Ideology, 'truth' and spin

Dialectic relations between the neoliberal think-tank movement and academia in Australia

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The context of contemporary universities restrains their ability to drive public policy. Yet, currently, they confront the relative success of a global network of neoliberal institutes, referred to as think-tanks, promoting freedoms derived from particular ideologies. Neoliberal reasoning has so moulded classical ideas of individual freedom into a radical hegemony of market supremacy that, in one application, it discounts scientific acknowledgement of anthropogenic climate change and seeks to deny its existence. This article links think-tanks, commercial and government media within a neoliberal alliance, which aims to 'balance' public information through ideological promulgations. It further contends that, largely of their own making, universities lack the philosophical positioning, will and the organisation effectively to meet this challenge. Situational analysis, strategy formulation and changes to practice are required before any meaningful response can be contemplated.

Keywords: neoliberalism, think-tanks, public policy, academia, hegemony

The neoliberal view

Becoming liberated

Some years ago, Pierre Bourdieu (2003, p. 21) reflected that academia, was a failing 'edifice of critical thought' and 'in need of reconstruction'. He saw a global hegemony of neoliberal ideas emerging largely unscathed by critique from these increasingly isolated enclaves. Reflecting Bourdieu's concerns, academia's apparent irrelevance in Australian policy-making emerged when the 2013-15 Prime Minister, Tony Abbott, addressed the neoliberal Institute of Public Affairs' (IPA) 70th Anniversary Dinner. He acknowledged the dominance of partisan information sources and the ascendency of conservative agendas by arguing that:

> Rupert Murdoch is probably the Australian who has most shaped the world through the 45 million newspapers that News Corp sells each week and [through] the one billion subscribers to News-linked programming. … He's never changed his fundamental principles … [regarding] greater personal responsibility, smaller government, fewer regulations and support for open societies ... Rupert Murdoch is a corporate citizen of many countries, but above all else, he's one of us. Most especially ... he's a long-serving director of the IPA, as was his ... celebrated father, Sir Keith. (Abbott, 2013a)

Though liberal post-Enlightenment thought elevates empiricism over doctrine, Murdoch evidences his editorial influence and supports his media's role both in agenda-setting on economic ideas (Karoly *et al.*, 2012; McKnight 2013a; Denniss, 2015; Monbiot, 2016) and in disputing the academic consensus on climate change (McKnight, 2013b; Manne, 2013). In light of bio-physical and growth issues, and impacts on public beliefs (Garnaut Institute, 2011; Dunlap & McCright, 2008; Hmielowski, *et al.*, 2014), this article examines neoliberal dissemination with reference to Murdoch's 59 per cent share of the Australian

print market (Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) FactCheck, 2013). In contrast to this powerful ideational project, a disparate and self-critical academic world is seen, on one hand, to be bound up in complex and sometimes incomprehensible ideas (Hmielowski *et al.*, 2014, p. 867). On the other, and despite the efforts of individual academics, it appears organisationally unable to match the impact of the think tanks. The case is examined in the domain of climate change.

Climate change

The divergence between ideological advocacy and reliably-evidenced approaches comes into sharp relief regarding the health of the global environment, since:

> multiple studies published in peer-reviewed scientific journals show that 97 per cent or more of actively publishing climate scientists agree [that in 2013] climate-warming trends over the past century are very likely due to human activities (NASA, n.d.).

Overwhelming academic concern about human-induced climate change contrasts with contemporary Australian survey findings that 'only 50 per cent of respondents ... [agreed that] human activity ...[was] driving climate change' (Garnaut Institute, 2011). This finding poses the questions, 'what does the public know that the academic experts don't?' and 'how did they find out?'

Earlier this decade, former PM Abbott was describing concern about climate change as 'crap' (Readfearn, 2014) and carbon pricing as a socialist plot (Holmes, 2013). Similarly, the IPA was denying any scientific consensus (Qiu, 2015) about environmental change because the 'modern climate is jogging along well' (Carter, 2013). Recognising that all 10 United States National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA, 2015) indicators had previously shown 'unequivocally that the Earth is warming' (Wight, 2015 n.p.), scientific opinion regarding anthropogenic climate change was strengthening (Carlton *et al.*, 2015). Yet, Australian public opinion about 'climate change happening' fell back from 84 (2008) to 73 per cent (2010) (Garnaut Institute, 2011; Chubb & Nash, 2012). This retreat is reason enough to scrutinise the disjunction between academic (Carlton *et al.*, 2015) and public opinion (Cook *et al.*, 2013).

