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The (Im)possibility of Intellectual Work in Neoliberal Regimes

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In this paper a critique of neoliberal regimes within universities is developed. Neoliberal discourse is deconstructed and the dangers of it for intellectual work are considered. Neoliberal subjects (those subjected through neoliberal discourses) are defined and guidelines for thinking about education within (and against) neoliberal regimes are developed.

Don Watson (2003) describes the all-pervasive language of neoliberal managerialism as “unable to convey any human emotion, including the most basic ones such as happiness, sympathy, greed, envy, love or lust. You cannot” he says “tell a joke in this language, or write a poem, or sing a song. It is a language without human provenance or possibility” (p. 15). Yet it is the language through which most organizations currently define themselves, including universities. In adopting this neoliberal language we don’t know, and we haven’t known for some time, whether we have just adopted some superficial and laughable language that will appease government, or whether the professional knowledge that guides and informs teaching and learning is reshaped in neoliberal terms. I suggest in this paper that it is very risky to buy into, uncritically, the language of those who would govern us through the manipulation of funds and the tying of dollar values to each aspect of our work. In speaking ourselves into existence as academics, within neoliberal discourse, we are vulnerable to it and to its indifference to us and to our thought. It can become the discourse through which we, not quite out of choice and not quite out of necessity, make judgements, form desires, make the world into a particular kind of (neoliberal) place.

A necessary step in refusing these new conditions of our existence is to be aware of the discourses through which we are spoken and speak ourselves into existence. We must find the lines of fault in and fracture those discourses. And then, in those spaces of fracture, speak new discourses, new subject positions, into existence. As Butler (1992, p. 13) says, the “subject is neither a ground nor a product, but the permanent possibility of a certain resignifying process”.

What then can we say that academic work is? Within neoliberal regimes we can no longer say it is the life of the intellect and of the imagination—a positioning from

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which the culture will draw both sustenance and critique, a positioning from which we can speak and be heard, and which carries with it the weighty responsibility of doing more than mimic the wise words of others, more than pick up the threads of what is already there, more than succumb to what successive neoliberal governments think they want. To critique is risky work, not just because it might alienate those who are deeply attached to, or personally implicated in, the discourses to be placed under scrutiny but also because to draw attention to the very terms through which existence is made possible, to begin to dismantle those very terms while still depending on them for shared meaning making—even for survival—requires a kind of daring, a willingness to envisage the not yet known and to make visible the faults, the effects of the already known.

At the beginning of my academic life my Head of Department prevaricated about promoting me from tutor to temporary lecture. After weeks of waiting I asked him had he made up his mind, and he told me it was a difficult decision to make, since in his view women should remain in service positions. His thinking, his judgement, his emotions, no doubt deeply felt in his gut, were shaped by that particular gendered discourse. It was not possible, then, for him to reason his way out of it. That dominant, indifferent discourse that divided men and women and placed men in the ascendant had colonized his soul and made it impossible, at the time, for him to see otherwise. My point here is not to sneer at his old fashioned narrow mindedness, but to comprehend how it is that discourses colonize us—gifting us with our existence and shaping our desires, our beliefs in what is right—the things we are prepared to die for. Those discourses change, but only after a great deal of individual and collective work has been done. In understanding the constitutive force of any discourse we can begin the work of seeing how to dismantle it, when we find ourselves controlled by a discourse that runs against conscience and stifles consciousness.

You could say that it is a vital part of academic work, to understand the dominant and indifferent discourses through which inequalities of various kinds are put in place and held in place and to explore the means of disrupting them, over-writing them, of speaking a different kind of existence into being. Working towards dismantling specific gendered discourses has been one part of what I have done in my work. The more important part has been this task of teasing out an understanding of how the constitutive work takes place (Davies, 2000a, 2003a), how we are subjected, and of envisaging how we might both find for ourselves, and grant to the students in our education systems, the capacity to see and to critique the discourses through which they are constituted. I have invited students to listen against the grain of those dominant and indifferent discourses through which they and we are constituted, to begin the very hard work of thinking how they, and we, might be otherwise (Davies, 2003b).

