

# Life in Neoliberal Institutions: Australian Stories

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Bronwyn Davies<sup>1,2</sup> 

## Abstract

In this article, I examine some of the neoliberal technologies that have impacted Australian academics and their workplaces over the last three decades. My focus here is on the silencing of academics through those technologies. Neoliberalism works through entangled discourses and practices, which we academics have, in no small part, actively taken up. Recognizing the constitutive force of our naive collusion, and our own agency in the take-up and maintenance of neoliberalism, is relevant, first, to dispelling the sense of powerlessness that sucks the breath out of many in the academy, and, second, for mobilizing that agency in the development of collegial and collective practices that can contribute to the emergence of the post-neoliberal academy.

## Keywords

neoliberalism, resistance, critique, post-neoliberal academy

*The silencing of academics has not been accomplished through a uni-directional imposition of power on the part of government. Power, as Barad points out, is “an immanent dispersed cause”, and subjects are not passive products or mere effects of historical formations.” (Barad 2008, p. 311)*

One of the claims used to justify neoliberal technologies when they were first being mobilized in the 1990s in Australian universities was that they would produce increases in quality and excellence. Another was that they would establish gender equity. University managers, in the face of reduced government funding, embraced the technologies and the discourses and practices through which they were rationalized, in an attempt to achieve the necessary economic efficiencies. To the extent that government funding depended on the implementation of the new technologies they believed they had no choice. Audit technologies were implemented by government to monitor and quantify the required advances in workers’ productivity, and university managers in turn generated audit technologies within each university (Bansel, Davies, Gannon, & Linnell, 2008).

The audit technologies, despite government and university management claims, did not simply *represent* a world that existed prior to their implementation; the measures themselves were productive, and not just of compliance. They shaped both the way the work itself could be produced, and they hollowed out the vulnerable subjects who produced those increases—subjects whose moral compass and will to critique were being continually overridden by

the external drivers of intensified competition, loss of security, and fear of reprisals.

Should one of those subjects question the new technologies, they were silenced with the neoliberal slogans that had become the new management-speak in the academy. Those who raised questions discovered compliance was necessary not just for their own survival in a competitive world but also for the very survival of their own school or department, and indeed for the survival of the university itself. Even the survival of the nation in a competitive globalized world could be weighed into the act of quelling resistance. Acts of resistance were individualized and pathologized, and such individuals were at risk of being positioned as backsliders or “dead wood,” which needed to be removed.

The radical 1960s that culminated in the global revolution of students and workers in May 1968 (Ali & Watkins, 1998) had unsettled what Friedmanites deemed to be the “natural order.”<sup>1</sup> In that so-called natural order, workers must accept oppressive work conditions or risk joining the unemployed. The restoration of that natural order, following May 1968, involved the development of strategies for silencing radical critique. The form that first took was brutal dictatorship under Pinochet, who was strongly supported by

<sup>1</sup>The University of Melbourne, Victoria, Australia

<sup>2</sup>Western Sydney University, New South Wales, Australia

## Corresponding Author:

Bronwyn Davies, Youth Research Centre, Melbourne Graduate School of Education, The University of Melbourne, Victoria 3010, Australia.  
Email: [daviesb@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:daviesb@unimelb.edu.au)

Friedman and his economist colleagues in Chicago. That took two decades to overturn. Subsequent restorations were in a sense more sinister, taking place as they did under the guise of liberalism. Neoliberalism was to bring under control our powers of critique and resistance, and to do so in a way that we found difficult to oppose.

