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Peter McLaren

Chapman University, mclaren@chapman.edu

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Foreword to *Life for the Academic in the Neoliberal University*
Edited by Alpesh Maisuria and Svenja Helmes
London and New York: Routledge

Like many who chose a life in the academy, I was a youthful adventurer committed to provide ballast for headstrong students of critical consciousness. But that spirit of discovery that infused my early days as an academic soon became tempered, if not overmastered, prone to being capsized in the ribald currents of university life. It is now an academic life no longer bound by earlier commitments to ensuring professional autonomy, academic freedom, and a search for ways of providing a new stewardship for a planet now rotting before our downcast eyes. In other domains of social and political life, they would describe this state of affairs as a historical betrayal of trust, but today in colleges and universities it's referred to as 'practical', as if the arc of history compels itself on its own to take the path most profitable for the mandarins of finance and only slowly, haltingly and hesitatingly does it concern itself with other trajectories – such as a robust engagement with the epistemologies, ontologies, and ethics of knowing.

It is with this reflection that I write the following warning about neoliberalism for academics across the pond, whose academy is following us in the US. Here, plump university endowments are used to invest in expanding neoliberalism in universities. Rarely are they used to provide a living wage for those who do most of the heavy lifting – teaching students, grading papers, organising tutorials, etc. The metrics by which we now judge a successful university are the utility of those selfsame metrics – which unsurprisingly is in concert with the reigning paradigm of capitalist growth. That the gold standard of today's neoliberal university is the efficacy of its metrics should come as no surprise to those who have not lost their taste for thinking critically – and how many standard deviations from the norm this represents I shall leave to the accountants and consultants who run the universities to figure out in front of their computers. Critical education for social justice, unsullied by administrative clerics and untouched by the redactors-in-chiefs, and presented to the public in its raw contempt for helping to reproduce the worst elements of the society of the spectacle, is attacked through a sola economicus hermeneutic and socialist straw man, bolstered by conceptual "swag attire" from the Wall Street Journal – the sartorial equivalent of wearing a pair of \$6,000 Yeezys along with your cap and gown. If you wish to attend soirees with Conrad Black-type mountebanks or thrill in the mysteries of Yale's Skull and Bones secret society, or engage in golden showers with Russian oligarchs and orange-haired tyrants, then presumably you already have the financial means to reach your goal. This tarnishes the claim that education remains in the pursuit of freedom and social justice. Today, becoming educated in the vaulted halls of higher learning means little if it can't help your capital investment augment value, enhance through public exposition your

personal brand, and help you purchase a house in the Hamptons. Education is big business and if you don't believe that, then follow the money. When the prestigious Rossier School of Education at the University of Southern California developed their online Masters of Arts in Teaching programme, colleagues of mine scoffed but within several years it had several thousand students paying full tuition with a full online degree and remote sites for student teaching. Their reputation as an elite university prevailed even as it sold its soul and it went on to make a fortune, continuing to this day. Stagnating wages and decreased benefits that have been more or less constant since the 1970s constitute a major problem in our age of austerity capitalism, especially as public services and welfare are shrinking across the country. And what a challenge this has become for social justice educators! Some scientists today are warning humanity that we have entered the sixth period of extinction which began in 2010. The massive emission of carbon dioxide from fossil fuels is implicating many life forms on Earth – and not for the best. And this will intensify over the next three to four decades. And while our biosphere continues to rot, another stench engulfs us, this time ideological. Notorious paleo-conservatives – mentors of the likes of Steve Bannon such as William Lind – announce that we have entered a period of fourth-generation warfare that includes cyber-attacks involving decentralised media networks, low-intensity conflicts such as “culture wars” (i.e. political correctness, feminism, multiculturalism, and immigration) and guerrilla strategies and tactics directed towards the surveillance state. Such situations present a harrowing backdrop for the remaining drama of the struggle for human civilization. Critical theorists in the US influenced by Frankfurt School intellectuals are being held responsible for the breakdown of the US Judeo-Christian values – which includes most if not all of us involved in critical pedagogy. There is a lot of work to be done, and we won't be able to carry this work out as long as we are being trained in college and universities to become spineless clerks of the empire. We have entered an age of dogma, in which the nuances of reason have been sacrificed to the iron-fisted rhetoric of persuasion through a politics of authoritarianism, all of which can be traced to the social relations of capitalist production, the financialisation of the economy, attacks on unions, floating exchange rates, shock doctrine politics, austerity capitalism, racism, white supremacy, homophobia, patriarchy: neoliberalism's usual suspects.