In 2012, Simon Copland of 'Science Communication' (Australian National University) exposed the very strong bias against scientific evidence about climate change within Murdoch articles. Later, Readfearn (201) reiterated that 'the vast majority of news stories and opinion columns published by the dominant Murdoch press in Australia ... promote long-debunked fringe views on climate science.' Lay beliefs, rather than reflecting scientific discovery, became 'strongly related to political preferences, voting behaviours and gender' (Garnaut Institute, 2011), due to the co-ordinated activities of a climate change 'denial movement' and its media wing (Dunlap & McCright, 2008; Hmielowski, *et al.*, 2014, p. 867). Politicisation within the dominant media presents anthropogenic climate change findings as flawed left-wing ideology (Denniss, 2015; McKnight, 2010, 2013b; Manne, 2013) and likewise as 'left-wing bias', when presented factually by the Australian public broadcaster (ABC) (Chubb & Nash, 2012; Happs, 2013). Where did these discrepancies all begin?

Globalising an ideology

Angus Burgin's (2012) historical work traces the roots of the neoliberal social project to the classical-liberal (or laissez faire) ideals of the 'Depression era' and thinkers such as Karl Popper, Bertrand de Jouvenel, Wilhelm Röpke, Ludwig Von Mises, Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman. After the Second World War, these figures aligned to form the first think tank, the Mont Peleron Society (MPS). They were also aware of the rise of socialism and of John Maynard Keynes' economic interventionism. Anthony Fisher, a war hero, organised to meet Hayek to discuss his (libertarian) ideological battle for individual freedom. As a foundational anti-socialist warrior and as an instigator of the MPS, Hayek (1980) seems so to have acknowledged Keynes' (1936, pp. 383-84) opinion about the power of academic 'ideas' that he and Fisher planned a movement to promote their more classically-liberal, economic thoughts.

Hayek discouraged Fisher's political aspirations, while assisting him to found private institutes furthering economic discovery and influencing scholarly opinions. Mainstream politics was sidestepped when Hayek (1980, p. 1) judged 'the future of civilisation' as dependent upon capturing 'the ear of a large enough part of the upcoming generation of intellectuals all over the world' to displace socialist notions from politics. According to Friedman (n.d.), Hayek asked Fisher to 'get the ideas of the public at large changed [in order] to change the general atmosphere of belief.' Friedman presents the ideational change agenda as a public project, rather than as academic research and education. Fisher started with the establishment of the Institute for Economic Affairs (IEA) in the United Kingdom, a body to which Friedman attributes the credit for altering the 'intellectual climate of Britain' and for convincing Margaret Thatcher that neoclassical economic (neoliberal) ideas should focus public policy. By the 1980s, Milton Friedman (n.d.) was applauding the ideational transformation that neoliberal institutions had achieved in international economic policy.

This IEA was the first of many think tanks which Hayek (1980) saw as essential to saving the world from destruction. Today, they are networked by Fisher's creation, the Atlas Foundation. In Australia, this alliance includes, *inter alia,* the IPA, the Centre for Independent Studies, the Australian Libertarian Society, the Australian Taxpayers Alliance, the Bert Kelly Research Centre, and the Mannkal Economic Education Foundation. Globally, there are nearly 400 neoliberal bodies like North America's CATO, Heartland and Fraser institutes. Yet, counter to Hayek's strategy, not all are respected research institutes focussed upon informing academic opinion. (Past conservative Australian) Prime Minister John Howard (2013) has implied that organisations such as the IPA 'try and condition the public attitude.' Likewise, Friedman (n.d.) once remarked that:

> The importance ... is that ... [CATO and thus other think-tanks are] today performing the kind of function that the Institute of Economic Affairs performed so well in Britain... in trying to alter the climate of opinion...

Though Hayek thought this movement important in catching the ear of young intellectuals, Friedman saw the agenda as propagandising public views and values, a project in which the various institutions have been remarkably effective (Crook, 2013). As such, the successful work of the Australian IPA (Miller & Schneiders, 2013) and others in the region represents not only a media triumph but a potentially important learning process for the disparate academic institutions which support scientific pursuits. The relative dominance of neoliberal ideas (Brenner & Theodore, 2002; Bourdieu, 2003) against the ineffectiveness of academic dissemination is reason for considering the strategy that has led think tanks from marginality to colonisation of news and government agendas (Crook, 2013; Manne, 2013). It is important first to understand the messages that the neoliberal movement seeks to convey, second to assess the logic of pursuing a predefined, unquestioned set of axioms and, third, to comprehend factors behind the seeming flaccidity of the academic response.

