The Rise and Fall of the Neo-liberal University

BRONWYN DAVIES, MICHAEL GOTTSCHE & PETER BANSEL

Introduction

The current Australian Federal Government has been systematically restructuring the economy, the labour market and the workplace according to the neo-liberal mantra of deregulation, privatisation and market freedom. Universities have been extensively restructured and re-regulated: indeed, it might be argued that they are currently more highly regulated than ever before — which is somewhat at odds with the neo-liberal emphasis on deregulation. Recently, the government has passed legislation that imposes requirements on universities that are in excess of those required by the workforce in general: increases in federal funds are tied to compliance, with a specified percentage of individual workplace agreements to be introduced by a specified date. These are to replace collectively bargained and union negotiated working conditions. Further, the Minister for Education reserves the right to disallow funding for particular universities if he does not approve the form their particular negotiated agreements take. Funding will also be withheld from any university that makes available any resources (rooms, equipment and so on) to any union organisation. The date set for compliance and release of funds takes effect once the academic year has begun — meaning that universities are beginning the 2006 academic year without confirmation of funding — severely compromising sound economic management. These coercive technologies are cynically described by government as voluntary — universities may, after all, choose to forgo government funding if they don’t want to comply. Given that universities are already highly flexible workplaces, with many staff on individual performance-based contracts, and are compliant with all necessary workplace legislation, such micro-management and increasing regulation seem extraordinary.

Despite the extent of re-structuring and regulating, the rise of neo-liberalism in universities, both in Australia and elsewhere, has been met by an ambivalent struggle on the part of academics. As successive governments in the globalised world have taken on the task of ‘reforming’ workplaces and transforming them into neo-liberal institutions, academics have been hard pressed to generate a collective position of resistance. On the contrary, some have welcomed the transformation, seeing it as offering a solution to problems they had with the traditional workings of power in the universities of the 1960s and 1970s (Davies & Petersen, 2005a and b). Hand in hand with the ‘declared inevitability’ of global economics (Saul, 2005, p. 3) neo-liberal managerialism has come to be widely understood as a set of practices that is necessary for individual, institutional, and national economic survival. Workers have tended to accept the governmental rationality
that money is (always) scarce and that responsible workers must, in the name of continuous improvement, produce (ever) more with less and less. Few guessed, as they embraced various aspects of neo-liberalism and grumbled about others, the extent to which the systemic transformations within universities, and between universities and government, would transform both their subjectivities and their work in a range of detrimental ways (Davies & Petersen, 2005a; 2005b). Perhaps it is only now that the steady and increasing regulation of the academy has become visible as something more than adjustments to past problems; and only now that the equally steady adaptation of academic workers to successive reforms and restructures has begun to make visible the dissonance between the rhetoric of the new economy and its lived effects on both the academy and on the lives of academic workers.

Our analysis draws on interviews undertaken by the first author. These interviews were a detailed exploration of the impact of neo-liberal management practices on the intellectual work of academics. The 26 interviewees were selected on the basis of their positive reputations as teachers and researchers. They were from universities varying in status and size, in both major metropolitan universities and regional universities in Australia, New Zealand, Sweden and the US. Their status ranged from Senior Lecturer to Professor, with many of them having had major administrative responsibilities at some time in their career. Their disciplines were in the Sciences and the Social Sciences. Our analysis is situated within the theoretical terrain of governmentality and focuses on the emergence, in the 70s, of neo-liberalism as an historically specific set of economic discourses and practices.

Foucault uses the term governmentality to mean the art of government, and to signal the historical emergence of distinctive types of rule (Foucault, 1978; Peters, 1999). Neo-liberalism, as a specific mode of government, is variously articulated as advanced liberalism, neo-conservatism, economic liberalism and economic rationalism. It has geographically localised iterations, with the term neo-liberalism more widely used in Europe, economic rationalism in Australia, and neo-conservatism in the US. These various iterations are constituted from the conjoined thematics of: a liberal humanity expressed as philosophy (a relation between the individual and the social, in terms of character, ethics and morality, and the exercise of autonomy, responsibility, freedom and choice); a liberal economics (a relation between the individual, government and the market); and a conservative form of government (generally associated with a right politics that emphasises a withdrawal of government from the welfare state).