Throughout my 30 years in the university, I have taught doctoral Students who have had to work in strip clubs, who lived in their cars, who slept in alleys, who were escaping a harrowing existence on the streets of Los Angeles. Those were considered unusual circumstances for those of us fortunate enough to be among the professoriate, luxuriating in our swivel chairs and expounding to our students and peers in faux-Oxbridge offices in the outskirts of Silicon Valley. Now, at a time when government funding for public universities is falling, when the “businessification” of

universities has become the new normal, there are increasing numbers of freshly minted graduates from respected doctoral programmes who are being hired to teach single courses. Also included in this precarious situation are more experienced adjunct professors who have been seeking three-year contracts and who are similarly scraping by, utilising any means that they can to pay off student debt, to find food and shelter and to publish some articles so as to increase their chances of finding the mother load – a tenure-track position. Some are enrolled in public assistance programmes, eat at food banks, some turn to sex work, and some are homeless. A report by Alastair Gee (2017) in *The Guardian* includes the following description:

begin quotation

Sex work is one of the more unusual ways that adjuncts have avoided living in poverty, and perhaps even homelessness. A quarter of parttime college academics (many of whom are adjuncts, though it's not uncommon for adjuncts to work 40 hours a week or more) are said to be enrolled in public assistance programmes such as Medicaid.

End quotation

They resort to food banks and Goodwill, and there is even an adjuncts' cookbook that shows how to turn items like beef scraps, chicken bones, and orange peel into meals. And then there are those who are either on the streets or teetering on the edge of losing stable housing.

Even highly successful adjuncts who are able to secure six courses per year and put in 60-hour weeks are lucky to earn \$40,000 a year whereas the median income for adjuncts is approximately \$22,041 a year. Full-time faculty earn approximately \$47,500 (Gee, 2017). And private institutions?

According to Gee (2017):

Begin quotation

Adjuncting has grown as funding for public universities has fallen by more than a quarter between 1990 and 2009. Private institutions also recognize the allure of part-time professors: generally, they are cheaper than full-time staff, don't receive benefits or support for their personal research, and their hours can be carefully limited so they do not teach enough to qualify for health insurance.

End quotation

The sheer numbers of precarious academic workers put the lie to the notion that all the hard work of earning a doctorate and the passion for research and teaching will pay off when those carved oak doors of the academy swing open, offering a portal to a world rich in opportunities to contribute to the public good as well as to acquire the creature comforts of a middle-class existence. It's more likely that adjunct work will force you

and your family to rely on food stamps, the Children's Health Insurance Program, cash welfare, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or the Earned Income Tax Credit. Long past are the days of the polished mahogany desk decorated with a brass inkwell, hand-carved pipe stands, arcane artefacts collected during talks abroad, and heaps of well-thumbed books with covers carefully angled towards the door to impress visiting colleagues eager to collaborate in your important research projects. Today you are lucky to teach two or three classes per semester and don't have to re-mortgage your house, rent out the spare bedroom, or add your name to the growing lists for government-subsidized housing. I have a friend who teaches as an adjunct and lives in a tent in the woods – fortunately the climate in southern California will not be overly punishing in this regard. Adjuncts have made some gains by unionizing, but much work needs to be done.