In my book *(In)scribing body/landscape relations* (Davies, 2000b) I explored the role of literature and art in shifting those terms of existence. Opera, for example, can open up a vision of something new, a passion and a longing for something new, at the same time as it reveals the intractability of the discursive forces that hold the old order in place. Consider Othello, a pagan black man who presumed to marry the fair,

Christian woman and find happiness. He disrupts the dominant social, racialized order, and we find ourselves as an audience both longing for him to succeed and knowing that he can't. Such doubled moments give us a vision of something new—with a blow to the head and the heart—while the character himself is lost. His embodied being is the ground on which the (im)possibility is worked out. Catherine Clément asks provocatively:

How could he the wretched Moor, have kept the blonde white woman? How can one make the charm of war stories last after becoming a husband? How can he retrieve this so distant distance between him and her, the paths of passing comets intersecting in the sky, the trajectory of tremendous movements across the universe? Surmounting, mounting, he sings, higher and higher. He straddles her. And the astonishing tenor voice rises to the limits of possibility, to Venus shining above the Greek island. And Desdemona's voice harmonizes, lower by a third. Their order, above and below, is the order of men and women; unless this voice—that is too high—is the symbol of its own failure. For the Moor of Venice, men's order is untenable. (Clément, 1989, p. 123)

It is in the doubleness of this moment in the performance that we know both the knowledge of another desired social order and the intransigent force of the existing racial order, counteracting the new. Othello sings sublimely—he takes us with him, into the aching heart of himself, as he is taken in by the machinations of those who cannot stand the fact of a black hero, a black hero who has, moreover, captured the heart of the white Christian woman. As his audience we want him to see, to discover, that he is being manipulated before it is too late, before he kills the woman whose heart he has won. We want this love to survive. In this moment we long for the impossible, a social order that is colour blind, that is just, and a hero who can read against the grain of those who would bring him down.

What is it we long for, then, in universities? And what part does neoliberalism play in shaping our longing, or in counteracting it—even obliterating it? What kind of social fabric is it that neoliberalism envisages?

At first glance neoliberalism might seem to be value blind. Keating worked to implement it while at the same time building up a liberal story of the Australian people as “a people who had suffered but had overcome. [Who] had triumphed over their tribulations and prejudices to embrace diversity and tolerance with an egalitarian generosity that would enable them to engage their Asian neighbours and flourish in the open, globalised economy” (Macintyre & Clark, 2003, p. 11). Howard has progressed the same neoliberal agenda while scrapping principal multicultural agencies, dashing hopes for reconciliation with indigenous Australians, refusing to agree to the Kyoto protocol, dispatching the republic and turning refugees away (Macintyre & Clark, 2003, p. 11). In place of Keating's “big picture” values he inserts the small picture—the insular family with a right to its old fashioned values and its fear of outsiders. This small picture taps into the fears of the new neoliberal subject and both appears to pacify those fears at the same time as it (deliberately) exacerbates them.

While it is possible, then, to couple neoliberalism with very different political agendas, it nevertheless generates in the population its own set of values that are far from benign. What is understood as possible, and as desirable, is shaped by the obsessive regulatory practices of government through which universities and other public institutions are made to bend their energies to the “bottom line” and what Toni Morrison calls “the bottomed out mind”—the mind that disattends the effects of that bending except to report to government that the bending has indeed been productive of the things that government wants. (How much money do we spend convincing them and ourselves that this is true, that their power to shape us is real?) What work do we do to avoid knowing what has been destroyed in our intellectual work through the imposition and take up of neoliberal discourses? We must ask: how does neoliberalism get inserted into our consciousness, into our conscience? And with what effects? We need to understand how this major shift in the culture occurred, what it does to us, and how to crack it apart.

In *Opera*, Clément points out, it is the tricksters, the clowns, the poor fools who smuggle in the shifts and disruptions:

For the real tricksters, the eternal clowns, the poor suckers, are smugglers. It is in their presence that the necessary shifts and disruptions are accomplished. It can happen that they embody disorder and die of it, like Othello. . . . these men, who unlike other men, further madness, by means of which, at their expense, an opening can be forced into the social fabric. They provide the dialectics of the opera, they are its anxiety and its endless movement between a peaceful life and places where society suddenly cracks apart. (Clément, 1998, p. 131)

