

PLG PROGRAM PAPERS

Editors' note: The following four papers were presented at the PLG program "Deprofessionalization, Cutbacks & Progressive Librarianship in the Trump Era" on 25 June 2017, ALA Annual Conference, Chicago.

Neoliberalism and the Academy

by Peter McDonald

A common theme you'll hear stated through the four talks today will be the impact of neoliberal thinking in the affairs, not only of librarianship as a profession, but also in the administrative running of our libraries, and, more widely, within the commons of society as a whole, and finally, inside the academy where sadly it is now rife as well. On this latter point, which is the focus of my talk, forget a liberal education, whoever mentions the benefits of such an education today to create well rounded citizens, gone are those days. Instead, universities everywhere talk in the jargon of the marketplace, terms like leverage, disruptive innovation, the new normal, mind-share, win-win, spin-up are all bromides from the private sector now rife in academia! It is this latter arena which I will explore and discuss more fully today – in short, how neoliberalism pervades every aspect of higher education, and by extension academic libraries.

Full disclosure. For the past ten years I have served as a library dean at just such a university, California State University, Fresno, so my talk intends not to point fingers, but to open a space for dialog and exploration. One thing I won't be doing is offering some smorgasbord of solutions. Rather, it's important in itself to understand how pervasive neoliberal nostrums are, how they pervade our lives, our work environments, without any sort of critical analysis.

So what is neoliberalism? Well at heart it's a fancy name for "neo laissez faire economics." Jason Del Gandio describes it thus: "a form of global capitalism based on the deregulation of free markets and the privatization

Peter McDonald is dean emeritus of the Henry Madden Library at California State University, Fresno. Since stepping down as dean, he is now the liaison and librarian to the College of Arts and Humanities. Peter has been a lifelong progressive, was a co-founder of the Progressive Librarians Guild, and is very active in environmental/social justice issues in central California and beyond.

Keywords: neoliberalism, academic librarianship, library management, access to higher education, library funding

of wealth.” This near religious emphasis on the privatization of wealth rather than the enhancement of the public good or the civic sphere is central to neoliberal ideology. In short, neo-liberalism subordinates all control of our civic spaces, from local governments to universities, to the interests of market-driven models of efficiencies and profit-taking under the false nostrums of the markets’ inherent ability to sort through any problem no matter how thorny and thereby provide a privatized (e.g. profitable) way to a better world or outcome. We can see pretty much everywhere how that’s been working for the 99%.

Indeed, today, most of the world’s governments - rather than regulating capitalist markets to assure a level playing field – have, to a fault, become instead extensions of corporate boosterism and business-friendly talking points. Hence the language of governance has become indistinguishable from the pabulum of Wall Street. Like Freddy Kruger, this malignant cyst just doesn’t fade away under the absurdities of its own inconsistencies and unsustainable goals.

But at the end of the day, stripped to the bone, about all neoliberalism does is provide tax breaks for the rich, reduces spending on social programs and welfare, gives unfettered control to corporations in most every sphere of public life, dismantles environmental protections, loosens drug and food regulations, wars against labor rights, and even sidesteps international and national treaties and laws all under the flag of free markets. Sadly, as I shall discuss, this is the precise world-order that our university-industrial complex and our libraries, if even unconsciously, so happily embrace today.

But is this really new news? Surely since the Middle Ages, universities have always been the exclusive play-ground of powerful elites. These centers of learning (might we say centers of indoctrination?) and their forbidden books, and religious texts, e.g. early libraries, were forbidden to the masses lest these unwashed denizens rise up and say (in paraphrasis), what a sec, we have naught to lose but our chains! Education during the medieval and renaissance eras was first and foremost an instrument to solidify the power of the clergy and the nobility, an uneasy alliance, from about the 12th century through to about 1600. From this point on, with the Reformation in full swing, and with the precipitous rise of a ruthless European mercantile class, over time, these new lords of commerce, often self-righteous Protestants of a new sea-going world order, were allowed reluctantly into the hallowed halls of ivory, since they now held so many of the usurious purse strings that the nobility, perhaps less so the church, grudgingly relied on.

