

# **Review: *Resisting Neo-Liberalism in Higher Education Volume 2: Prising Open the Cracks***

Edited by Catherine Manathunga and Dorothy Bottrell.  
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In the midst of the current global political climate consisting of a visible resurgence of right-wing extremism coupled with authoritarian tendencies, it may be argued that a concentration of a huge amount of power and wealth among a small section of the global elite has become more common. It is within this political and economic context that the ideology of neoliberalism becomes relevant and important to decode. Neoliberalism, possibly one of the defining political and economic ideological paradigms of our time, refers to the policies and practices through which a relative handful of private or self-interested goals are allowed to control and influence much of social life for the purposes of generating personal profit (Giroux 2002). While the origins of the process of neoliberalism are often traced back to policies enforced in the 1970s and 80s by political leaders like Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, it is now indeed the dominant political and economic ideology that has been adopted by governments of various countries across the globe. At its core, neoliberalist policies are oriented towards allowing market-driven notions of individualism, competition, and consumption to replace and drive out the more democratic ideas of individual and social agency (Giroux 2002).

This perspective has been rooted in discourses concerning previously non-commodified public institutions such as schools, universities, libraries, and others that are dedicated to engaging in critical educational dialogue and learning. The seeping in of such practices into the sphere of higher education is concerning since it greatly hinders the strive and struggles for democracy within such spaces by handing the control over the functioning of such spaces down to a corporate culture (Giroux 2002). The book *Resisting Neo-Liberalism in Higher Education Volume 2: Prising Open the Cracks* (2019), edited by Catherine Manathunga and Dorothy Bottrell, is a collection of essays that outline very specifically how such inherent neoliberal policies within

universities have corroded the workspace by creating hierarchies that leave a multitude of researchers and academics on an outer periphery of sorts. It also gravely impacts crucial aspects of professional life for academics and researchers such as their individual agency, identity, healthy work environment, job satisfaction, and security to name a few. The overarching theme of this book is the idea that neoliberalism within the university context greatly inhibits learning and research by converting the management of universities such that they resemble the management of corporate organizations. This henceforth introduces the concept of elite-level powers within such educational institutions, which consequently overpower the decision-making abilities of academics and professors. The importance of maintaining and focusing on pure learning within the university by bringing education to the community rather than just leaving control in the hands of a select few individuals like it mostly happens within corporate organizations has been argued as one of the primary goals of educational institutes by Bertrand Russel (Russel 1926). It is in resonance with such a claim that this book attempts to uncover the effects of neoliberalism on higher education, based on theoretical, research-oriented findings, and personal experiences of the various authors in this edition.

The first of the three parts of this book, titled ‘Seeing Through the Cracks,’ is dedicated to unravelling the state of affairs and problems that currently plague most universities with regards to their neoliberalist policies. In the first chapter titled ‘The New Culture Wars in Australian University Workplaces,’ Paul Adams examines how the neoliberal university invades academic freedom with a specific focus on performance management systems (2019). Such a system, Adams argues, not only reduces democratic inclusiveness within universities by disregarding the voice of academic professionals in important decision-making processes, but also substantiates these decisions through improper budgetary imperatives (2019). The decision-making within universities and research funding bodies tend to financially support only that kind of research that is focused solely on market terms as an investment seeking maximum monetary returns and not the kind of research that is based simply on the pursuit of knowledge (Rhodes et al. 2017). When research output is considered as necessary or valid only in terms of the degree of economic output that it may generate, whilst ignoring its social, cultural, and political impact, crucial academic decisions regarding the type of research to undertake within the university are also bound to be influenced by only financial returns.

