistants and are further penalized as internal funding opportunities disappear along with monies for replacement hires or new lines. And in what has become an all too common occurrence during the pandemic, deficit-mongering administrators have imposed salary freezes, salary rollbacks and in the most extreme cases, furloughed or laid off tenured professors. In addition to the calculable financial hit of higher prices, lost wages and salaries, there is also the spectre of perennially swelling caps on class size and serious, though considerably less quantifiable, costs such as the increasingly superficial interaction between professors and their undergraduates and lost opportunities for the professional socialisation and mentoring of graduate students.

Austerity's utilitarian logic is exactly the kind of thinking behind the general pushes and pulls of neoliberalism in which the distinction between public and private institutions have become merged as one, the market-driven ideology supersedes the ethos and values of academia, and where corporate interests are part and parcel of a university (Giroux 2014; Kotsko 2018). Yet the outsourcing to private for-profit corporations is only the tip of the iceberg that is neoliberalism's impact on higher education.

Rob from the Poor to Give to the Rich

Like the major private sector conglomerates that they are beginning to resemble, universities are engaging in cost-benefit analyses, not only of their day-to-day operations such as groundskeeping, facilities maintenance, and similar infrastructure work, but of their curricular offerings, research centres and academic programmes. Held up to the profit standard, universities calibrate supply to demand dictating what "forms of knowledge, pedagogy, and research will be rewarded and legitimated" (Giroux 2002: 110).

Well established by authorities in the United Kingdom, performance-based funding schemes for universities are now being taken up in earnest by their counterparts in the USA, and more recently by those in the Canadian provinces of Alberta and Ontario. In some instances, the financial incentives that come with a particular university's improvement on key metrics not only include new government funding, but an amount of the base government funding reallocated. These misguided and often poorly developed pieces of legislation mean that programmes and curricula are being tailored to suit the needs of corporate interests and marketplace demands. Under the auspices of producing employable, job-ready graduates, these thinly veiled funding cuts hyper-emphasise credentialism and risk turning universities away from the aspirational ideal of providing a well-rounded critical education into little more than proto-industry training camps. In the USA, this translates into varying degrees of pressure on all but the truly elite and well-endowed universities to promote technical and professional disciplines such as business, computer science and engineering that promise to yield jobs immediately after graduation at the expense of others (Howland 2019). Under this framework, instead of cultivating students' intellectual curiosity, communication and problem-solving skills so they can engage actively and meaningfully in civic life, the university risks producing graduates who are little more than malleable cogs in service of neoliberal capitalism.

In their celebration of more evidence-based knowledge on which to inform best practices and reward "success", performance-based funding's running dogs at the university fail to acknowledge that forms of knowledge, pedagogy and research that are not easily co-opted to serve corporate interests, or perhaps openly challenge the hegemony of the global

capitalist project, are simultaneously punished and delegitimized as resources and funds are diverted away from them. Predictably, the costs of what Slaughter and Rhoades (2010) refer to as “Robin Hood in reverse” are borne overwhelmingly by disciplines in the humanities and social sciences such as English, History, Philosophy and Sociology. Others, such as Economics and Geography, perhaps somewhat more susceptible to neoliberalism’s subtle advances, whilst certainly not thriving under this framework, face slightly fewer cuts.

Given the heightened precarity of university funding in the neoliberal era criminology too continues its long, complicated dance with the state and capital. It is true that the discipline as a whole is broader now than it was even at the turn of the century, but the generally conservative or, perhaps more correctly, *administrative* orientation still remains central. There are more courses that address state crime, racism, globalisation and other social harms than there were a generation ago, and some universities’ criminology departments have even taken the radical step of adding “and Social Justice” to their names, but in practice very little has changed. With relatively few exceptions criminology departments continue on as the home to a disproportionate number of students aspiring to (re) produce carceral violence upon graduation and professors whose scholarship can, at best, be characterised as liberal left-leaning policy analysis. In fact, as neoliberal sensibilities, new state funding formulas, student success measures and the sanctity of metrics become more entrenched in higher education there has been a reversal of some of the progress won by critical criminologists and their co-conspirators. The pressure to vocationalise programmes, coming from both outside the university as well as within it, has overturned some of the small gains we made and marked a reinvigoration of the core police-courts-corrections focus, though it is now sometimes adorned in the trappings of decolonising knowledge and related liberal left populist tropes. In short, our discipline continues to, as Quinney (1970) long ago charged, serve a system that is as obsolete as it is oppressive.

