Learning under Neoliberalism
Higher Education in Critical Perspective: Practices and Policies

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Penny Welch, Wolverhampton University

Around the globe, universities are being reformed to supply two crucial ingredients of a purported ‘global knowledge economy’: research and graduates. Higher education’s aims, concepts, structures and practices are all in process of change. This series provides in-depth analyses of these changes and how those involved – managers, academics and students - are experimenting with critical pedagogies, reflecting upon the best organization of their own institutions, and engaging with public policy debates about higher education in the 21st Century.

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Learning under Neoliberalism:
Ethnographies of Governance in Higher Education
Edited by Susan Brin Hyatt, Boone W. Shear and Susan Wright

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Learning under Neoliberalism

Ethnographies of Governance in Higher Education

Edited by

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Introduction: higher education, engaged anthropology and hegemonic struggle

BOONE W. SHEAR AND SUSAN BRIN HYATT

Higher education in the global knowledge economy

On 22 August 2013, President Obama announced a new plan to further reform higher education in the United States (Obama 2013). Speaking from the campus of the State University of New York Buffalo, Obama set the stage for his intervention. He acknowledged some of the ongoing social inequalities and hardships facing individuals and families, and decried the exorbitant costs of higher education that are leading to ‘crushing’ amounts of student debt and are pricing some students out of higher education altogether. As a solution to economic suffering and precariousness, Obama promised to increase access to higher education, make higher education more affordable, and ensure that student debt would be curbed and made more manageable. Obama was resolute, stating that, ‘higher education is still the best ticket to upward mobility in America, and if we don’t do something about keeping it within reach, it will create problems for economic mobility for generations to come’ (Obama 2013).

As a way to safeguard this Shibboleth of education as a pathway to the American Dream, Obama charged Secretary of Education Arne Duncan – the architect of the Obama administration’s education reform efforts that have further marketised primary and secondary education in the U.S.A. (Lipman 2011) – with the task of ‘lead[ing] an effort to develop a new rating system for America’s college’s before the 2015 college year’ (Obama 2013).¹ As Obama explained, colleges would need to be rated through ‘metrics like, how much debt does the average student leave with? How easy is it to pay off? How many students graduate on time? How well do those graduates do in the workforce? Because the answers will help parents and students figure out how much value a college truly offers’ (Obama 2013).
These new metrics, along with the ability of universities to engage in cost-saving innovations, would then presumably be used to rate schools so that student-consumers could make the best-informed, rational choices based on the instrumental, economic value of education offered by each institution. To further facilitate this transformation, these metrics would then be used to ‘change how we allocate federal aid for colleges’. In sum, Obama laid out a framework that would further codify on-going processes of marketisation and surveillance at the university, bringing the heterogeneous and unruly U.S.A. higher education terrain into closer alignment with the more consolidated and centralised higher education systems of other OECD nations.

As we write this introduction, Obama’s plans have yet to take final shape, let alone be implemented, but of particular importance, for us, is the ideological context from which these policy proposals emerge. For Obama, education reform is necessary for individual economic success because of a broader discursive framework shaping education and economic policy today, where ‘greater and greater global competition in a knowledge-based economy’ is understood as a key fact of our current lives. In a global knowledge economy, nations, regions and municipal- ities are positioned in direct competition with each other; economic success at every scale is dependent on the ability to commodify and own knowledge as well as on the availability of skilled workers who can both create products for and provide services to knowledge-based corporations.

This neoliberal fantasy of unbridled market competition via the marketisation of knowledge provides the ideological terrain from which much of the education reform efforts in the past few decades have emerged. As the chapters in this volume show, universities both bear the marks of neoliberal restructuring and are enlisted into participating in further restructurings through discursive and material transformations that are reshaping institutional objectives, influencing the nature of academic practice, and instilling new beliefs, affects and desires in students, faculty and administrators. It is precisely these dynamics — these implications of the university, its people and its practices in broader economic and cultural transformations — that we are interested in here.