In addition to the loss of agency of academics due to unfair funding practices on research output, the first section of the book also analyzes the working conditions of those involved in academia in neoliberal universities, wherein aspects such as the creation of hierarchies, reduced state funding, and performance-based systems of management have led to a great reduction in the

power of labor itself (Mountz et al. 2015). With a reduction in the power and agency of academics, there naturally also exists a greater cause and concern for the physical and mental well-being of such university employees, especially for those that do not hold tenured faculty positions. This section of the book also elaborates on such concerns from a personal perspective through interviews held with academics who were pushed towards different career paths owing to the mental and physical struggles and inconsistencies that exist as being part of the neoliberal work environment. Ruth Barcan, in her chapter titled ‘Weighing up Futures: Expenses of giving up an Academic Career,’ brings forward stories of dismay, guilt, and shame of academics who were pushed out of academia due to the physical, mental, and emotional turmoil that they faced due to various considerations that included reasons such as financial burdens and the precarious nature itself of the positions that they held (2019). The reason for such an abrupt and undesirable departure from academia is primarily rooted in the psychic and physical toll that a neoliberal work environment takes on an individual which is neither reasonable nor sustainable in the long run (Mountz et al. 2015).

The second part of the book, titled ‘Decolonizing the Academy,’ shifts the focus towards a more gendered perspective on the matter with author Fiona Nicoll reflecting on being a white and female academic. She attempts to challenge notions of ‘white virtue’ by arguing that white female academics in positions of privilege must consider or treat supporting indigenous female activists not from the point of view of ‘virtue’ but ‘virtuosity;’ instead of focusing on projecting themselves as virtuous individuals, Nicoll argues that white female academics must acknowledge that from their position of privilege, it is quite possible to transform the ethical foundations of university workspaces in settler colonies (2019).

Building on the idea of encouraging and enabling creative ways of research to exist in universities that are outside the control of market-driven and profit-making tactics, Edwina Howell in the final chapter of the second part of the book elaborates on how such a method of research allowed his team to work on and develop the ‘Aboriginal History Archive Project’ (2019). This project was an attempt to unravel and explain an Aboriginal history of political agency in their struggle for self-determination, which not only plays an important role in terms of understanding the recent demonstrations and protests in Melbourne against the colonization of the Aboriginal people but also reveals insightful detail for those attempting to actually understand and represent Aboriginal experiences (2019). Once again, it becomes evident how a scholar’s freedom and relative agency in actually being able to do meaningful research work, such as this project, is a vital part of the socio-political impact for the recognition and empowerment of oppressed peoples.

The final part of the book titled 'Prising Open the Cracks' looks at the various ways in which this neoliberal status quo can be resisted through means of governing assessment processes, inter-institutional reading groups, and employing an 'arts-based' approach towards visualizing solidarity. Author Rille Raaper, in his chapter titled 'Assessment Policy and 'Pockets of Freedom' in a Neoliberal University: A Foucauldian Perspective,' suggests that while power relations may be one of the defining factors of a neoliberal work environment, the individual subject is never passive and has opportunities to respond to the power relations acting on them by internalizing regulations and governing themselves as an opposition to the neoliberal forces (2019). While this may be a starting point to situate individual subjects as active voices within the neoliberal system, this section of the book is dedicated to investigating the creativity and ingenuity of the methods that may be adopted to increasingly move towards the tackling of a neoliberal system that comprises unchecked managerialism and toxicity in the work-environment by searching for gaps of freedom that can enable a positive change.

Catherine Manathunga and Dorothy Bottrell in the final section of the book are quite vocal about the possibility of significant positive change that can be brought about by the mobilizing of labor and communities and by instituting a sense of radical hope. The editors acknowledge that instances of managerialism are well documented within the university, but what the book additionally offers in its final section are the various means by which the higher education space within universities may be reclaimed from the colonial nature of neoliberal policies. As Bertrand Russel suggests, the quest for new knowledge is the chief cause of progress without which the world becomes stationary (Russel 1926). If that is to be believed, the neoliberal agenda within the sphere of academia tends to disregard such a motive and focus simply on aspects like introducing managerialism in the university system to make them more like corporate organisations and only focusing on monetary returns from academic research output. Such practices have implications not only on the quality of research output but also on the overall wellbeing of a large number of scholars and academics who have to consistently find ways of surviving the toxicities of a neoliberal structure in the university workspace. One of the core concepts of the book may be summed up in the need to decode, analyze, and subsequently find ways to resist or tackle such neoliberal policies by establishing how education must be experienced and why it is so pivotal that we must strive together to reclaim and preserve an educational system that is guided by motives of inclusivity and democratic freedoms.

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