Managerial Control of Expertise

The control, regulation and, some would suggest, the micromanagement of faculty is yet another example of the corporatisation of the university. It is a process which disenfranchises faculty and, contrary to the official corporatized rhetoric of “serving” students, may actually be more detrimental to their intellectual and political growth. As Giroux (2014) poignantly illustrates, these management models are characterised by administrative bloat, students who are conceived as “customers” and “consumers,” and faculty who are defined less through their scholarship than through their grantsmanship. In addition to the increased importance placed on faculty members to underwrite the university’s operating costs by securing external funding is the pressure, admittedly more acute in some disciplines than others, to develop and then market their research skills and outputs as consumer goods to government agencies, NGOs and the private sector under the auspices of community engagement. And as in the case of student retention, graduation rates and related “success” measures, universities employ sophisticated metrics to assess research productivity.

Under neoliberalism’s austerity the work lives of faculty become more burdensome and they are expected to do more with less. In addition to dealing with larger classes and having more office contact time with students, professors are expected to make themselves available day and night as experts to the news media, consult with outside agencies and industry, promote themselves (and by extension their universities) on social media, and act as recruiters at university fairs and on open days.

A large study of academics in the United Kingdom paints a dire picture for university faculty (and by extension our students and the wider society) as neoliberalism further consumes higher-education. The report, based on a survey of almost six thousand professors, was organised under major themes such as; “The dominance and brutality of metrics”; “Excessive workload”; “Perpetual change”; “Vanity projects”; “The silenced academic”; and; “Work and mental health” (Erickson et al. 2020).

It is disturbingly evident that the tightly controlled, yet highly unstable, conditions of the neoliberal university are exemplified by an erosion of the honourable ideals of post-secondary education. Faculty members are meant to be the heart of the university. In addition to creating knowledge, professors are charged to nurture students’ intellectual curiosity and provide them with analytic skills that are the prerequisites of a lifetime of post-baccalaureate learning. And, given that the stakes are so high, as critical criminologists we bear a particular responsibility to teach students how to distinguish empirical evidence from vociferous insistence. Our work environment is meant to be conducive to these important duties. Tenure, academic freedom and a role for ordinary faculty members to play in the operation of their institution through democratic governance structures are all vital in continuing the noble mission of the university. The neoliberal university is the antithesis of these ideals and practices. The widespread economic uncertainty that sustains right wing populism combined with a more general erosion of the public sphere has resulted in the winnowing away of academic freedom and tenure, bloated university administrations that maintain only the façade of shared governance, and evermore crass forms of corporate brandalism.

The remaining sections of this paper will be devoted to an exploration of the neoliberal universities’ appropriation and commodification of liberal left populism in an attempt to advance their collective relevance as well as their individual market share.

Skeptical Shoppers and False Advertising

Romanticised images of the medieval *universitates scholarium* aside, for much of the second half of the twentieth century a university education was widely understood as a way by which people could better themselves. In addition to the somewhat intangible benefits of erudition came the measurable vocational and economic benefits of an interesting, well-paying job upon graduation; the key to a comfortable middle-class existence. The promise of a better life through education both drew upon and fuelled an instrumentalist orientation among parents and students, culminating with swelling university enrolments in the final decades of the twentieth century. In today’s Global North a university degree is no longer conceived of as one of several routes to economic prosperity, but rather almost as a necessity for economic survival. With scarce opportunities for apprenticeships in skilled trades and the virtual disappearance of unionised work and indeed, even stable, living-wage jobs, a university education seems to many young people, particularly those in Canada and the USA, as the only potential palliative against a future in retail sales or food service.

For decades, universities have traded on the notion that a degree is the key to a good career. The promise of a fulfilling and, more importantly, a well-paying job has always been an exaggerated, if not an outright spurious one. Instead of focusing on telling some hard truths about a number of the intangibles alluded to in the previous section such as critical thinking skills, class consciousness, political participation and civic engagement the majority of universities (aside from a few of the most prestigious American liberal arts colleges whose names and pedigrees are all the branding they need) choose to tout half-truths

about tangible ones like the impressively high percentage of their students who found a job within three months (or six months or a year) of graduation.