The origin of this volume can be traced to a collaborative project in the Anthropology Department at the University of Massachusetts Amherst in 2007–2008. For the better part of two years faculty, graduate students and undergraduates met together to investigate, discuss and attempt to respond to the changing conditions at the university from which we research and write; learn and teach; and accommodate, reform and
resist (see Shear and Zontine this volume). One of the outcomes of this project was a symposium that produced earlier versions of four of the chapters in this volume, all of which were originally published in *Learning and Teaching: The International Journal of Higher Education in the Social Sciences* (LATISS) along with John Clarke’s chapter examining the modernization of U.K. universities. (The chapters by Hyatt, Lyon-Callo, Shear and Zontine and Clarke appeared in the 2010 (vol, 3, no. 3) special issue of LATISS and that by Davis in 2011 (vol. 4, no. 1). A pair of chapters previously published in LATISS, one by Cris Shore (2010 vol. 3, no. 1) and another by Susan Wright and Jakob Williams Ørberg in 2008 (vol. 1, no. 1), investigating university reforms in New Zealand and in Denmark respectively, further strengthen the comparative aspects of this volume. All of these chapters have been revised and updated. Finally, Davydd Greenwood takes measure of the authors’ work in the Afterword and points a way forward through collaborative, participatory research. Greenwood, whose own writing on education and action research (see, for example, Greenwood 2002; 2007a; 2007b) has helped to inspire much of the work in this volume, also provided critical and helpful feedback on all of the chapters.

In this introduction, we aim to situate the university as an important location of hegemonic struggle. In reflecting on the dilemmas and challenges we have faced in each of our own university settings, we illustrate how universities — and the people who teach, learn and work at universities — are thoroughly implicated and embroiled in processes of economic and cultural production. We briefly describe the contours and manifold impacts of neoliberal restructuring of the university in relation to the broader political scene. Universities — as institutions that are often presented as vehicles to produce people, knowledge and products for social well-being and coherence — offer an unusually rich and important location for critical investigation and for the politicisation of cultural production.

We then argue that ethnography, with its emphasis on lived experience, can be a particularly effective tool with which to explore both the local manifestations of broader processes as well as to uncover areas of slippage, discontinuity and surprise between the global and the local, between structure and agency and between theory and practice. We use several examples to illustrate how ethnographic research and engaged teaching can uncover and mobilize the unexpected insights found in the interstitial spaces connecting people and cultural processes. We describe how each of the chapters in this volume relies on the use of ethnographic methods including participant-observation, qualitative in-
Interviews and reflexive analysis to help us think through how academic practices, working conditions and university objectives are structured through changing conditions that can be linked to dominant class interests. We suggest that by calling attention to and revealing the workings of these agendas — as well as by investigating the beliefs, desires and practices of those attempting to negotiate and respond to these same agendas, including students, faculty, administrators and other community members — we can become better equipped to understand and resist the conditions that we are in. Such reflexive analysis is essential if academics and students are to imagine new possibilities, institutions and practices and are to work for potential transformations, most particularly through engaged learning and teaching.

Some brief notes on neoliberalism

Before we proceed further, allow us to take a brief detour to consider the theoretical and political entanglements of our titular frame, *Learning Under Neoliberalism: Ethnographies of Governance in Higher Education*. Given the ubiquity of neoliberalism as a conceptual frame and signifier, as well as the increasing number of critiques of neoliberalism’s textual ubiquity, we feel obliged to discuss how we understand and are treating neoliberalism in relation to the chapters in this volume.

As Ferguson (2010), Clarke (2008) and others have suggested, browsing through the scholarly literature might lead one to the conclusion that neoliberalism is everywhere, an agenda that is saturating our lives in myriad ways. Appearing at once as heterogeneous in its manifestations yet coherent as a project, neoliberalism can operate as a sort of master signifier that gathers together a motley mix of social processes and deleterious conditions in the social field; it purports to explain inequality, poverty and oppression in relation to historical change, social and economic restructuring, global economic and cultural flows, contemporary governance and policies associated with privatisation, marketisation and the withdrawal of the state from particular social welfare provisioning. All this can be accounted for and contained within a neoliberal imaginary. As Elyachar (2012: 76) succinctly put it, ‘referring to neoliberalism has become a shorthand way for signalling all that is wrong in the ethnographic present’. Though sometimes conceptually and politically useful, an imagined coherence can also work to stunt theoretical investigation into the nature of neoliberalism(s), as well as leave little room for manoeuvre away from neoliberalism’s reach (Elyachar 2012; Ferguson 2010; Gibson-Graham 1996).
Introduction

In its everywhere taken-for-granted-ness, neoliberalism works to conceal as much as it reveals about the world (Clarke 2008). Scholars have been attempting to move away from analyses that present neoliberalism as a taken-for-granted and coherent worldview and have instead identified and mobilized multiple neoliberalism(s) using more conceptual precision and complexity. In fact, one of the contributions of this volume is to show how ethnography serves to highlight the ways in which similar constellations of ideas – not least about university reform – find very different expressions and outcomes in different national settings. Adopting a historical approach, some scholars argue that neoliberalism should be understood as processual and always unfolding (Canaan 2013), or as transitioning from one incarnation and context into new assemblages (Hyatt 2011). Others argue that neoliberalism is necessarily always in a hybrid form (Clarke 2008), is assembled differently in different locations (Ong 2006; 2007), and both constitutes and is constituted by local conditions, contingent encounters and social movements (Bockman 2012; Goldstein 2012).