Being the one who asks the questions or through whose embodied being the shifts get played out can be a risky business. We could, as we do, not quite through choice and not quite through necessity, take neoliberalism on board for a safe life—we can survive if we subject ourselves to its terms. But, for the most part, it has entered our world by stealth, and has eroded our values. It undermines the very value and meaning of academic life. I feel compelled, as I felt compelled in relation to gender—it is a matter of survival of a different kind—to force an opening in the social fabric in which it becomes evident that this discourse of neoliberalism is turning us into people that we do not want to be. Like Othello, I want the impossible. I want to speak my mind—I long to transcend the discourse of neoliberalism. I long to continue my love affair with the life of the intellect in which I refuse the terms of neoliberal existence, even while seeing the impossibility of doing so. Can we, like Othello, enter the space in which the fault lines in the social fabric can be made visible—revisable, knowing as we do, our own vulnerability to the terms of the social fabric for our existence?

It is because of the fear of difference, of the abject Other, that Othello must die, he cannot belong. Imagine his final death song

Between the composer and the song, between the singer and his audience, the impossible moment is made possible—the moment is held, lost, regained, finally, when the curtain rises the last time, to Othello standing, to ecstatic applause. Othello

is immersed in his impossible love—united in love with Desdemona even as he knows she is dead. We weep for him, we shout bravo! for his love even as we know it cannot be—he cannot be allowed to disrupt the social order in this way—to unite with the good pure white Christian woman of noble birth

Can we hold the moment long enough to know how we both get caught up in the apparent inevitability of dominant discourses, how we blame Othello for his own demise, and, at the same time, long to disrupt those dominant discourses, to decompose them, to move beyond them? It is this “and at the same time” that is so difficult to grasp. We do not exist solely on one side or the other, but on both.

The possible is embedded in the (im)possible. Through a shift of attention, a shift of conscience and consciousness, not just in one mind but in the mind of a people, action unfolds, sometimes violently, making a new possibility. Nelson Mandela and his fellow ANC members dreamt the impossible dream, the abolition of injustice in South Africa. In a syncope of almost 30 years, a small death lived over and over, they remained true to the words of Mandela when he was sentenced to imprisonment for life:

Whatever sentence Your Worship sees fit to impose upon me for the crime for which I have been convicted before this court, may it rest assured that when my sentence has been completed I will still be moved, as men are always moved, by their conscience; I will still be moved by my dislike of the race discrimination against my people when I come out from serving my sentence, to take up again, as best I can, the struggle for the removal of those injustices until they are finally abolished once and for all (Mandela, 1995, p. 394)

The curtain falls. We shout bravo! But this time it is life imprisonment. The curtain remains closed. For 27 years the curtain remained closed. When the curtain finally rose again, the audience was delirious. The shift in consciousness had taken place. The wound, the line of fault in the social fabric has been made visible, and revisable. As the curtain fell on his life sentence, many longed for the change, and many died for it. Mandela’s mythical status could not have emerged, however, without the struggle of many, many people, all over the world, to change consciousness. The question is, how was it possible for the majority for white South Africans, and for us, each in our own ways, to be so blind to our own acts of violence and oppression? How is it that we get caught up in language, that is itself a violence, that is oppressive in ways we do not consciously, rationally choose to be, without feeling the need to turn our reflexive gaze on the effects of what we say, what we allow to be spoken without demur?

In the words of Butler,

Precisely at the moment when choice is impossible, the subject pursues subordination as the promise of existence. This pursuit is not choice, but neither is it necessity. Subjection exploits the desire for existence, where existence is always conferred from elsewhere; it marks a primary vulnerability to the Other in order to be. (Butler, 1997, p. 20)

This is our dilemma.

Even Mandela tells stories about the language and practices of the powerful seeping into his consciousness and taking over his emotions. He writes, for example, of a moment of terror when he first boarded a plane with a black pilot. Secretly on a tour of African countries to gain support for the armed struggle for a multiracial democracy in South Africa, he suddenly found he didn't trust a black man to fly a plane:

We put down briefly in Khartoum, where we changed to an Ethiopian Airways flight to Addis. Here I experienced a rather strange sensation. As I was boarding the plane I saw that the pilot was black. I had never seen a black pilot before, and the instant I did I had to quell my panic. How could a black man fly a plane? But a moment later I caught myself: I had fallen into the apartheid mind-set thinking that Africans were inferior and that flying was a white man's job. (Mandela, 1995, p. 348)

But a moment later—not too late—he caught himself in the act, he quelled his terror, he made visible the discourse through which his panic had erupted.