Admittedly, the transition from school to full-time employment has been more seamless for some graduates, particularly those from professional programmes and applied sciences, than those in the humanities and social sciences. Graduates from nursing and aerospace engineering programmes have always had an easier time securing fulltime work in their chosen fields than their counterparts with BAs in Art History and Sociology; however, this is not to say that social sciences and humanities graduates have not secured permanent, full time employment, but it has often been in areas sometimes only tangentially related to their disciplines (Coates and Morrison 2013). In Canada and the USA, NAFTA-accelerated deindustrialisation in the 1990s, the more drastic restructuring and eventual disappearance of work in the twenty-first century, and the neoliberalisation of the university have further disrupted the already tenuous connections between a university degree and a meaningful living wage job. The warning signs—like Petrochemical Engineering graduates freelancing promotional copy for green-initiative start-up companies because of changes in the oil and gas industry and Bachelor of Education programmes churning out literally tens of thousands of graduates without teaching positions to fill due to a combination of national demographic shifts and government cuts to primary and secondary school funding—were evident to anyone who took even a cursory glance, but few did. Ironically, more students than ever are enrolling in university at the same time as their post-graduation employment prospects are plummeting (CBC 2013; Coates 2013).

Austerity, though a relatively recent (circa 2008) addition to the general public's lexicon, is not a new practice in higher education. For several decades neoliberal governments have reduced funding to universities. In the early 1990s the Corporate Higher Education Forum began advocating for government funding cutbacks to make universities more responsive to private interests (Brownlee 2015). The results were almost immediate. In Canada, where all universities (except for a relatively small number of chartered or religious schools) are publicly funded, tuition fees on average doubled and for some programmes nearly tripled between 1993 and 1999 (Lang 2005). Funding cuts continued into the new millennium seeing federal transfer money spent per student at Canadian universities decline by almost half between 1995 and 2005 (Brownlee 2015). The trend, barely two generations old, is frightening: in 1982 government funding of Canadian universities comprised 82.7% of university operating revenues, by 2012 that had dropped to 54.9%. By 2019 in Ontario, the most populous province and home to eighteen of Canada's top fifty research universities, government funding had shrunk to only 24% (Smith-Carrier 2020). In the USA, publicly funded schools have similarly suffered. Cuts were severe in the wake of the 2008 recession and although the economy recovered in the intervening decade, government funding for postsecondary education has not experienced a resurgence. In fact, when adjusted for inflation, state funding is significantly lower than it was a decade ago. According to data from the Centre on Budget and Policy Priorities government funding for public two- and four-year colleges in 2018 was more than \$7 billion less than it was in 2008 (Mitchell et al. 2018). In their report, aptly entitled "Unkept Promises", Mitchell and his colleagues demonstrate that beginning in the late 1990s the price of attending a four-year public university has grown significantly faster than the median income and whilst there have been some increases in federal student aid, they have fallen short of covering the increases in tuition and other university expenses (ibid 2018).

Neoliberal governments' divestment in higher education has resulted in skyrocketing tuition fees, and managerialist incursions have undermined the quality of the educational experience. In the eyes of consumption-oriented prospective students and their parents, the

result, indisputably exacerbated by the pandemic lockdown's mandated move to online/hybridized teaching, is an increasingly inferior product at an unjustifiably high price. What the schools have known for some time but has not yet quite crystallized in the minds of the skeptical parents university shopping with their cynical children on open days, is that it is not the degrees offered by universities, but the vicissitudes of global capital that determine the availability of jobs. Even more disconcerting is that the trend on which any given university's strategic planners are at this very moment scheming to capitalize could likely already be dematerializing as a result of national or international developments.

Market Share

Whether it is a genuine financial solvency crisis (rare, though sadly not unprecedented) or the more common Friedman-esque *crisis* promulgated by administrators spinning tales about scarcity, it is clear that the pandemic lockdown has served to highlight some of the real differences between the top universities and all the others. For example, in the USA, applications for Fall 2021 admissions to programmes that tend to produce graduates who enjoy lucrative careers, such as medical schools, law schools and MBA programmes have increased across the board. Whilst a desire to help prevent a future COVID-19-like tragedy may have motivated some young people to consider medicine and hence pushed up medical schools' numbers, the same cannot be said about the jump in applications to business and law programmes. In the area of general undergraduate admissions, large, prestigious universities and highly selective liberal arts colleges have likewise enjoyed increases in applications for Fall 2021, whilst those at other schools have tumbled, sometimes precipitously. Duke, Emory, Michigan, Pennsylvania and Yale all saw increases in applications to their early decision programmes but regional schools, smaller state schools and less selective four-year colleges experienced drops, in some instances double digit drops, necessitating multiple application deadline extensions at some schools (Watanabe and Agrawal 2020).