Like the scholars above we, too, reject any notion of neoliberalism as an entirely coherent, cohesive project. We agree with Clarke (2008), Kingfisher and Maskovsky (2008) and others that it is precisely in the specificity of particular cultural arrangements and assemblages that we can find interesting contradictions, spaces where neoliberalism’s reach might be averted and possibilities for new logics, practices and worlds to emerge.

This recent theoretical challenge to a presupposed neoliberal hegemony – and concomitant attention to heterogeneity and contingency – is indicative of a rapidly changing political and cultural terrain in which ethnographic work is taking place. On-going economic crises and deepening inequalities, dissolution of the Washington Consensus, social movements and protests in the Middle East, Occupy, Idle No More, 38 degrees, uprisings in Turkey, Chile and Brazil have reshaped public discourse, policy and politics and have created openings for both conservative retrenchment and radical change. Thatcher’s statement that There Is No Alternative is no longer axiomatic. Though some states have turned to progressive and even radical reforms,² more have doubled-down on the logics of marketisation and privatisation associated with neoliberal restructuring, joining these processes with populist rhetoric and authoritarian measures to impose austerity and protect the interests of the elite. At the same time, visions and practices for new worlds – what we might describe as a ‘politics of possibility’ (Shear 2014; Cornwell 2011; Escobar 2004; Fórum Social Mundial; Gibson-Graham
Boone W. Shear and Susan Brin Hyatt 2008b; Gibson, Cameron and Healy 2013; Holbrook 2013; Miller 2011; Molina 2013; Quinones Jr. et al. 2009) – appears to be spreading at the community and local levels, suffusing grassroots politics, and in some cases connecting across political contexts through social and informational networks.

As anthropologists study with communities and social movements, and study up (Nader 1969) and study ‘through’ (Shore and Wright 1997) and struggle against power (Lyon-Callo and Hyatt 2003; Greenwood 2007b; Shear and Lyon-Callo 2013), theoretical approaches and political commitments are forged anew; they are recast through negotiated relationships with research subjects/collaborators whose own interests, hopes and desires are themselves resituated by and responding to a changing cultural-political terrain. At a certain level then, the divergent theoretical understandings of and approaches involving ‘neoliberalism’ – or any other political framework – might be understood as moral commitments and strategic choices to emphasize particular problems and sets of relations that might produce particular epistemological and political effects. Indeed, we understand knowledge production – what scholars and students say and think, write and teach – not only to reflect reality (a necessarily partial and situated view of reality) but also to construct and constitute it (Burke and Shear 2014; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Gibson-Graham 2008a).

A central aim of this volume is to explore ethnographically how the practices of engaged scholars and teachers are being constrained, produced and reconfigured in relation to new discourses and rationalities associated with neoliberal governance – processes like marketisation, privatisation, responsibilising individuals, auditing and accountability, and entrepreneurialism – as well as how teaching about these transformations might create possibilities for new interventions. If, as engaged scholars, we intend our research, writing and teaching to produce possibilities for a more democratic, socially just, egalitarian future, we must remain vigilant; we must remain aware of and on guard against the processes that push and pull our identities and desires. We need investigations that can help us reflect on how our own practices as engaged scholars are being constrained and configured in relation to broader cultural-economic forces, in order to be able to locate possibilities for effective agency and intervention.

Our adherence to the moniker and concept of neoliberal governance, can be considered in part a strategic choice for two interrelated reasons. First, we find it important to draw attention to the relationship between global-capital, international and state policies, and university
transformations – and most especially to those transformations that encourage or coerce individuals to invest themselves in university restructurings and reforms. We are interested, as are all of the scholars whose chapters appear in this volume, in investigating the way in which the university’s practices and relevant social actors are recast by discourses that work to shape and manage the ‘conduct of conduct’ (Lemke 2001: 191 citing Foucault). Second, we wish to position the chapters in this volume in a shared political-theoretical space while at the same time providing enough room for each of the authors to be able to make their own commitments in relation to the different ways that they understand, experience, and care about the impacts of neoliberal restructuring at the university. Thus, we find it less important to define neoliberalism succinctly and more important to position ‘neoliberalism’ as a relatively open signifier that can help us think about governance and social reproduction across scale and space. We are not making the claim that neoliberalism is all that there is or that the term neoliberalism can adequately capture and explain all of the problematic transformations at the university. Rather, we are suggesting that in order to see these different cases through a comparative lens, deploying the notion of neoliberalism is a useful trope that allows us to situate individual instances in a larger context.