In the beginning, there was no name for what was taking place. Friedman had mastered the technique of disguising the nature of the new order through using the language of the system he was interested in dismantling. There was nothing natural about his natural order. Neoliberal-speak uses quality when it means quantity, and natural for what is engineered. It didn't occur to us that our work was perceived as dangerous and was being brought under control.<sup>2</sup>

Through the 1970s and 1980s, the *Trilateral Commission* brought together powerful individuals, politicians, academics, and entrepreneurs, from North America, Western Europe, and Japan, to develop the diverse technologies that would install what we would later come to name neoliberalism. Among the Trilateral Commission papers, we find that post May 1968 it was not foreign powers or the internecine war between political factions that was the problem for powerful nations, but the *mobilized citizens* (Sklar, 1980). The people, they asserted, had become ungovernable, and democracy was thus unaffordable. Mobilized citizens were causing a "decline in the strength of imperialism abroad" (Sklar, 1980, p. 43). The Trilateral Commission's purpose was

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 . . . "trilateralism" refers to the doctrine of world order advanced by the Commission. (Sklar, 1980, p. 2)

The implementation of the trilateral technologies, which we were later to call neoliberalism, was deliberately piecemeal, so disguising the order that was being installed. While many of us continued to believe in and to work toward the fulfillment of the ideals of May 1968, neoliberal technologies were shifting discussions away from our work and from *what mattered* in that work, and in the world at large, to a "permanent conversation about which policies are affordable, efficient and provide people with the right incentives" (Denniss, 2018, p. 7). We were to be re-constituted as *homo economicus* for whom money was the only real value.

Those technologies put to work on us, as Thatcher said, were designed to re-shape our hearts and souls. They would work on our desires, though fear as well would be mobilized as a major driver. At first, the Trilateral Commission's piecemeal strategies appeared to be benign. And who could argue with "efficiency" and "effectiveness," or with "excellence"

or "quality"? Over the decades of neoliberal strategic manipulation, the harm to academics and to the academy has become evident. We have become fearful of engaging in critique and active resistance, and we have, some of us, become demonstrably heartless. As Denniss (2018) observed, "Children in Australia die in the custody of our governments, but our public debate focuses on our fiscal deficits, not our moral deficits. That's quite a feat" (pp. 11-12).

We might have expected academics not to be taken in by the linguistic trickery through which neoliberalism was installed. But instead, we repeatedly rose to the challenges of the ever-increasing productivity that was demanded of us, in teaching, in research, in administration, and in community service, all to be measured through ubiquitous audit technologies. The competitive spirit that had led us to strive at our studies and become academics in the first place was something that made us easy fish to hook in strategies that divided us from each other. "Success" morphed into the ticking of boxes that demonstrated our ever-increasing productivity, making us, we hoped, worthy of promotion, or study leave, or research grants—or continuing employment.

Working out how to tick the right boxes became an obsession. I remember with a sinking heart the day a petty bureaucrat, head of the University's research office, came to the School of Education to lecture us on how to tick the right boxes. I listened in horrified silence to the catalog of superficial strategies that were to replace the hard work of thinking. At the end of his talk, there was a burst of spontaneous applause from my colleagues, grateful for the tips on how to survive in the changing academy. When I pointed out, in the discussion that followed, that my response-ability as a research leader was to counter the very strategies he had recommended, if research that mattered was what we sought to engage in, he claimed, as if he believed it to be true, that none of his strategies were incompatible with quality research. The difference between quantity and quality had been so effectively smudged by then that they had become interchangeable, making my words apparently meaningless.

My research on the impact of neoliberalism on academic work in Australia, New Zealand, Sweden, and the United States unearthed multiple tales of the quality of research being eroded and of stress levels rising. Academics were going to extreme lengths to re-make themselves as survivable subjects in the new order of things; they searched for justifications for what they were doing and generally lost sight of what was being compromised.

For me, in the first decade of the new century, when winning research grants became the primary indicator of academic excellence, and books and research papers were deemed to be of negligible value, my own will to continue re-making myself (while simultaneously engaging in sustained critique) faltered. I came to the daunting realization that my university was no longer willing or able to provide

me with the conditions that would enable me to continue what I thought of as my life's work. I would have to cut myself loose to maintain my integrity.

It is interesting to look back on the academy before the installation of neoliberal technologies. When I first entered the academy in the 1970s, it was deemed necessary for academics to be free of political pressure, and thus free of fear of what might come from being critical of government. Tenure was seen as essential (though in practice it was generally only seen as essential for men). We were also, in the 1970s, free from interference from the law. Police were only allowed on campus if they were invited. University campuses were, in effect, sanctuaries for those engaging in the hard work of thinking free of political interference. Only gross and continual misconduct was grounds for dismissal.