Though quite telling, the problems experienced in varying degrees by all but the most prestigious programmes at the most elite educational institutions are not new, nor are they exclusively or even primarily a result of the pandemic lockdown or the 2008 global recession. The pandemic, recessions, or other seismic events like Brexit and the US Presidential Election that anarcho-capitalist economists selectively point to have, at most, accentuated the waning value attached to a liberal arts undergraduate degree. For years universities have sought to re-establish their relevance in the face of the harsh reality that spending four years and tens, perhaps hundreds, of thousands of dollars on a degree is not a guarantee that students will find meaningful, secure, living wage employment upon graduation. Obviously, it is the vagaries of global capital, not universities that control the job market. Universities, however, control the stories that they tell about themselves. Claims-making by the universities is in some respects as old as the modern university itself, but it took on a new and heightened form in the 1990s with the emergence of institutional websites and corporate-inspired marketing strategies in which the news media was enlisted as an advertising venue through the use of carefully crafted "news releases" originating in university communications offices. No longer restricted to producing print catalogues and brochures to be mailed to secondary schools' guidance offices or other universities' libraries, universities began disseminating stories about themselves to anyone with internet access. As such, stakes became quite high as the images and narratives were increasingly open to wide

public view and scrutiny. A noisy marketplace glutted with inferior parity products was the result as marketing campaigns ranging from the slick and sophisticated to the fumbling and obnoxious made dubious claims about being the “best college buy” in some category or another. *Maclean’s* magazine, *US News and World Report* and a host of other publications and websites promote a consumerist ethos by ranking institutions with a host of suspect measures such as endowment size, student-faculty ratios, the percentage of international students and “student satisfaction” all whilst claiming to provide trusted performance data for, among others, students, their families and industry.

Social Justice U

Predictably, the neoliberal university’s tactless embrace of corporate values has manifested itself in a number of distasteful ways, not the least of which is cloaking itself in the guise of social justice whilst engaging in all manner of harm in the pursuit of profit. In their work on the commodification and illusion of resistance, Collins and Rothe (2020) borrow from Baudrillard’s work on consumer society to demonstrate that capitalism is fuelled by its very critique. This, they note, is evident both in contemporary corporate advertising campaigns as well as in the very social movements from which they draw their taglines and images. Though Baudrillard’s original work in this arena predates the true ascendancy of neoliberalism in the 1990s it provides a useful conceptual frame to understand the anti-advertisement advertisements that emerged at this time. Paralleling the “I’m not a doctor, but I play one on TV...” sort of advertising schtick, and eventually overtaking it in the early twenty-first century, was the narrative of “minimising harm”; how a company was a good corporate citizen that promoted social responsibility. Free trade produce, greening initiatives and land stewardship were the new corporate currency of environmental justice, whilst tolerance, diversity and equality became the stock-in-trade of social justice.

Collins and Rothe describe eloquently the 2017 “Live for Now Moments Anthem” Pepsi advertisement featuring, “...a youthful and multicultural street protest, complete with dancing and pop-locking, smiles, and ambiguous resistance...” marching its way through a city centre (2020:141). With thinly disguised allusions to the Black Lives Matter movement and multiracial solidarity in the face of police violence, this sanitised presentation of a street protest was quickly recognised as the offensive monstrosity that it was and was pulled.

In a seemingly endless media feedback loop, images that appear to be carefully curated from an extensive photo archive of G20 protests, Black Lives Matter marches, Pride parades and latterly, defund the police rallies, have gone from newsrooms to advertising agencies to the homepages of universities. These images signify not only that the university has now discovered the scourges of transphobia, racism, colonialism, etc., but that it is now in the business of social justice. Understandably, these images are interspersed with other less threatening ones such as those of a ground-breaking ceremony for the medical school’s new building, a business major receiving a municipal young entrepreneur’s award and a big win for one of the sports teams to moderate the overall original impressions. The neoliberal university is very conscious in its efforts not to further alienate any current (and especially, potential) parents, donors and capital investors already suspicious that it is actually run by the alleged Cultural Marxists and social justice warriors. Whilst not commodifying resistance in quite the same ways as newly “woke” entrepreneurs selling #BLM tee shirts and Trans Rights flags manufactured in Bangladeshi sweatshops, the neoliberal

university's marketing strategy works to confer legitimacy on select forms of resistance but not others within a hegemonic status quo. Apparently, the neoliberal university is very concerned with dignity and living wages for the workers picking coffee in Colombia, but less so for the workers serving it in the food courts and dining halls that they outsource to union-busting food service giants on their own campus.