Yet even here, as I say, universities fiercely guarded their gates against further intrusions from the rest of the world’s riff-raff for another two and a half centuries. Within this whites-only, wealthy and entitled enclave, the key notion of Manifest Destiny, e.g. the god-given right for Anglo-Saxon (e.g. Western European) elites to lord it over anyone anywhere at any time

for personal, hereditary or corporate profit (think the East India Company and the slave-based sugar industries of the New World), these became the norm. Indeed, in the fledgling United States, at least up to post-bellum Reconstruction years, under this rigged system ruthlessly erected a wall (think Donald Trump) to ensure that women, the poor, Jews, immigrants, the teeming masses, and most definitely minorities (e.g. freed black slaves and so on), one and all, that these second class citizens were left largely to fend for themselves when it came to book larnin' — in short, denied easy access 'to promote the Progress of Science and the Useful Arts' (despite these being enshrined in the U.S. Constitution, Section 8).

It really wasn't until the Morrill Act of 1862, oddly passed by a divided Congress of warring legislators, North and South, that things began to change with regard to offering more than a rudimentary high school education to the working classes. The law stipulated that ceded lands in every state, bought by federal funds, were to be set aside to build agricultural colleges for folks of average means, that is to say, immigrant population flooding into America. Hence the land grant college system that still dominates higher education today in every state of the union.

This wasn't altruism on the part of the conservative male legislators of the 19th century who enacted the Act. It was a conscious well-planned experiment to create a white and educated working force (albeit made up of a melting pot of Old World males) as a vanguard to bring Manifest Destiny to fruition, so that the westward lands stolen from the native tribes by the thousands of square miles, treaties be damned, would have enterprising immigrant lads, with some agricultural know-how, to make productive the wild, purportedly unpopulated, purportedly unproductive, lands that God ordained should be given to the white man. Convenient quotes from the Bible, suitably edited, were used to justify the land grab and slaughter.

Modestly progressive for its time, the Morrill Act, surprisingly, forbade racial discrimination in admissions policies for colleges receiving these federal funds. The "fairer sex" still was not particularly made welcome but at least a narrow path to higher education was cautiously beaten forward. Women, in fact, mostly had to wait until the rise of the Normal Schools of the early 1900s, which were set aside for them as places to educate school teachers, latterly nurses, and other female-dominant professions. And as for the then-called 'emancipated Negro', the Morrill Act of course provided a handy loophole for the feds, in concert with the states, to set aside a parallel system of higher education designed specifically for black folk, hence the under-funded, discretely separate but "equal" (where have we heard that before) historically black colleges and universities of 1890s to the present day.

Despite these obviously glaring discrepancies in educational access to the nation's diverse immigrant and non-white populations, one might nevertheless argue that these were the halcyon years of higher education in America, roughly from the end of the Civil War through to the 1960s.

The effort got a big boost, of course, with the passage of the G.I. Bill in 1944 at the height of the Second World War, which opened a floodgate to all veterans to attain to a college degree on Uncle Sam's dime. Here one can claim, perhaps, America reached the apotheosis of its education ideals with a promise of higher learning for all, aided at every turn by the federal government with open pockets.

But as with so much else, things soon fell apart with the poison pill of Vietnam. So wrenching were the upheavals of the late Sixties through to the mid-Seventies, what with the anti-war protests on every college campus, the college deferments for elites, coupled with the inexorable rise of a counter-culture implacably disinterested in the stale nostrums of American exceptionalism purveyed by a 1950s mind-set, that the guarantee of a college education soon came under fierce scrutiny by conservatives and middle-of-the-road liberals of every stripe. Why should tax dollars pay for 'pinko flag defilers' (Robert McNamara, Secretary of Defense) to get a draft deferment at a college they were trashing?

Despite the crash and burn of Richard Nixon in August 1974, and the bland salve of the interregnum of Gerald Ford, so ineffective was the next President, well-meaning Jimmy Carter, in bringing the war-torn union together, that in 1980, we the citizens of this fine nation, eagerly elected to the highest office in the land, ideologue Ronald Wilson Reagan, a second rate actor, and clumsy governor, to be our 40th President. But what Reagan, and, later, the iron-haired Valkyrie Margaret Thatcher, P.M. of the U.K. zealously shared in common was a religious belief in the magic of neoliberal economics and the capitalist mystique (the new and improved Manifest Destiny of the late 20th century) which they peddled would solve all our problems with unregulated profit-seeking in the realm of cut-throat capitalism within the milieu of free and competitive markets. And so on, in short, that the invisible hand of the market would accomplish all this by sleight of hand. The mantra first annunciated reverberates to this day: Rip government meddling out of every sector of civic society and let unfettered competitive capitalism triumph in the marketplace. With collapse of communism, Neoliberalism has since ruled supreme.