The Neoliberal Subject

Toni Morrison, a decade ago, spoke of the limiting force of oppressive languages both inside and outside the academy:

Oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence; does more than represent the limits of knowledge; it limits knowledge. Whether it is obscuring state language or the faux language of mindless media; whether it is the proud but calcified language of the academy or the commodity driven language of science; whether it is the malign language of law-without-ethics, or language designed for the estrangement of minorities, hiding its racist plunder in its literary cheek—it must be rejected, altered and exposed. It is the language that drinks blood, laps vulnerabilities, tucks its fascist boots under crinolines of respectability and patriotism as it moves relentlessly toward the bottom line and the bottomed out mind. Sexist language, racist language, theistic language—all are typical of the policing languages of mastery, and cannot, do not, permit new knowledge or encourage the mutual exchange of ideas. (Morrison, 1993, pp. 16–17)

Oppressive state language—that is, currently, the language of neoliberal government—is more violent than its bland, rather absurd surface might lead us to believe. It is at work here, busily containing what we can do, what we can understand. It is the language in which the auditor is king. It is a language that destroys social responsibility and critique, that invites a mindless, consumer-oriented individualism to flourish, and kills off conscience. What can the academy do in the face of such a powerful relanguaging of our work when that relanguaging is tied to our economic survival? I have heard conversations among academics who are not otherwise monsters but have become monstrous in their will to survive and their attention to the bottom line. I heard a group of staff say, for example, they wanted to force the retirement of their one-time leader against his will, a man to whom they were deeply

intellectually and personally indebted, because they would get more money from DEST that way—money they had come to believe they needed for survival. I have heard Heads of School advise their staff not to bother to publish their research, since the significant dollars from DEST were now attached to getting research grants, rather than to publishing. I hear over and over again about academics who are worthy of respect because they bring in outside money—and what of the value of their work, I ask, but the question draws a blank. It becomes a pressing question, then, to ask how did neoliberalese insert itself into the hearts and minds of academics? Is there any room left in Australia for those who want to critique the words of government and call its practices into question?

Toni Morrison warned in 1993 that: “There will be more of the language of surveillance disguised as research; of politics and history calculated to render the suffering of millions mute; language glamorized to thrill the dissatisfied and bereft into assaulting their neighbors; arrogant pseudo-empirical language crafted to lock creative people into cages of inferiority and hopelessness” (Morrison, 1993, p. 18).

This is exactly what neoliberalism has done and continues to do. It co-opts research to its own agendas, it silences those who ask questions, it whips up a small-minded moralism that rewards the attack of each small powerless person on the other, and it shuts down creativity. It draws on and exacerbates a fear of difference and rewards a rampant, consumerist, competitive individualism. It makes emotion, humour, poetry, song, a passion for a life of the intellect unthinkable.

A question I have asked again and again in my work is how can we, as teachers, as scholars, as students and as members of the public, learn to catch ourselves and each other in the act of taking up the terms through which dominance and oppression take place. How might we catch ourselves mouthing the comfortable clichés and platitudes that together we use to shape that same world that we shake our heads at with sorrow and resignation—or that we secretly in our darkest hearts applaud? How might we put to one side our own safety and comfortable certainties and ask the impossible questions that exist outside of the already known, the already asked, the comfortably conservative discursive universe that shores up our certainties and keeps the world a safe place—for us? How are we to resist engaging in the neoliberally induced surveillance of ourselves and each other, surveillance that limits, that holds us neatly packaged within economic and utilitarian discourses. How can we dare to ask, in the face of that discourse and its constraints, the questions that unsettle, the questions that disrupt the certainties and securities, the questions that honour a passionate ideal of the academy where intellectual work is without fear, where it does not know, necessarily, where its questions might lead—passionate work that recognizes no boundaries that might prevent its development and where it also cares passionately about its effects?