Liberal leftists amongst the faculty and academic middle management have been conscripted in service of the neoliberal forces to produce the university's own brand of what Nancy Fraser terms "progressive neoliberalism" (cited in Hall and Winlow 2020). A poignant explanation of the forces at work in the election of political leaders such as Tony Blair, Bill Clinton, Barak Obama and Justin Trudeau, Fraser's (2017) concept likewise provides considerable insight into the operation of twenty-first century universities. To wit, the logic of neoliberalism is fused with mainstream currents of some equity movements to create highly symbolic, but unremarkable and largely ineffectual spaces for social justice through anti-this-that-and-the-other-thing pedagogy, scholarship and activism. Promises by the university to decolonize knowledge and promote anti-oppression education gloss over its own policies, as well as those of its government and corporate partners that serve the interests of global capitalism. For example, removing a statue is at best a reactive gesture. It is counter-hegemonic window dressing, and not a truly oppositional behaviour because it does not meaningfully challenge the status quo (Collins and Rothe 2020). Likewise, changing a building's name is not the same thing as paying reparations, and including a land acknowledgement is not the same thing as honouring treaty rights: to pretend that they are is intellectually dishonest and politically disingenuous.

Conclusion

University "Town Hall" budget meetings held on Zoom in which the administration solicits faculty input on how to best implement the 3.5% budget reduction already decided upon by the Board and other exercises in the pantomime of shared governance seek to enlist us as willing participants in our own subjugation. Like the weekly university wide email messages in which administrators, "...recognise the ongoing challenges faculty face and acknowledge [our] tenacity and hard work" or remind us to "maintain a healthy work-life balance" and "practise self-care" accompanied by links to various websites for tips on how to do so individualises the suffering inflicted by neoliberalism.

Many public intellectuals contend that a "culture of cruelty" has come to define contemporary life (Giroux 2017). Even a cursory examination of life at the neoliberal university provides ample evidence to support their assertion. This milieu, wherein qualities that mark sociopathy have come to be celebrated as virtues does speak to neoliberalism's complete colonisation of many aspects of our lives. At the university the shop window is very much social justice posturing guided by liberal left authoritarianism. The goods in the back—avariciousness, deceitfulness, a lack of empathy, and narcissism and all that they spawn—continue to transform universities for the worst.

A significant expenditure in effort and resources is required to allow the neoliberal university to do what it does whilst claiming to be doing something else (see particularly Winlow and Hall 2012); much of this is borne, albeit indirectly, by faculty and other university frontline workers. In their hypocritical responses to COVID-19 universities have laid bare some of neoliberalism's true inequities. During the lockdown(s) universities fostered some of the more distasteful middle-class sensibilities of economically comfortable students.

Enhanced pandering to the students-customers through administratively mandated hybrid online/in-person courses (in essence, doubling a professor's teaching load) and flexible evaluation methods (tailored to meet individual students' preferences) in hopes of providing for their comfort and well-being as if they were customers on a private shopping excursion in an upscale boutique is of course premised on extracting more labour power from professors-personal shoppers. In a similar vein, other frontline staff at the university, particularly those who could not work remotely, found themselves furloughed, and subsequently laid-off whilst new, well-compensated administrative positions such as VP Teaching Innovation were created, and lucrative contracts awarded to private consulting firms espousing special expert knowledge on a social justice *cause célèbre*. Concurrently, many of our economically disadvantaged students struggle to remote learn because of tight living conditions in their homes, issues of technological accessibility, and online connectivity problems. It is also many of these students, and their parents, who have a particularly difficult time as they continue to work in unsafe conditions as grocery clerks, delivery drivers, slaughterhouse workers, order fillers, personal support workers, warehouse labourers, etc. The precarity of their circumstances lies in neoliberalism's transformation of our world, the pandemic has only added to the danger and uncertainty.

Scribbled in crayon on a torn sheet of notebook paper, the satirical death threat that appears at the outset of this article draws upon the story of St. Cassian of Imola.⁴ He was a schoolmaster in the third century who defied the authorities by his repeated refusals to worship the Roman gods. Because of this, he was sentenced to death and killed by his students who used their tablets to bludgeon him as well as their styli to hack at him. As critical criminologists we know that officially sanctioned *deities*, whatever their form, must be resisted... but that resistance sometimes comes at a high price.

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⁴ NB. The letter, like the novel from which it comes, is a work of fiction. As such, any similarities between the description of the recipient contained therein and that of an actual department head, associate dean, dean, etc., that you may know is purely coincidental.

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