These various iterations share a trend towards globalised markets, tariff reductions, deregulation, taxation reform, privatisation, competition, casualisation of the work force and reduced public spending (Deakin, 2001; Dean, 1999; Gamble, 2001; Hay, 1999; Watson et al., 2003). As many costs as possible are shifted from the State back on to individuals, and markets, particularly labour markets, are made as flexible as possible. This is achieved through concerted efforts to de-unionise and deregulate workplaces, wages and conditions. Perhaps the most significant shift wrought by the emergence of neo-liberalism is the profound disengagement of government from the social or public domain, and its emphasis on privatisation. Responsibility for education welfare, hospitals, transport, telecommunications, and so on, are separated from the public domain and attached to the domain of the market and private enterprise.
The emergence of neo-liberalism was characterised by the transformation of the administrative state responsible for human well-being and for the economy into one that gave power to global corporations and installed apparatuses and knowledges through which the people could be reconfigured as economic units. Neo-liberal forms of management require a highly individualised, responsibilised subject; one who, in Saul’s words, is characterised by ‘loyalty, belonging and acceptance, compensated by the rewards of self-interest and marked by the promotion of efficiency in the service of the inevitable’ (2005, p. 13). Neo-liberalism involves not only a configuration of individual subjects as ‘individual entrepreneurial actors across all dimensions of their lives, [but also the] reduction of civil society to a domain for exercising this entrepreneurship’ (Brown, 2003, p. 38). This reconfigured subject is governed through the installed belief in the inevitability (and desirability) of globalisation, its desirability being accomplished with the perception of ‘an expanding economy, national security and [in the US] global power’ (Brown, 2003, p. 38).

The Failure to Resist

The discourses, practices and technologies of neo-liberal governance have been strategically aligned with discourses and practices of globalisation, which support the regulation, management and reach of global capital(ism). This has been in part achieved through those organisations such as the World Trade Organisation, the World Bank and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development standardising and naturalising their particular repertoire of economic discourses and managerial practices, and in part through the market dominance of geographically dispersed multinational corporations.

This diffuse installation of technologies and practices has produced docile neo-liberal subjects who are tightly governed and at the same time, ideally, successful entrepreneurs. In the interests of making workers more governable the collective power of unions has been eroded at the same time as individualism has been heightened through competition, responsibilisation and the transfer of risk from the State to individuals. The curious combination of beliefs that government has left no room for choice on the part of individuals and institutions, and that the changes are voluntary strategies implemented in the interest of protecting workers, emerges in the following interview:

I would hate to be a Vice-Chancellor in the current funding climate . . . I hate what’s happened but I don’t actually think that our Vice-Chancellor’s had any choice. I think, basically what he’s said is that we’re going to do what we have to do to ensure that staff numbers don’t decrease and I don’t see how he had any choice but to do what he’s done. And that was forced on him by government. (Australian female scientist)

Seen in this way, it cannot make sense for academics to debate within the institution whether the changes are desirable. To the extent that they appear inevitable there is nothing to discuss. Claims to an unquestionable truth, that there is no other way, locate neo-liberalism as a fundamentalist discourse (Saul, 2005). Further, to the extent that loyalty is a feature of neo-liberal subjects, debate can be construed as disloyal and as a failure to support the manager, who, in turn, will
work to keep the institution afloat economically, and so protect workers' jobs. Neo-liberalism's heightened focus on the individual and its de-emphasis of the social and of the moral combine with the sense of vulnerability to job loss and to institutional demise to persuade individuals that, if they have problems with the changes, the problems are strictly their own. The acceptance of the necessity of work on the self rather than on the institution is accomplished by incremental changes in governmental practices, rather than through the conscious will to change on the part of the participants. This heightened individualism entails an intensification of some aspects of liberal subjectivities, rather than the radical break with them that postmodernism or post-structuralism might have envisaged (Davies et al., 2006).

Neo-liberalism as a form of governmentality works, then, by convincing workers that there is no choice at a systemic level. Instead, their power lies in their individual choices to become appropriate and successful within that inevitable system. Part of our task, then, in this project, is to challenge that inevitability and to open up the possibility of choice at the systemic level by making visible neo-liberalism's work on academic subjects to transform them, to transform what is thinkable, and to transform the nature of academic work.