Certainly, we have not kept our research safe. In my research project on the impact of neoliberalism on intellectual work, one of the interviewees who had been spectacularly successful in attracting large outside grants said, when I questioned him about the advice that we should forget publishing because DEST doesn’t pay much for it, that it was irrational nonsense, a nonsense that only “limited

administrators” would buy into: “I mean they only give grants to some people and the grants they give are to people who are publishing, so it is only a limited administrator’s perspective, I reckon”. But when I questioned him further and in detail about his approach to his work and the way he understood its value, his own value, in dollar terms or in terms of the significance of his intellectual work, he suddenly realized that neoliberal discourse had slid way beyond the administrators into his own decisions and judgements about publishing and grant getting—about his own value to the academy and the terms in which that was measured. When those ideas “first appear on the horizon” he said, “you know you kind of object and don’t do it and after a while it just becomes part of the furniture and you don’t notice it any more, you find yourself doing all that stuff, and getting cross when other people object, and you’ve suddenly identified with the whole flawed process”.

Caught up in being neoliberal subjects who operate within the terms of dominant discourses does not suit academics very well. It runs counter to intellectual work. It places us in the impossible situation of existing in a context where what we know we should do is scoffed at as a romantic dream, a fantasy, an indulgence of the past—a love like Othello’s of Desdemona, or a dream like a just South Africa, not to be countenanced? It is not surprising, as Winefield, Gillespie, Stough, Dua, and Hapuarachi (2002, p. 9) have found, that approximately 50% of Australian university staff are “at risk of psychological illness, compared with only 19% of the Australian population overall”.

The language and practices of neoliberal managerialism are seductive: They lay out the grounds for a new kind of success and recognition, they scuttle like *ragged claws* across the *floors of the silent seas* of our minds (Eliot, 1961, p. 14), and they open up a contradiction, an impossibility, for those who are passionate about the life of the intellect, an impossibility as deep as the impossibility of Othello’s love for Desdemona. The Moor cannot live.

It would be much easier, wouldn’t it, to abandon the dream of intellectual work, to become no more than the one who participates in the scene, glad to be of use, like J. Alfred Prufrock:

No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;
Am an attendant lord, one that will do
To swell a progress, start a scene or two,
Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool,
Deferential, glad to be of use,
Politic, cautious, and meticulous;
Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;
At times, indeed, almost ridiculous—
Almost, at times, the Fool. (Eliot, 1961, p. 15)

Yet also almost the fool, the trickster, the one who might smuggle in the dream, ask questions, cause the necessary disruptions and shifts in consciousness and in practice.

So how then can we characterize the neoliberal subject—the one appropriately subjected within neoliberal discourses?

Consumption

The neoliberal self is largely defined in terms of income and the capacity to purchase goods. The desire for goods can be satisfied to the extent that the worker produces whatever the economy demands. This emphasis on consumerism makes the worker compliant to whatever must be done to earn money, since to lose one's job, to be without income, is to lose one's identity. In order to hold their jobs, neoliberal selves are necessarily flexible, multiskilled, mobile, able to respond to new demands and new situations; "... security is seen as emanating from people's capacity to adapt. Either they are flexible and adaptable, open to change, capable of finding new projects, and live in relative personal security, or they are not and will be put aside when the current project finishes" (Chiapello & Fairclough, 2002, p. 30). Martin (1997) analyses the doubleness of this neoliberal ideal—it feels good to be flexible and adaptable, but it also feels terrible when we realize we cannot afford to stop.

Individual Responsibility

A major shift in neoliberal discourse is towards survival being an individual responsibility. This is a crucial element of the neoliberal order—the removal of dependence on the social combined with the dream of possessions and wealth for each individual who gets it right. Vulnerability is closely tied to responsibility, and is central to neoliberal subjectivity—workers are disposable and there is no obligation of the "social fabric" to take care of that disposed self. Sennett (1998) claims that the new disposability is tougher than the old capitalist class-based system as it is more personal. The neoliberal subject becomes both vulnerable and necessarily competitive, competition being necessary for survival.