That freedom from the striations of the outside world was inevitably abused. Protected academics did indeed engage in gross misconduct, mostly gross sexual misconduct, though that often remained unreported. Even when it was reported, and I encountered some horrendous cases, the perpetrators did not lose their tenured professorships. The molested female workers and students, in contrast, were both temporary and expendable.

It was thus not so difficult for managers to enlist liberal feminists in the charge against the old freedoms. Many became ardent supporters of the new technologies, often becoming the new bosses, the "femocrats," who espoused and oversaw the rise of neoliberal technologies.

### How Were We So Blind?

The strong boundaries between disciplines contributed to our blindness. For my part, I was focused on exploring and extending the possibilities of qualitative research. I didn't think economic theory had anything to say to me. I took for granted that developing strategies to give voice and agency to the oppressed—to children, to women, and to ethnic minorities—was necessary work. I remained naive about the commonalities between Pinochet's regime and changes taking place in Australia. It is only now, three decades later, that they are becoming evident. An Australian journalist noted recently that the right wing of the Australian government "seems junta-ready, filled with fantasies of violence and retribution" (Rundle, 2018, p. 7). In the United States, Trump, in his chaotic clown-like way, is in no doubt that junta readiness is a virtue (Davies, 2019).

In 2019, Australian politicians, on both the left and the right, appear to have so thoroughly swallowed neoliberal discourses and practices that they have little capacity to envisage anything different. As the fault-lines of neoliberalism start to show, critique is beginning to appear in popular media. Denniss (2018) wrote, for example,

the neoliberal agenda of "free markets," "free trade" and "trickle-down tax-cuts" has wounded our national identity,

bled our national confidence, caused paralysis in our parliaments, and is eating away at the identity of those on the right of Australian politics. (p. 2)

So how did we get there?

In the early 1980s, the Australian government discovered it could engineer change in the university sector simply through threatening reductions in funding if certain criteria were not met. By the 1990s, they withdrew funding from "non-productive" critical disciplines such as Women's Studies, History, and Philosophy, on the grounds that they were unproductive and thus unaffordable. Simultaneously, the power of unions to protect the workers, and their disciplines, was strategically undermined. The Industrial Commission, where workers' conditions had previously been negotiated, was de-commissioned. In its place, Enterprise Bargaining was instituted. Every 3 years, each university now had to justify its bid for government funding in terms of demonstrated improvements in productivity. In successive rounds of Enterprise Bargaining, hard-won working conditions were traded for salary rises that might, though usually did not, keep up with inflation.

Some of us enthusiastically embraced the new technologies, and we set to work making ourselves over into subjects who could survive and perhaps even flourish within their terms. Some of us bought the myth that had begun to circulate in popular media outlets, that if we worked hard enough, and cleverly enough, we could rise to the top. Those who had been precluded from advancement in the old system were particularly vulnerable to this fantasy.

The new, individualized, competitive framework was particularly seductive for women. The products that would lead to success were clearly specified, unlike in the former regime, where the keys to success were held close to the chests of successful men. As it later turned out, what had seemed so clear in the new regime changed regularly, as managers doubled and trebled the goals, or dumped "products" that had previously been at the top of the list.

The academic unions did not oppose the changes. Like the rest of us, they busied themselves with learning how to adapt to them. When I suggested in the mid-1990s that we must get rid of Enterprise Bargaining because it was undoing all we had ever fought for, they told me they wanted to keep it because they were now skilled up for it. Union workers too, were vulnerable, positioned by government as the enemy, along with critical scholars and journalists. Union activism was "unnatural" and detrimental to the newly installed natural order. University managers, academics, and unions were effectively mobilized in the task of restoring that natural order.

In Australia, one of the earliest signs of the return to the natural order (if only we had been able to read it as that) was the reduction of government funding for research. Research funding from business and industry, which had previously been regarded as of questionable value, was now encouraged.