In what follows, we consider the related domains of government and of the university. We provide a brief historical sketch of those economic narratives through which the project of neo-liberalism has been advanced. We look at the ways they mobilise concepts of the individual, the social, and education, and at how they produce different sets of relations among them. We trace the changes that have made the idea 'that the market should be allowed to make major social and political decisions' (George, 1999, p. 1), not only thinkable, but so standardised and so naturalised that the belief that there is no alternative can be accepted as a self-evident truth that it is not in need of investigation. We will then go on to ask whether neo-liberalism might be seen, as Saul suggests, to have arrived at its (unheralded) use-by date.

Neo-liberalism, we suggest, is not based on fundamental eternal truths, notwithstanding its claims to that effect. As Saul observes, 'economics is a romantic, tempestuous business, rather theatrical, often dependent on the willing suspension of disbelief by the rest of us. As with other fashions, its truths change more often than in more concrete sectors . . . [and as far as neoliberalism is concerned] a quarter of a century is a good run' (2005, p. 7). Its apparent inevitability was accomplished, he says, by the 'international economic debate being flooded with work funded around the world by largely American neo-conservative foundations holding $2 billion in assets and neo-conservative think-tanks with $140 million to spend every year. This was and remains a gold mine for professors of economics everywhere' (Saul, 2005, pp. 33–4).

**The Domain of Government: a brief history**

In the early decades of the 20th century, the dominant economic narrative was informed by classical or liberal economic theory, which held that economies cyclically go up and down according to the ebb and flow of market forces. The inevitable cyclic downturns were managed through business taking responsibility, using such measures as cutting the size of the workforce and freezing or reducing wages. The responsibility for recovery in this model lay with business while the
burden of recovery was carried by workers. In the 1930s, business failed to engineer the ‘upswing’. The economic recession deepened and turned into what became known as the Great Depression.

There were two competing narratives explaining the Depression. The first of these came from classical economics. It held that the rise of organised labour within mass-production industries (such as mining and manufacturing) was responsible. The union movement was guilty as it would not submit itself to needs of the market and was obstructing the recovery of the economy. The competing narrative shifted responsibility away from business and onto government, and argued that workers did not have to take the brunt of recoveries. Rather, workers’ conditions could go on improving, as could business profits, if business submitted to the demand for greater productivity. This was the Keynesian solution.

The new storyline generated by Keynes was that a high wage policy would force the restructuring of industry around businesses that had the highest productivity. This would allow for the mutual rise in business profits and the wages of workers. Government would facilitate this process by increasing expenditure, and thereby enlarging the market, and by inducing business to increase investment. The leaders of business and industry were resistant to this change and it was necessary for governments to introduce legislation to bring about the shift to the Keynesian model. In the US, for example, Roosevelt’s New Deal regulated wages and taxed uninvested corporate money.

This change placed the control of the economy in the hands of the State. Through legislation, fiscal policy, fixed exchange rates, trade barriers etc., it was the State — and no longer business and the market — that took responsibility for adjusting and stabilising the economy and steering the country through the ebb and flow of economic growth (Cleaver, 1981). Further, the experience of democracy could be extended from representative government to workers being empowered through unions to negotiate better conditions of work and of life for themselves.

Economic texts describe the Keynesian system as the basis for the stability and prosperity of Western countries in the post World War II period and up to the 1970s. By the late 1970s, however, this narrative of stability and prosperity was being overshadowed by another narrative that characterised Keynesian economics as a threat to the Western world. Wages, it was argued, had been increasing at a faster rate than productivity and this was undermining the Keynesian principle in which wages and productivity should grow in accord. Inflation was spiralling. Business attempted to pass on costs to consumers, which led to wage increase demands from workers, which led to increased prices and so on.