In a recent commentary, Maskovsky (2012) reminds us that the various crises at the university are not solely a product of neoliberalism; as he notes, new forms of right-wing populism, including the Tea Party movement in the U.S.A., have impelled the adoption of austerity measures that outflank an earlier era of neoliberal reforms. Like Maskovsky’s example, the chapters in this volume examine the discursive articulations of neoliberalism with other forms of governance, power and oppression. As Shear and Zontine illustrate in their chapter, attributing too much explanatory power to any particular ‘strong theory’ can work to prescribe outcomes in advance and lead to political despair and/or disengagement (and see Gibson-Graham 2006). We are, however, beginning from the position that neoliberal processes are powerfully reshaping university life across national contexts in myriad, problematic ways, and are implicating universities and the people in them in capitalist relations of production and interrelated forms of oppression.

Universities and social reproduction

Of course, universities have never been unencumbered by broad cultural-economic processes. Characterizing universities and academic life-
gone-by as either spaces of free inquiry on the one hand, or as hotbeds of radical indoctrination on the other elides the always deep integration and entanglements of university practice with society writ-large. Certainly, one purpose of formal education in industrial societies has always been to produce people and products necessary for exploitation and economic growth (Barrow 1990; Bowles and Gintis 1976); this means producing workers with the requisite technical skills and also producing people who accept or invest themselves in the given social order (Althusser 1971; Sotiris 2013). Academics, students, and the teaching and learning that they do, are necessarily located in a compromised space, shaped in part by elite interests working through the state (Gramsci 2003; Shear 2008).

In short, the restructuring of universities today is not altogether novel and universities are always changing in relation to broader political-economic and cultural transformation (Rabo and Wright 2010). Nevertheless scholars, students, workers and activists are making the claim that contemporary restructuring is inordinately severe and profound, encompassing changes to university goals, governing structures, labour conditions, pedagogy, and curricula. These changes are not occurring evenly within and between nation states, but are structured through capital imperatives, international policies, differentially situated discursive regimes and local conditions — including historical differences in university systems — as well as in relation to the agency of administrators, academics, and students who negotiate, transform, and resist individually, collectively, and as part of broader social movements.

**Outlining university reforms**

Over the past few decades, university reform has been driven from two seemingly incongruous but in fact mutually reinforcing directions. First, higher education has been caught up in the broader neoliberal trend of privatisation. This trend has several dimensions found in various constellations in different countries. In some countries higher education, like other public services, has been *devalued* as a public good (exceptions include Denmark and Norway where higher education for domestic students is still free). Where social well-being has come to be understood, not as the obligation of government, but as the responsibility of individuals and the domain of the private sector, the percentage of public spending on higher education has generally decreased. Decreasing public funding has prompted universities in many locations to restructure internal budgets and seek out new sources of revenue,
especially from international and domestic students and their families. Tuition and fees have skyrocketed in many locations, further structuring racialised class exclusions and generating a staggering amount of student debt. For example, in the U.S.A. student loan debt is now the largest form of unsecured debt, surpassing credit cards and auto loans (de Rugy 2013). Revenue from students is also extracted in the form of surplus value through poorly paid and unpaid labour. Student labour is interwoven into the university’s hyper-exploitative growth industry – part-time and contingent labour (Bousquet 2008). In the United States, for example, non-tenured and non-tenure track instructors now account for about 75 per cent of college teachers. The American Association of University Professors has provided a graphic representation showing changing percentages of contingent labour in higher-education teaching over the past few decades in the United States (Curtis 2013).

Another identified area of potential revenue has been the private sector, itself. Industry-university partnerships, what Shore and McLaughlan (2012) researching in New Zealand identify as ‘third stream’ activities, are enacted through a variety of different arrangements including commercialization, technology transfer, corporate investment and public-private partnerships. Again the existence of business and corporate interests at the university is nothing novel, but both the sheer number of relationships as well as the degree of intimacy and shared intention is certainly worth noting (Washburn 2005).

What is new is the extent to which university-business linkages have become institutionalized through the direct involvement of the universities themselves [Etkowitz 2003; Laredo 2007] in what appears to be conscious strategies to translate university knowledge into revenue through leasing academic and technological resources to business [Shore and McLaughlin 2012: 267].

For-profit higher education is posing both a challenge and an opportunity to more traditional higher education structures. In the United States for example, for-profit universities offering degrees through flexible, on-line programs have exploded in numbers (Lee 2012). At the same time, in response, public and non-profit private universities are also adopting on-line, profit models as increasingly important new sources of revenue. Public, not-for-profit and private enterprises are becoming intertwined in new and complex ways (as Davis shows in her chapter in this volume).³

The second direction of change is that even while universities have restructured in relation to public disinvestment and concomitant privati-