Business and industry rapidly discovered they had the power to dictate our findings, simply by withdrawing funding until our reports said what they wanted. A reward for that compliance might be, of course, the all-important letter claiming the research had had an “impact” (a “product” that was now required).

Even into the mid 1990s, we were, generally, naively unsuspecting of the changes. We still tended to think change was always good. When I expressed disquiet, for example, as a new professor at James Cook University, about some of the new technologies being introduced, in this case that we should pay a (neoliberal) consultant to guide us in forming our newly mandated plan for the future, I was told in no uncertain terms by my then head of school that I had not been employed to be a conservative. Resisting the new technologies was cast as opposition to the progress we collectively desired.

I was also told by the consultant who was appointed to run that workshop that I was to remain silent, as my attempts to generate discussions among my colleagues were not welcome. Instead of the discussions we needed to have about possible futures, we threw mini-bean bags to each other and filled out silly forms and handed over the future of our work to the consultant. After the workshop, we worked hard on those plans to turn them into something we could believe in, and after weeks of work, they were filed away somewhere and were never referred to again.

It was around that time that I began to research neoliberalism to make sense of what was happening to us.<sup>3</sup>

Following the changes in research funding, the casualization of academic labor was extended through mandatory ratios of tenured to untenured faculty. The avowed purpose was to ensure greater *flexibility* (a new buzz-word) to respond to new (market) demands. Insecure jobs and the prospect of whole schools and departments being closed added to the sense of competition and vulnerability.

Through Enterprise Bargaining, tenure was traded off, and in its place previously tenured workers had “continuity,” and that continuity depended on whether the university needed or wanted us. Casual and contract workers, of course, did not even have the prospect of continuity.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, at the University of New England, I worked with a group of feminist scholars from a wide range of disciplines to develop a women’s studies diploma and a master’s degree. We got them through the approval process by undertaking to teach them for free, that is, on top of our existing teaching loads. If the degrees had no resource implications, they couldn’t be blocked. Women, whose degrees had foreclosed further study, now had a pathway opened to them, and many of our students went on to PhDs. What we inadvertently gave permission for, however, was a formal increase in our teaching loads, because we had undermined any argument against them.

Restructuring of schools and departments was repeatedly implemented in the name of efficiency and effectiveness, with the desired effect of removing our institutional memory and collegiality. There could be no appeal to how things had always been done or how they should be done. Institutional memory was seen as an impediment to change. We must become blank slates onto which the new practices could be written. These, of course, were not the arguments presented to us.

Each triennium, in the funding negotiation rounds, the government would offer to the management of each university 10 conditions (such as withdrawing support for the student union). Each university could select three of the 10 conditions, and these were traded for an increase in the depleted funding. One senior manager confided in me that all 10 conditions were morally repugnant, but that they experienced a sense of agency, even elation, at being able to reject seven of them. They were thus persuaded, each triennium, to trade off conditions they had previously been party to establishing when they were committed to values other than financial values. The managers of each university were being made over into “contracting individuals who express their freedom through choices from available offers” (Rundle, 2018, p. 7). A further benefit to government of this particular strategy was that each university chose a different set of conditions, thus obscuring their origin and obscuring the nature of the beast we were up against. We, the workers, were not usually told about those conditions and how they were negotiated; the new conditions just emerged without explanation.

When I was Head of the School of Education at James Cook University, the School was told by the Vice Chancellor that “student retention” was now an issue that was affecting our funding from government. Each school was to have 5% of its funding withheld, and the withheld funds would be re-allocated to those schools with the highest student-retention rates. I pointed out that this was highly inequitable, given that the university had unilaterally lowered the entry scores for those applying to study Education (a strategy to bring in much-needed students to boost funding), and this had flooded our school with students who could not possibly succeed without significant support. Because our staff-student ratio in the school of education had now been raised to three times higher than the average university ratio, we had no capacity to deliver that individual support. The only way to increase retention was to lower our pass rates and send graduates into schools who would inevitably fail as teachers—and that we obviously could not do. The Vice Chancellor snapped back:

That is just what I have come to expect of you Professor Davies—you can only see the negative. Why can you not be like other heads of school, who welcome this new policy, seeing it as a reward for improving their retention rates?