The inflationary crisis was an opportunity for classical liberal theorists, most influentially Hayek and Friedman, to re-gain dominance. In the US it gave Carter (and, later, Reagan) the opportunity to (re)vitalise the discourses of (neo)liberal economics (Tabb, 1980). In this new order big business once again gained the upper hand, workers’ wages and conditions were reined in, and the global market dominated government decision-making. Governance became not only the activity of government, but also of quasi governmental bodies such as the WTO and the OECD, and privately funded corporate bodies such as the Trilateral Commission. Founded in 1973 by David Rockefeller and Zbigniew Brzezinski, the Trilateral Commission had, by 1980, 300 members made up of some of the worlds most powerful and wealthy, including people in international business and banking,
from US, Japanese and Western European governments, and from academia, media and conservative Labour (Sklar, 1980). As Sklar points out, ‘The Commission’s purpose is to engineer an enduring partnership among the ruling classes of North America, Western Europe, and Japan — hence the term trilateral — in order to safeguard the interests of Western capitalism in an explosive world’ (Sklar, 1980, p. 2).

The shift to neo-liberal governance refigured relations between government, private enterprise and society, with the economic imperatives of the private sector becoming central to government economic and social policy. This shift was so substantial that it is not unreasonable to say that it involved a change in the meaning of what a democracy is. Brown (2003, p. 41) analyses the shift to neo-liberalism as eviscerating not only social/liberal democratic principles but also democratic morality. The impact on the poor throughout the world has been scandalous, yet these scandals are dismissed within neo-liberal and neo-conservative rhetoric as no more than a matter of ‘miscalculations or political manoeuvring’.

The Domain of the University: a brief history

Public institutions, previously supported as essential to collective well-being, were reconstituted under neo-liberalism as part of the market. ‘Within this view there is nothing distinctive or special about education or health; they are services and products like any other, to be traded in the marketplace’ (Peters, 1999). Many countries’ public sectors were early targets of this ideology in the 1980s and were either privatised or transformed by neo-liberal management technologies. These included increased exposure to competition, increased accountability measures and the implementation of performance goals in the contracts of management. A decade or so later, in the mid- and late 1980s and early 1990s, the same measures were introduced into universities. The dates vary depending on the country. Whereas New Zealand, Australia and the US were early entrants to the new system, Swedish universities were only just beginning to implement neo-liberal strategies at the time of the interviews.

When the Keynesian system was seen to be working well — particularly in the early 1960s — Western governments invested in social institutions that would contribute to the improvement of ‘human capital’, such as education and health. Informing this link between quality of workers and productivity was a belief that much of the economic growth of recent times had come from improvements in the quality of capital and labour. Education was one of the central means by which the ‘quality of capital and labour’ was understood to have been improved.

The generous funding of universities in this period was made on the basis of the belief that knowledge and education were valuable to the state and society for the purposes of defence and for ensuring that all members of society were able to participate and to contribute. The role of government as generous and unobtrusive patron of higher education was established on the presumption that universities would, more or less, support the government’s model of a productive society and of a State that could defend itself. What this economic narrative did not allow for was that knowledge and education might work against utilitarian models of the economic subject and the subject’s relation to the State.
A significant challenge to this idealistic narrative of universities and governments working for a common cause came in 1968 when students in many Western capitalist democracies violently opposed the idea, for example, that universities should support, without question, the link between university research and the military-industrial complex. Students and workers also united in open rebellion against oppressive regimes and the exploitation of the poor. Their rebellion was met with a great deal of support from academics on the left. During the ensuing period, the idea(l) took root in university culture not only of freedom to criticise government but of a moral responsibility to do so. Students began to look less and less like docile workers-in-training and more and more like revolutionaries and rebels.

The events of 1968 resulted in a commitment to greater and more equitable student access to tertiary education and to moving beyond patriarchal and elite attitudes within the organisational practices of universities. It was during this period that the storyline of irresponsible academics abusing the freedom and autonomy of their positions came to be accepted by many as a morally ascendant truth (Davies, 2005c). It was also a time of idealistic, moralistic and passionate commitment to intellectual work, a commitment to a kind of Hegelian or Age of Enlightenment ethos where through an ongoing dialectical process knowledge improves on itself — knowledge is teleological — and works towards the betterment of society and of humanity generally. The flourishing of the individual intellectual worker and of the students was understood to contribute to the flourishing of the social/economic good. Alongside what we have characterised as an Hegelian ethos emerged a post-structuralist critique of the foundations, truths, values and knowledges that such an ethos produced.