At a time when Hollywood celebrities and private equity executives spend a fortune in bribes to get their children into elite schools, what does that say for the working-poor who were promised by the guiding narrative of meritocracy that their hard work would give them a chance to enter the country's best colleges. According to Kevin Carey (2019), these colleges constitute 'an overpriced gated community whose benefits accrue mostly to the wealthy. At 38 colleges, including Yale, Princeton, Brown and Penn, there are more students from the top 1 percent than the bottom 60 percent'. Carey writes:

Begin quotation

Tuition prices aren't the only reason for this, but they're a major one. Public university tuition has doubled in the last two decades, tripled in the last three. Prestige-hungry universities admit large numbers of students who can pay ever-increasing fees and only a relative handful of low-income students. The US now has more student loan debt than credit card debt – upward of \$1.5 trillion. Nearly 40 percent of borrowers who entered college in the 2003 academic year could default on their loans by 2023, the Brookings Institution predicts.

End quotation

Online courses, you would think, could be a more cost-effective means of educating students unable or unwilling to shoulder a student debt that is the equivalent of a modest home mortgage. Such a course offering "could break the tuition cost curve by making the price of online degrees proportional to what colleges actually spend to operate the courses" (Carey, 2019). But the stark reality is that they don't, as they are reluctant "to pass even the tiniest fraction of the savings on to students. They charge online students the same astronomical prices they levy for the on-campus experience" (Carey, 2019) since they hire expensive private companies – OPMs (Online Program Managers) – to help run their online degrees, companies

that take approximately 60 percent of the tuition fees.
According to Carey (2019), these companies:

Begin quotation

Outsource much of the work to an obscure species of for-profit Company that has figured out how to gouge students in new and creative ways. These companies are called online program managers, or OPMs, an acronym that could come right out of “Office Space”. They have goofy, forgettable names like 2U, HotChalk, and iDesign. As the founder of 2U puts it, ‘The more invisible we are, the better’.

End quotation

But OPMs are transforming both the economics and the practice of higher learning. They help a growing number of America’s most-lauded colleges provide online degrees – including Harvard, Yale, Georgetown, NYU, UC Berkeley, UNC Chapel Hill, Northwestern, Syracuse, Rice, and USC, to name just a few. The schools often omit any mention of these companies on their course pages, but OPMs typically take a 60 percent cut of tuition, sometimes more. Trace Urdan, managing director at the investment bank and consulting firm Tyton Partners, estimates that the market for OPMs and related services will be worth nearly \$8 billion by 2020.

Carey (2019) sums up the neoliberal rationale of education in these times:

begin quotation

What this means is that an innovation that should have been used to address inequality is serving to fuel it. Instead of students receiving a reasonably priced, quality online degree, universities are using them as cash cows while corporate middlemen Hoover up the greater share of the profits. In a perfect twist, big tech companies are getting the spilloff, in the form of massive sums spent on Facebook and Google ads. It’s a near-perfect encapsulation of the social and structural forces that allow the already-rich to get richer at the expense of everyone else.

End quotation

The big cash cows are master’s degrees. They are part of a criminal enterprise, run by the academic equivalent of Chicago’s old mafia dons:

begin quotation

Colleges are legally required to publicly report undergraduate admissions statistics, including SAT scores and what percentage of their applicants gain admission. This prevents elite schools from simply jacking up the number of students admitted to their most prestigious undergraduate programmes to make more money – those programmes are sought after precisely because they are exclusive. Ph.D. programmes at

elite universities tend to be similarly selective.
End quotation

By contrast, master's programmes are a black box – there is no requirement to publish any admissions data. This means universities can dramatically lower their admissions standards and enrol thousands of highly profitable students without sully their brand. The University of Pennsylvania, for example, offers a master's in “Applied Positive Psychology,” which is essentially a \$66,000 Ivy League degree in self-affirmation. It has “no specific prerequisite courses” and applications are accepted from anyone with a minimum 3.0 grade point average. According to a UPenn official, the programme, which launched 15 years ago, is for individuals who ‘desire to apply evidence-based positive psychology to their area of expertise’ (Carey, 2019). As long as a master's degree is accredited, there are no limits to what a student can borrow. In fact, students are eligible for federal loans for the entire cost of tuition, fees, books, and living expenses, often in excess of \$100,000. And there is no limit on what the college can charge. This makes us wonder if there are goals to education under the Wehrmacht of neoliberalism other than profit-making for the universities? But what about the actual conditions faced by education workers inside the walls of our once-hallowed institutions?