The Self Adrift from Values

Sennett (1998) describes the neoliberal subject as fearing

that the actions he needs to take and the way he has to live in order to survive in the modern economy have set his emotional, inner life adrift. (p. 20)

Short term capitalism threatens to corrode his character, particularly those qualities of character which bind human beings to one another and furnishes each with a sense of sustainable self. (p. 27)

The conditions of time in the new capitalism have created a conflict between character and experience, the experience of disjointed time threatening the ability of people to form their characters into sustained narratives. (p. 31)

Since the individual is responsible for taking care of him or herself and not dependent on society, such selves, in being cut loose from the social, no longer have the same responsibility to the social. The emphasis of responsibility is shifted over to responsibility for individual survival. Survival is constructed not as moral survival but as economic survival. Elements of the liberal humanist self that were integral to the maintenance of the social fabric (a commitment to liberal values—the development

of character, predictability, a capacity to critique) are now less important than the skills for individual survival (the capacity to earn money, entailing flexibility, responsiveness, responsibility for self against the other). The appropriate(d) self at work is produced because it is too risky to do otherwise. Because this self must work so hard and has no narrative certainty about itself, it is quite difficult to take care of. It becomes dependent on the practitioners of the psy-sciences, new age practices, doctors and therapeutic drugs to keep itself going (Walkerdine, 2003). The inner self that might be cultivated through such practices, or the person of character is of less relevance and value in the workplace than the self that might be produced through flexibility, responsiveness, and training in public discourses. And, of course, the costs of maintaining the newly fragile self is constructed, in neoliberal discourse, as an individual responsibility.

Surveillance

Surveillance becomes a key element of neoliberal systems, necessitated by the heightened emphasis on the individual's responsibility and the de-emphasizing of inner values and commitment to the social good. Trust is no longer realistic or relevant. Each person no longer trusts the other to work properly, and each becomes one of the multiple eyes spying on each other. Further, reporting mechanisms for monitoring and producing appropriate behaviour are mandated. These mechanisms are, in turn, very costly and devour an enormous proportion of shrinking funds, thus requiring an increase in the amount of work each worker is expected to do.

Autonomy

An illusion of individual autonomy is created within neoliberal systems. Over and over again individuals are required to collectively invent the neoliberal systems they are part of, making sure each time that they come closer and closer to the correct discourse. "Reconceptualization" is all the rage in universities. If you look to see how that reconceptualizing is being done, you find a weaving of old hopes and ideals—in education, of the teacher as professional, of the teacher as intellectual coming to study with us or to do research with us, of the teacher with a heightened sense of care for her students. We find hopes for increased funding, and a buckling and adaptation to the new. We find increased surveillance via accrediting bodies, a willingness to train students up to become neoliberal subjects. In "a process of adaptation to these new circumstances" of what he calls the knowledge economy (neoliberalism by another name), Lovat (2003, p. 1), for example, says in a discussion paper prepared for the Australian Council of Deans of Education:

The role of educators will need to be reconceptualized and teacher education will need to broaden its focus The Australian Council of Deans . . . vision recognises education as the key to economic prosperity, social cohesion and the

promise of democracy. It also recognises that the major challenge for the teaching profession in the twenty-first century is to prepare young people to live and work in a world characterised by constant change and uncertainty.

Lovat offers to train up the new neoliberal subjects and to encourage surveillance—in return for which he argues for more money and celebrates the increased autonomy he thinks teachers will have in this new economy. But he’s missed the point. Buying into neoliberal agendas means an illusion of increased autonomy, and it means less money for public institutions. The only thing approximating autonomy comes for the entrepreneur—the one who plays with money and may be a big time winner or a big time loser. And money is moved from public institutions to the private sector as an integral part of shifting responsibility to the private realm and to individuals. Education, under neoliberalism, is no longer a public good.

But still, how on earth did universities get sucked into believing that they should become part of this process? How did they agree that education was a market commodity rather than an essential part of any democracy, contributing to the public good?

The ground for the implementation of neoliberalism was laid in the 1970s, hot on the heels of the student uprising in universities against authoritarian rules and knowledges, though it is only in the last decade when its effects have really begun to be visible. Looking back it is possible to see that the necessary ground that was prepared for the sewing of neoliberal discourse was a combination of:

- fear for the survival of one’s country laid out in economic terms and defined as an inevitable result of globalization—the government would not be able to stop the changes even if it wanted to;
- fear for one’s own social group and its economic survival defined in terms of the Other, the one who is different and who will take what you have;
- fear for the survival of the institution one is part of induced by the successive withdrawal of funds and the tying of funds to various acts of compliance—the removal of safety in the known institutional fabric through successive restructurings;
- fear of one’s own survival created by weakening of unions and security of tenure at work, reduction of support from social nets to take care of those who lose their jobs or become ill or old or too frail to work, combined with the introduction of a discourse that values the short term, the flexible—movement over stasis.