My resistance was individualized and pathologized—a common mode of silencing. My colleagues later told me I should not have risked alienating the Vice Chancellor, but as far as I remember, the 5% strategy was never implemented.

From the 1990s, there was a substantial increase in the responsibility of universities to report to government, which in turn required a shift in the work of administrative staff from the support of academic work to preparing government reports and to preparing for government audits. During the training exercises for one such audit, I was ordered to stay at home during the days of the audit after I revealed that I was not prepared to lie to the government auditors. The lie we were being “trained” to tell was that our academic work was flourishing under the quality/excellence/audit regime.

Vice Chancellors (i.e., Presidents) who had previously been chosen from among academics were turned into CEOs with increased salaries and powers, and a weakened commitment to academic values. Furthermore, a mantra appeared, asserting that only those who had studied courses in (neoliberal) management, like the Harvard MBA, could work successfully as managers.

Recently, I heard about a consultant who was hired to up-skill research leaders. When the participants in one such workshop questioned the use of psychometric measures of introversion and extroversion as a suitable guide to their leadership decisions, they were told that their academic backgrounds that had encouraged critical thought lay at the heart of “their problem.” Their critical skills, the consultant explained, were impeding their development as research leaders.

Power was increasingly handed over to the auditors to judge academic productivity. The auditors were to become the kings. Once when I had driven two hours south of the city I worked in, to lead a week-long research workshop (at no cost to the university), I was hauled before my head of school for not having filled out the travel form—an on-line form designed by a travel agency—and which I had understood only to apply to funded air travel. This unwieldy form took the best part of a day to fill in. I had already notified my head of school that I had belatedly filled it in, as I now understood it applied to all travel. I asked why he felt it necessary to reprimand me when he knew it was an honest mistake, which had been rectified. His reply was, “I have to honor the auditor.” I was astonished: “And your professors and research leaders, do they not need to be honored?” I asked. This was met with an embarrassed silence. It was no longer a question that could be asked or answered.

On another occasion I sought an interview with the head auditor to find out how these processes worked from his point of view. He declared himself completely good-willed and harmless, not party to controlling or shaping our work. He was a lackey, simply monitoring the state of things. Like the petty bureaucrat I described earlier, he believed what he

said. The puppeteer, in a neoliberal regime, was impossible to find.

Yet the changes were inexorable. Bit by piecemeal bit, everything academics did in teaching, research, governance, and community service was reduced to measurable units. One such measure produced the finding, shortly after I took up my position as research professor at Western Sydney University, that I was “research-inactive.” As such, I was not entitled to apply for research funding or to have time allocated to do research. All my publications, of which there were, admittedly, quite a few, including two recently published sole-authored books, had been deemed irrelevant, as I had published them while at my previous university. When I asked how it would look on the front page of Murdoch’s *Daily Telegraph* that Western Sydney University appointed research-inactive professors, the finding that I was research-inactive was suddenly withdrawn. Managers, I later discovered, had their own lists of boxes, one of which told them to consider whether the effect of their decision-making might appear on the front page of the *Daily Telegraph*. Bringing ill-repute to the university was an offense that could lead to dismissal. A right-wing, anti-intellectual newspaper had become a significant player in university affairs.

Petty bureaucrats were busy meanwhile implementing the new technologies; they busied themselves, for example, in deciding which journals we should publish in. Later they developed strategies for ensuring we only published in our own disciplines, and they decided for us what our disciplines were. Gaining recognition as someone who was research-active became a complex puzzle; it depended on working out in what way conformity to the rules, rules that multiplied and shifted daily, could establish one’s worth. Quantitative, conservative journals were favored, and when we put up a concerted battle about that, all publications were eventually written off as having no value. Only research income, preferably from business or industry, would count as worth anything in assessing our productivity. Productivity had visibly morphed into economic productivity.