What was not visible to many academics pursuing their idealistic and radical agendas was that if conservative and utilitarian values were the implicit basis for funding of the university system, it followed that the same utilitarian ideals could become the basis on which funding could be withheld. Few imagined how dangerous their work with students might seem to be to those in government or to the global leaders of big business and industry. Those leaders who joined hands to form the Trilateral Commission, for example, had begun to see democracies as ungovernable, and as unaffordable. They believed that they must establish a new order to make the world more predictable, and they saw those radical intellectuals — both academics and journalists — as contributing to the dangerous disorder (Sklar, 1980).

In the implementation of the neo-liberal agenda, the idealistic and moral commitments and perceptions of the 1960s and 1970s, particularly as they related to equity and social justice, were colonised in an ‘affirmative tokenism’ (Sklar, 1980, p. 45) that made neo-liberalism not only palatable for some, but even desirable (Lakoff, 2005; Davies, 2005c). However, despite such token affirmative action programmes, neo-liberalism’s re-conceptualisation of capitalist democracy as a relation between government, the individual and the market, withdraws value from the collective and the social good. The free, autonomous, responsible individual of neo-liberalism is no longer located within a community of others: as Margaret Thatcher famously declared, ‘there is no society — there is only the market, and competition among individuals within it’. In this revised liberal model, economic productivity was seen to come not from government investment in education, but from transforming education into a product that could be bought.
and sold like anything else — and in a globalised market, Western education can be sold as a valuable commodity in developing countries. Within universities the meaning of ‘productivity’ was shifted away from a generalised social and economic good towards a notional dollar value for particular government-designated products and practices. Where these products are graduating students, or research published, government could be construed as funding academic work as usual. When the ‘products’ to be funded are research grant dollars, with mechanisms in place to encourage collaboration with industry, this can be seen as straightforward manipulation of academics to become self-funding and to service the interests of business and industry.

With the advent of neo-liberalism, following the downfall of Keynesian economics, the mode of conversation between universities and governments shifted from arguments on the part of each university for increased government funding to automatically reduced funding combined with heavy (and costly) demands on accounting for how that funding was used. The elaborate neo-liberal paraphernalia of surveillance, auditing and control was introduced with each change tied to funding. It was never clear within universities what drove the changes, or where they began and ended. What was clear, however, was that it was necessary to know what changes were being demanded and to implement them if government funding was to be secured. In this new relationship between universities and government, between academics and the State, trust in professional values and practices was no longer the basis of the relationship (Davies, 2003; Rose, 1999).

The required reforms of the management of universities were heavily dependent on arguments that drew upon two particular economic narratives. First, it was argued that governments’ budgets could not cope with the massive expansion of the university system in the post-war period; and second, that universities could be run much more efficiently (where efficiency is equated with doing more with less), by replacing the unbusinesslike collegial system of university government by a form of managerialism modelled on that of the private sector. Management replaced leadership as the primary role of University Presidents and Vice-Chancellors. ‘Efficiency in local management’ was to be achieved through strategies such as ‘reorganisation within the system, breaking up old fiefdoms and subjecting subordinates to vigorous review’ (Marginson & Considine, 2000, p. 35). The new model installed ‘System-level changes [that] created a more competitive relationship between individual institutions, installed efficiency imperatives in day-to-day conduct, and encouraged the emergence of entrepreneurial managements focused on the economic “bottom-line”’ (Marginson & Considine, 2000, p. 28).

The primary aim of government, we suggest, was not simply to do more with less, since the surveillance and auditing systems are extraordinarily costly and ineffective, but to make universities more governable and to harness their energies in support of programmatic ambitions of neo-liberal government and big business. A shift towards economics as the sole measure of value served to erode the status and work of those academics who located value in social and moral domains. Conversely, the technocratic policy-oriented academics, who would serve the ends of global corporate capital, were encouraged and rewarded.

The interview narratives of the participants describe changes that have taken place in universities since the 60s. These are characterised through a binary
construction of the moral order of an ‘old’ and a ‘new’ university, one in which the ‘new’ university is situated as a necessary address (and redress) to the problems of the ‘old’. What is absent or occluded in these narratives is any account of the ways in which the discourses and practices of neo-liberal governance may themselves have been implicated in both discursively constituting and problematising the ‘old’ university, and systematically installing the ‘new’ university through the economic imperatives and technologies of neo-liberal government. In constituting ‘the old university’ as problematic, neo-liberalism provided the solution from which the ‘new’ emerged as necessity and inevitability. This is a tactic of managerialism through which successive institutional restructures and reforms are situated as necessary improvements on the old — constituting past practices and older workers as redundant in the process.