This ground was then colonized by:

- forums for generating “futures” planning, where the newly uncertain future can be tamed by careful planning—planning within the terms of neoliberalese, but with a promise of implementation of equal opportunity as a means of seducing the previously disenfranchised to put energy into generating the (neoliberal) discourses of the future;
- multiple and repeated reporting on forms of vulnerability combined with moral ascendancy and fear of the Other;

- iterative reductions in funding to public institutions to increase vulnerability and compliance;
- funding of public institutions tied to compliance mechanisms;
- repeated restructuring of institutions to dislodge institutional memory, to open up workers to the new, and to obscure the picture of how the whole (institution or society) works;
- iterative development of surveillance practices, including state institutions such as The Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) and the Criminal Justice Commission (CJC), as well as internal surveillance mechanisms, turning individual workers into multiple eyes that spy on each other and undermine the fabric of trust that underpinned old practices;
- privatization, shifting responsibility from government to private corporations and of course, to individuals.

In summary, neoliberalism, as we currently practise it, has shaped up as:

- a move from social conscience and responsibility towards an individualism in which the individual is cut loose from the social;
- from morality to moralistic audit-driven surveillance;
- from critique to mindless criticism in terms of rules and regulations combined with individual vulnerability to those new rules and regulations, which in turn press towards conformity to the group.

The Implications for Education

Part of the burden of what I have to say here is that it is imperative that we understand neoliberal discourses and practices, how they work and their effects. In doing so, we can see, for example, that the decreases in public funding for education are not accidental. The encouragement of parents to move their children into the private sector is part of the move towards private responsibility for what was once understood as a government responsibility for the public good. Fighting the issue of public funding for education is bound to fail without an understanding of the underlying principles on which the decreases are based.

Revising education in line with neoliberal agendas, as Lovat does in part, needs to be understood in terms of the discourse and what its effects are, both on individuals and on the social fabric. Any revising of education would be better founded on such principles as:

- social conscience and responsibility is paramount, but is itself always in need of critique, of reflexive examination of any accidental slide into oppressive or otherwise harmful discourses;
- morality entails not only individual moral responsibility but also the task of looking at the effects of particular systems of morality, of examining, for example, how audit-driven moralism works, or at how binary thought limits what is thinkable;

- critique involves not only casting a critical gaze on discourse, but on deconstructing or decomposing oneself, understanding that the individual and the discursive are not distinct.

We must give to our students a doubled gaze, to enable them to become critically literate, to become citizens at once capable of adapting and becoming appropriate within the contexts in which they find themselves and as responsible citizens capable of critique; citizens who can understand the constitutive work that discourse does and who can work creatively, imaginatively, politically, and with passion to break open the old where it is faulty and to envisage the new. Even more urgent is the task of giving them some personal tools for withstanding the worst effects of neoliberalism, for seeing both the pleasure and the danger of being drawn into it, for understanding the ways in which they are subjected by it. They need to be able to generate stable narratives of identity and to understand the way neoliberal discourses and practices will work against that stability.

We need to work at the level of both rationality and desire. Students must be trained in philosophy—to understand the range of discourses through which they, and others, are constituted, and how those discourses work at the level of reasoned argument and logic. It is essential too that they know how discourse works on desire. Desire goes beyond rationality and, to a large extent, is part of the mysterious, the poetic, the ineffable: in a realm not readily pinned down with words, not readily amenable to logic and rationality In various humanist guises, desire has been used as an indicator of who we “really” are, as signifying an essence that is “natural” and personal, as independent of social influence. But desire is spoken into existence, it is shaped through discursive and interactive practices, through the symbolic and the semiotic. Desires are constituted through the narratives and storylines, the metaphors, the very language and patterns of existence through which we are subjected—made into members of the social world.

It is not a choice between compliance and resistance, between colonizing and being colonized, between taking up the master narratives and resisting them. It is in our own existence, the terms of our existence, that we need to begin the work, together, of decomposing those elements of our world that make us, and our students, vulnerable to the latest discourse and that inhibit conscience and limit consciousness.

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