Later, not long before I pulled the plug on my institutional life, “critical mass” came into favor, no doubt as one of the 10 conditions. We each had to become part of a “critical mass” whose research was limited to one Field of Research code. Publications or research grants not falling within our designated code would not be counted as relevant to any measures of our productivity.

And so it went, in a downward spiral of control and manipulation. I left my paid job at the university so that I could get on with my work, unimpeded by all those technologies that demoralized and intimidated us. The appointments I now have are “honorary,” and I am free to focus on working out what matters, and how, in the face of what matters, I might sustain creative and response-able research.

There are now enormous challenges in re-imagining a different future in what will be the post-neoliberal academy.

## The Broader Picture

There has been, over this period of neoliberalization, a continued weakening of democracy in the removal of human rights and freedoms. Jillian Triggs, when president of the Australian Human Rights Commission, came under constant attack from government for publicly stating what she saw to be unacceptable government behavior. She writes that by using the rhetoric of protecting insiders from outsiders, the general populace has been fooled into turning a blind eye to the appalling treatment of refugees and to the laws that, piecemeal bit by piecemeal bit, are undermining Australian democracy:

Over the last two decades Australian parliaments have passed scores of laws that infringe our democratic freedoms of speech, association and movement, the right to a fair trial and the prohibition of arbitrary detention. Disproportionate laws have granted executive and ministerial discretions that are often not subject to judicial or merits review. (Triggs, 2018, p. 7)

Triggs received continual and excoriating attacks from conservative government ministers who by now have lost sight of the fact that democracy depends on critique, and capitalism depends on creativity.

Neoliberal technologies have been extraordinarily successful in turning us into individuals who rate our own survival (and sometime success) more highly than the loss of those old democratic principles that might have generated public protest. As Chomsky (2018) says, in the United States, “intellectuals and academics want to work within the system and gain the benefits that come from obedience and passivity” (p. 59). Our hearts and souls and minds have been won. Thatcher would be jubilant were she to witness the extent of our docile governability.

## (In)conclusion

I have painted a seemingly depressing picture of naive collusion and adaptations to neoliberal technologies. I have shown how we have been made captive, arguing at the same time that we have not been powerless or without agency. As I said at the outset, power is “an immanent dispersed cause”, and subjects are not passive products or mere effects of historical formations” (Barad, 2008, p. 311). Neoliberalism works through entangled discourses and practices which we have, in large part, actively taken up. This is not to cast blame, but to draw attention to the fact that we do have agency, which we can mobilize in the development of collegial practices that will make the emergence of a post-neoliberal academy possible. We are not solely *determined* by

neoliberal technologies. To begin to make a difference, we need to abandon deterministic conceptions of causality. As Barad (2008) says, “queering standard notions of causality is a critical intervention for opening up possibilities for resistance and agency” p. 312). We can work out, together, how the entangled discourses of neoliberalism have captured us, and we can develop new ways of thinking and new collegial and collective practices, which will serve us well in the post-neoliberal epoch to come. One such example is the International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry where that critical collegial work has never stopped.

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## ORCID iD

Bronwyn Davies  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9797-0286>

## Notes

1. Friedman led the Chicago-based group of economists who espoused Hayek's theory.
2. I use the collective pronoun here at the risk of overgeneralization. The “we” of this article is the collective academic world that I was part of. There may have been others who saw what was happening quite differently.
3. Some of the papers that emerged from that research include Bansel, Davies, Gannon, and Linnell (2008), Davies and Bansel (2005, 2007, 2010), Davies, Browne, Gannon, Honan, and Somerville (2005), Davies, Gottsche, and Bansel (2006), Davies and Petersen (2005a, 2005b), Petersen and Davies (2010), and Zabrodska, Linnell, Laws, and Davies (2011)

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### Author Biography

**Bronwyn Davies** is an independent scholar, professorial fellow at The Melbourne University and Emeritus Professor at Western Sydney University. Her book *New Lives in an Old Land and Re-turning to the Colonisation of New South Wales through Stories of my Parents and their Ancestors* was published in 2019 by Ornithorhynchus Paradoxus Books.