In the Clinton years of the 1990s, this insidious ideology truly got its sea legs, and marched triumphant across the globe, capturing the minds of both liberal and conservative elites, university administrations, and think tanks, library administrators, hence to pervade library service corporations like Elsevier and ProQuest, to media talking heads on down, ad nauseam, to the point that neoliberalism soon became what it remains today -- a worldwide gospel canon within which few of us can see out to an entirely other way forward through the caged bars of a failing doctrine.

This burnished narrative naturally produced, and then unquestioningly necessitated, the withdrawal of most all state funding from the so-called public sector, first among the deprived – the welfare state and state funded land-grant universities who passed on the cuts to their own libraries

everywhere. And to their students as newly minted consumers they piled on debt burdens for the privilege of going to college. Gone were the days of the G.I. bill and a path to a degree. Up by your own bootstraps, sonny, became the prevailing mantra.

Consider this. Since the 1980s public (e.g. tax) funding of public universities has fallen a whopping 60%-70% across the spectrum (EDUCAUSE data 2009), higher still in some states. Libraries, too, have faced precipitous declines in their budgets in equal amounts. Faced with this bone-headed but neoliberally-justified ideology of public de-funding, universities, and by extension libraries, have felt obliged to respond by, and here I paraphrase legal scholar Stanley Fish: (1) raising tuition at the university level, in effect passing the burden of costs to the students who now become degree consumers and debt-holders rather than beneficiaries of an affordable education, and, in libraries, by slashing collections and librarian student services; (2) entering into research partnerships with industry in all the Science Technology Engineering and Math (e.g. computer) disciplines, thus courting corporate funds where the pursuit of truths for Truth's sake devolve into the pursuit of graduating cookie cutter worker bees for the profit-seeking sector. This was mirrored in our libraries by outsourcing monograph collecting to corporate jobbers, licensing e-journal bundles instead of buying journals outright for the shelf, and by beefing up IT departments with techies escaping the dot-com bust of 1999, to finally (3) hiring a larger and larger number of expendable part-time adjuncts, part-time librarians, or non-union contractual workers, who as members of a transient and disposable workforce are in no position to challenge the university's and by extension library management's practices or agitate for an academy more committed to the realization of democratic ideals rather than the monetary targets of neoliberalism. In short, most American universities, with their libraries supposedly resigned to follow suit, have embraced the neo-credo like godparents of a long-lost child.

According to a 2008 survey by *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, presidents from 19 of the top 40 research universities with the largest operating budgets sat on at least one Fortune 100 company board. The trend is more widespread among public universities, but the private ones are hell-bent on catching up. Here neoliberalism seeps into academia from the top where the purported successes of the corporate sector provide cover to bring its management techniques into all aspects of management in higher education.

Anyway, it was in the 1990s, too, that university endowment offices, until the financial crash of 2008 kicked the wind out of them, went into overdrive becoming at a stroke hyper-corporate boosters, entering into high risk investment strategies to maximize profits and thereby, one can only suppose, raise the university's endowment rankings in various national polls. Many universities, in fact, have outsourced the management of their endowment revenues to hedge fund shysters only too happy to play with the billions stashed in our ivory towers. Campus efforts by concerned students

and faculty to disinvest their endowments in armaments, big pharma, coal, tobacco, you name it, however noble, have largely been ineffective across the board. A few liberal colleges have, admittedly, seen the few successes.

In libraries, there was also a flourish of hiring development directors and part-time grant writers, all to seek donor, corporate and government granting agency dollars. None of these sorts of employees had an MLS, or necessarily understood the roles of libraries as centers of intellectual discovery and dissent, they were hired for their acumen in fund-raising, finance, and grants. To pay for these positions, the number of librarians hired has declined precipitously since 1990s across the board at most academic libraries.