Among the 26 interviewees there are, interestingly, similar patterns in their personal and professional beliefs and commitments and in their experiences of neo-liberalism, despite the different history and detail of transformation of the university system in each country. All of them visibly struggle with the task of becoming appropriate(d) neo-liberal subjects. All of them express some distress, no matter how successful they are or how willingly they have entered into some aspects of neo-liberalism. Higher education, they say, is not in good shape. Most talk about their university as in a state of financial crisis and many also talk about it as in a state of ethical crisis. Most describe levels of stress that are bad for their health (Winefield et al., 2002). Despite the bad shape of their universities and despite their stress, they talk about academic work as a reward in itself. Most (all but one) agree that they support the ethos of commitment to truth, reason, free speech, free enquiry, collegiality and public responsibility and that they are committed to the idea that universities should be critical incubators for intellectual life. They also said that being free to disagree with those in positions of authority was important and that they should critique popular ideas. The majority did not agree with the corporatisation of universities nor did they agree that university management and decision-making should be driven by the market. The majority of those interviewed said that their research had not benefited from the neo-liberal insistence on making research links with industry. They were not cynical about their own research, however, even though they claimed that their capacity for innovation and creativity was being damped down.

Interestingly, and notwithstanding the negative impacts they described of the neo-liberal system, none of the interviewees expressed a desire to return to the past, which they saw as seriously flawed. As one of the most outspoken critics of the pre-neo-liberal university said:

We can mourn as much as we want the passing of the old universities but the old university was as inimical to me and probably more so than this University because I was more excluded from any kind of channels of action.
(Australian female social scientist)

While the ‘old university’ had many desirable features that were mourned in the interviews, it was also seen to have systemic faults. The interviewees’ depiction of the differences between the system of the 1960s and 1970s and the present neo-liberal system show favourable and unfavourable elements in both:
Narratives and discourses employed by interviewees to describe the university of the 60s–70s and the neo-liberal university of the 80s–00s

The advantages perceived in the current university system were, predictably, increased accessibility and equity, less room for irresponsible individuals, greater accountability, greater diversity of the student body, more choice in career paths for students. This was weighed against a perception of neo-liberalism’s impersonal style, lack of trust, increased hierarchy and managerialism, endless paperwork, lower funding, reduction in autonomy, reduced time for students and greater government control.

The ‘old’ traditional, liberal university (including its more radical elements following 1968) was characterised as smaller, more personal, with more trust, but also elite and exclusive. It was more collegial and democratic, but discriminatory. It was more stable and adhered to a range of principles beyond economic principles. There was more funding, more autonomy, but also more room for individual abuses. There was more time for students and also occasional neglect. Students were from elite backgrounds and their choices of what to study were based on social background. There was little perceived government interference and academics experienced a great deal of authority. The many tensions between the radical push of the 60s and early 70s, the endurance of features of the traditional university, and the neo-liberal desire for greater governability are evident in the interviewees’ depictions of the changes they have observed.

While the perceptions of earlier inefficiencies may have been accepted as a reason to change, the solutions provided by the neo-liberal system are generally perceived as bringing with them an array of new inefficiencies with individual workers now preoccupied with excessive bureaucracy and endless paperwork. The belief that accountability might lead to better teaching and better treatment of students is not one shared by the interviewees. They cannot see that it has produced much that is better for students. Many see the neo-liberal university as ‘dumbing down’ knowledge and as giving them less time for individual students. What is produced is simply a greater extent of ‘accounting’ in monetary terms —
who delivers what services for how many less dollars in how much reduced time. One of the interviewees, a scientist who describes himself as very critical of the old system, nevertheless claimed:

Teaching assessment is a joke. It’s a bit of window dressing and it happens I do very well at it, but that’s just my good luck in a way and I don’t mind it. But, I don’t think anyone could seriously think that we assess teaching now. We just go through the motions. (Australian male scientist).

So who is this window dressing for? Under neo-liberal systems ‘quality’ has to be demonstrated by going through a number of motions before funding is secured. This can be, as the following interviewee suggests, a deeply cynical exercise:

We put more and more regulations in and the consequences of those are more and more unpredictable things that in turn need more and more regulations and you get a spiraling that you are basically spending 90% of your effort at regulating the system and only 10% of it at the system actually doing anything. (American male social scientist).