While there are identifiable similarities to the neoliberalising currents implicating the lives of university workers in the US, university life in the UK faces its own localised challenges. These challenges are analysed in this new volume by Maisuria and Helmes. They meticulously undress the swindle of fulfilment surrounding education, exposing the sham hiding behind the ideological and economic curtains of our neoliberal theatre of academic operations. The values reaffirmed in the Magna Charta Universitatum in 1988 (Banfield, Maisuria, and Raduntz, 2016) have, according to Maisuria and Helmes, been lost to history, floating like dregs through the sewers of those neoliberal agencies that are responsible for credentialising our identities – for creating our own person brand and polishing our uniquely neoliberal ‘skill sets’ – as worthy instruments of the corporate will in the great crusade to become the new Knights Templar of commodity production. The nature of academic work and the purpose of the university itself under the guardians of neoliberalism must be held up to scrutiny. This is especially the case for social justice educators who define education very differently from those policing and running universities, whose obsession with employability metrics scuttles entire philosophy departments in order to bolster, say, biochemistry. Julian Baggini (2018) reports:

begin quotation

You might think that a university philosophy department facing closure in Hull is of as much interest to the average person as the shutting of a butcher's in Wolverhampton is to a vegetarian in Totnes. There

are almost as many universities as high streets now, and for every closure here there's an opening somewhere else. But the events unfolding on Humberside are symptomatic of a deep malaise affecting not just universities but the wider culture. The crude pursuit of what is "practical", "efficient" or "useful" is threatening everything of value that isn't evidently profitable.

End quotation

For many philosophers, the major goals of education are bound up with the task of linking scholarship to the moral and political imperatives of social justice. But this requires a space of learning where ideational kinetic energy necessary for critical inquiry can be produced without needless obstruction or obfuscation, without falling into what Paulo Freire called "bureaucratization of mind" (1985, p 15). That the voices of education workers fail to be incorporated into decision-making over the nature of working conditions has sadly become one of the truisms of our educational times.

Very often critical educators must resort to a coded language with their students, to avoid the 'quality' controlling eye of the Dean, the Rector, or the Chair. As someone who has hung out with academic comrades in London pubs, I've listened to many of their experiences – excruciatingly depressing – resulting from championing with unwavering zeal the works of a philosopher nicknamed the "Old Moor". And I had my own stories to share. For example, in 2006 I was placed on top of a list of 30 "dangerous" professors at UCLA, and the organisation responsible for the list offered to pay students 100 dollars to secretly audiotape my classes and 50 dollars to provide notes from my lectures. One of my crimes was working in Venezuela on behalf of the Bolivarian revolution, offering what advice I could to create opportunities for a socialist education. Venezuela has its share of important educators who have left their mark on history, such as Simón Rodríguez, tutor and mentor to Simón Bolívar, and during my time there I was educated by the campesinos, who became my teachers. This book successfully explicates the impact of neoliberalism on the life of increasingly alienated academic workers and offers an unsparing analysis of the likely conditions they will face in the foreseeable future in England, like the one I have accounted above in the US. Universities continue to grow profits, but such growth is decoupled from the wages and better working conditions for the academics whose labour power fuels such growth. The authors make clear that any possible exit from this situation must have as a priority a critique of political economy and viable alternatives, such as the National Education Service, for a better world.

Peter McLaren is Distinguished Professor in Critical Studies,
College of Educational Studies, Chapman University,
where he is Co-Director of the Paulo Freire

Democratic Project and International
Ambassador for Global Ethics and Social Justice.