In short, in this new neoliberal milieu, rather than providing space for intellectual thought and rich learning for young minds, the academy has too often become an adjunct to a ubiquitous corporate culture, an educational model that now has to 'pay its own way' often via the dicta of bean counters in state governments. The average college campus and its library are now ground zero (again from Del Gandio) for endless licensing agreements; construction contracts to build multi-use libraries, e.g. cram other units into library spaces especially tech heavy 'innovation sand boxes'; outsourcing of bookstores, vendors, concessions and food services, or take the building of Starbucks and other coffee shops in our library foyers – all point to a new corporatized mentality. Not to mention the addictions we endure at the hands of unscrupulous content-licensing businesses such that we all need to hire licensing experts rather than public service librarians just to make sense of this thicket. These and other 'expert' hires are often at an AUL or administrative exempt level with a proliferation of management types supplanting frontline librarians.

Along with massive corporate sponsoring of building construction, especially sports arenas and innumerable corporate named centers, think tanks and institutes, one and all these underpin, and enhance, under the football-speak of neoliberalism, a sense that questioning the very foundations of corporate hegemony is futile. Libraries fall squarely into this milieu as CFOs squeeze ever more other units into our spaces, as corporations, in tandem, underwrite our events, speakers, exhibitions and campus/library programs. I've been guilty of that myself at Fresno State. Even well meaning alternatives to corporate product dissemination (e.g. publishing), for example, have turned oddly to models like open-source publishing platforms (listen to that jargon) where we now ask faculty to pay upwards of \$2500 to get a peer reviewed article in print all to alleviate library budgets. And this is considered a step forward? We rail against the Elseviers of the world, but there is no sustained, collective, structural or intellectual reframing among academics to reimagine the academic enterprise stepping wholly outside the neoliberal paradigm. This, of course, would demand an entirely new approach to the Retention, Tenure and Promotion and that is not soon in the cards. The equation is always: Under neoliberalism someone has to get screwed, here the faculty, then the

debt-laden students, tomorrow who knows who. Faculty and staff unions, sadly, aren't exempt. Often they fight separately for their share of this diminishing pie, pitting one union's wages against another, but I am not aware of a single academic union putting forward a coherent manifesto or bargaining platform that questions the foundations of capitalism. They would be laughed from the bargaining table.

So we, as librarians, surely, fit into this sad nexus without much fuss. But it goes in concert with offsite storage of collections to make more room for business modeled or donor named uber-spaces, like the trendy Maker-Spaces popping up everywhere, and so on. But why are we surprised? Historically, just look at top ARL libraries and who they are named after: Carnegie, Firestone, Lilly, Marriott, Olin, through the rolldex of corporate titans and robber barons, doubtless expiating their sins through named philanthropy. Yes, we have met the enemy and he is us.

Such corporatization, of course, is inexorably transforming students into statistical target populations of financially beneficial demographic niches (e.g. foreign students who pay premium tuitions). Or take administrators, like myself. We get schooled to model business ideals in managing our libraries, as we fret over resource allocations, bottom lines, statistical impacts on targeted goal attainment and ever down-spiraling budgets, while business-savvy CFOs in university administration, and licensing agreements we are forced to sign, and endless state-funded cuts bleed us dry. In short, campuses, and most certainly library users, as a whole, have become mostly market populations with strategic and statistically derived goals cooked up periodically in PowerPoint presentations by high-priced private sector consultants. I've hired these mavens myself. Also note the corporate terms CFOs, CIOs, even CEOs now pervade higher ed, first at the for-profit Phoenix-like universities, but now ubiquitous in mimicry of the private sector. Above all, if a university receives public monies from state or federal sources, they must increase graduation rates at whatever the cost, a liberal education be damned. A corporate capitalist consumerist hegemony, after all, needs a never ending supply of degree-credentialed workers with a job and a shopping habit. Libraries in tandem must now prove their investment "value" since we are the largest money sink on any campus. Think about it, we do not bring in a dime of tuition or any other consistent revenue except perhaps among top ARLs this or that NEH/IMLS grant. So streamlining our operations, outsourcing technical services, beefing up IT departments, and using staff rather than librarians at our reference desks etc. become the budget-conscious norm.

In closing, let me just say that if you Google the vaunted Association of Research Libraries, fourth hit from the top, we find their Analytics@ARL, which leads directly to a link to the so-named "Library Investment Index" (sic.) a term we can only suppose ripped right out of a Goldman Sachs' portfolio. No longer stodgy library stats that once spoke of a bygone era of how we actually touched the lives of each student on campus, but lo! a library investment index. And on that note, I cede the microphone to my colleagues.