The voices of despair about the overwhelming nature of workloads featuring the excessive demands of meeting the requirements of surveillance and auditing are intensified by the elevation of the dollar as the single or dominant indicator of value. This induced a feeling of despair in some of the interviewees:

It is all filling in grids, and gathering statistics and then we have to put in place an evaluation system, or assessment system that tracks graduates for five years, it is nitty gritty stuff like this . . . So I have to say that in the last two years my writing is virtually non-existent, and my research, and I am getting very angry now. And I am wondering if I can stay here or if I have to walk away from academe totally. (American female social scientist).

Given all these negative features of neo-liberalism, it is interesting to ask how it was that academics were so thoroughly taken over (and taken in) by it. Are its positive features enough to explain the extent to which it dominates academic lives? In the analyses of the interviews undertaken so far (Davies, 2003, 2005a, 2005b; Davies & Bansel, 2005; Davies & Petersen, 2005a, 2005b; Davies et al., 2005) it becomes evident that academic workers are struggling with more, or sometimes, less success to become the docile subjects who give government what it wants. And at the same time, taken up as they are by the discourses through which they are defined as free, autonomous and responsible, they disavow their own docility and see themselves as choosing to work in the ways they are working — as responsible for their own misery and for the inferior nature of their products (Davies & Bansel, 2005). In what follows we will suggest that it is precisely this (disavowed) docility that serves the programmatic ambitions of neo-liberal government.

For this docile subject, the excesses of productivity (combined with anxiety that it is never enough) have seriously negative impacts on health (Winefield et al., 2002). These doubly negative impacts could suggest that no rational government could want this if it is concerned either about the health and well-being of the
workers (if only for the negative impact on health costs), or the quality of what they produce. We suggest, however, that within a particular economic narrative, located within a particular historical context, these so-called negative impacts can actually seem desirable if they increase both docility and the new 'productivity'. And indeed, we could say that neo-liberalism is successful within those narrow terms since within the new order, academic communities engaging in critique and potential rebellion are generally perceived by academics themselves to have become an unaffordable luxury. The talk that informs critique and the development of a counter-discourse takes time–time that no-one any longer has (Davies & Bansel, 2005).

Because of the deep commitment expressed about continuing to do work that is valued for its intellectual rather than monetary worth (and despite the imposition of neo-liberal technologies), the interviewees often seriously over-worked themselves, giving up their private lives, for example, in order to continue to produce the work that they were passionate about. Others drew back from the 80-hour weeks worked before the advent of neo-liberalism, seeing their family lives at risk from the ever-increasing pressure. Whilst they were reluctant to describe their work as of lesser quality than previously, they claimed without hesitation that the new system was forcing them into inferior work (Davies & Petersen, 2005a, 2005b; Davies & Bansel, 2005). Many recounted negative impacts on their work:

And I'd say, yes, there were those times when I certainly felt that my capacity for innovation and creativity and even capacity to engage in some sort of thought that had some intellectual stretch were being washed down the tubes. (New Zealander female social scientist).

As Marginson and Considine suggest, universities may have needed reinvention but this should not be done by punitive denial of those aspects of academic culture that facilitate excellence in teaching and research. They argue that if, ‘reinvention worked through academic cultures, actively engaging them, a larger, more exciting and more educationally enriching range of reinventions might become possible’ (Marginson & Considine, 2000, p. 237).

Moving Forward to the 21st Century: fertile ground for the fall of neo-liberalism

In considering the question of where to next, it is important not to lose sight of what the interviewees saw as some of the advantages of neo-liberalism. At the same time, it is also important that we make its negative workings visible and available for critique. We have attempted in these sketches of the rise of neo-liberalism and neo-liberal governance of the academy to signal the imperatives and strategies through which neo-liberalism emerged in its historical context. We have also sketched the ways in which these historical shifts mobilised certain desires and commitments (including equity, freedom, responsibility, transparency, access and choice) as a means of securing a re-conceptualisation of the relationship between government, society and the subject in economic terms.

In addressing the policies and practices through which the programmatic ambitions of neo-liberal governance have been realised, we have foregrounded the ways in which economic discourses and imperatives have reshaped social relations.
and subjects, both within the university and beyond. Academic subjects have been constituted and managed as successful or appropriate subjects on terms that have been increasingly driven by externalised, globalised economic relations. Academic work, along with academic worker subjectivities, have been reshaped through practices that emphasise and privilege some relations and performances and foreclose others. The imperatives of the practises through which academic subjects are governed have turned away from the intellectual work of critique and innovation towards managing workloads and meeting the terms of workplace agreements as measured through publication outputs, research funding, the establishment of relationships with industry partners, etc.

There is a growing global tendency to recognise, name and respond to neo-liberalism as a system of governmentality, making it visible where it was previously an unnamed set of technologies aimed at privileging corporate capital. The illusion that we have had some choice in embracing neo-liberal policies and practices and have willingly and knowingly brought it on ourselves is being disassembled in this work and in the work of authors like George and Saul. We have arrived at a time when it is possible to analyse the ways in which the technologies of neo-liberalism rely on (and generate) little more than an illusion of voluntarism, autonomy and freedom.

How then, might we both understand and resist the specific mechanisms, modalities, techniques and discourses through which neo-liberalism is constituted as inevitable? And in anticipating its fall, what will that look like? We know that it is likely to be neither sudden nor announced. The end of neo-liberalism will, no doubt, be as piecemeal and diffused as its implementation, and it will be peppered with neo-liberal zealots pressing their neo-liberal reforms with more determination than ever.

In this article, we have analysed the rise of neo-liberalism in universities, showing what has been foreclosed by neo-liberal regulation of the academy, of academic work and of academic workers. Being able to see how the conditions through which this rise has been discursively and materially installed as inevitable and necessary allows us to imagine and mobilise strategic action towards acts which in turn forestall the appropriation of our work and our lives by neo-liberal ideals. And as Sartre wrote to the students at the end of May '68: ‘You have an imagination . . . Something has emerged from you which surprises, which astonishes and which denies everything that has made our society what it is today. That is what I would call the extension of the field of possibility. Do not give up’ (cited in Ali & Watkins, 1998, p. 105).

In understanding the conditions of possibility through which neo-liberalism has done its work in, on and through us, we might begin to reshape the academy, academic work and ourselves through interventions that resist the master narratives and technologies of neo-liberal governance. We can begin, in Barthes’ (1977) term, to ‘decompose’ the individualistic neo-liberal subjects we have become. Neo-liberalism, as rationality, as necessity, as inevitability can be turned on itself and shown to be less than rational, less than necessary, less than inevitable. It will take individual and collective imagination and profound courage to re-envision and re-create the university of the 21st century as a place that sustains scholarly intellectual work.

Neither the rise of neo-liberalism, nor its downfall, are understood here as the product of a coordinated, coherent set of intentions, or linear and massively
orchestrated events. Rather, they are understood as emergent from local re/iterations of ideologies, discourses, reactions and tactics, from ‘what we might call the efficacy of dispersed and discontinuous offensives’ (Foucault, 1969/2003, p. 5). Similarly, dispersed and discontinuous offensives can undo the ‘astonishing efficacy of totalitarian theories, or at least — what I mean is — all-embracing and global theories’ (1969/2003, p. 6). Just as the rise of neo-liberalism cannot be traced to linear and massively orchestrated events, so it is with its fall. The fall is emerging from a series of small, local and co-extensive critiques that are discontinuous and yet astonishing in their overall power to lead to the crumbling of something that has seemed so total and impregnable. What we might look forward to will include anything positive that was generated during the last 25 years of neo-liberalism; and while we do not imagine a romantic reversion to the old, we would hope for a recovery of those values that situated universities as vital to the practice of social/liberal democratic principles.

How we choose, individually and collectively, to act now will in itself be constitutive of the emergence of what is to come: ‘we can’t be sure of what is coming next, although we can almost certainly influence the outcome’ (Saul, 2005, p. 3).

NOTE

1. It is interesting to note that these critiques from George and Saul that have captured the public imagination come from outside the university system.

REFERENCES

DAVIES, B. (2005c) The impossibility of intellectual work in neoliberal regimes, Discourse, 26, pp. 3–16.