Redefining the agenda

The change in public opinion which Hayek and Fisher created and Friedman applauded was, according to Harvey (2005, p. 64), Heywood (2012) and Thompson and Coghlan (2015) underpinned by individualistic beliefs which MPS members judged as fundamental to human society (Friedman, n.d., 2). For Plehwe and Mills (2012), early neoliberals strived to develop basic norms and values upon which they could found 'epistemic communities.' Ironically, theirs was a philosophical movement which eschewed relativist perceptions, preferring an absolutist value base and accepting the 'sacrosanct truth of certain basic beliefs' (Plehwe & Mills, 2012). It challenged the modernist view that humanity is increasingly apprehending, and developing better governance of, society and the environment. The neoliberals also disputed the Cartesian rationalism unifying scientific discovery, preferring a more elemental philosophy of truth and ascendancy of individualism. This position came to represent a fundamental, individualist libertarian view underpinned by negative rights, property rights, religious freedom and self-determination (Plehwe & Mills, 2012). Such absolutist ideas, though initially overt about self-determination, self-interest, and freedom from coercion, were increasingly politicised by influential capitalists rather than purified by intellectual debate (Burgin, 2009, pp. 164-65). That is to say, in the seeds of the movement was a rejection of academic rigour in favour of an ideology which capitalists edged towards political influence (Burgin, 2009; Monbiot, 2016). Hereby, they enlarged the classical liberal ideas of John Stuart Mill and early libertarians to a collective view of the 'market' imbued with a virtuous, unassailable capitalist utopianism. This elevation involved inherent contradictions which other authors have ably identified (Gibson-Graham, 1996; Webber & Rigby, 1996).

Logically, the movement had to reject environmental-conservationism, if only because freedom, interpreted through self-interest, property rights and an unregulated market, cannot countenance arguments requiring restraint and regulations for the greater good (Monbiot, 2016). In the virtuous neoliberal circle, growth becomes the overriding mantra: more investment allegedly creates more jobs, enhances productivity and can thus increase supply: thereafter, more people are needed to provide the demand to consume the greater supply (*cf.* Hamilton, 2003). Free markets are the vehicle through which the immediate and longer-term needs of society are best addressed. Once 'market freedom' became the movement's paramount value, efforts to expose evidence of market externalities (including humans' ecosystem damage) were constructed as socialistic threats to liberty (Monbiot, 2016). Seen as capable of providing solutions to human issues, the market became central to a pervasive, secular ideology.

Neoliberal constructs

In its own words, the global Atlas Network of 'free-market organisations in over 80 countries [is committed] to the ideas and resources needed to advance the cause of liberty'

(Atlas, n.d.). However, the 'cause of liberty' is described in economic rather than individual terms, using concepts such as those of the associated Economic Freedom Network's 'market freedom project' (Fraser Institute, n.d.). The latter is 'devoted to promoting economic freedom around the world' and 'has member institutes in over 87 nations.' Its agenda is presented as important to the IPA (Novak, 2014) and as uniting many network members. Now, rather than being informed by classical liberal philosophy, the members of this project consider that:

> The cornerstones of economic freedom are (1) personal choice, (2) voluntary exchange coordinated by markets, (3) freedom to enter and compete in markets, and (4) protection of persons and their property from aggression by others. Economic freedom is present when individuals are permitted to choose for themselves and engage in voluntary transactions ... The use of violence, theft, fraud, and physical invasions [is] not permissible in an economically free society, but otherwise, individuals are free to choose, trade, and cooperate ... In an economically free society, the primary role of government is to protect individuals and their property from aggression by others. The [Economic Freedom of the World] EFW index is designed to measure the extent to which the institutions and policies of a nation are consistent with this protective function… [or] identify how closely the institutions and policies of a country correspond with a limited government ideal, where the government protects property rights and arranges for the provision of a limited set of 'public goods' such as national defense [sic] and access to money of sound value, but little beyond these core functions (Gwartney *et al*., 2015, pp. 1-2).

The EFW project follows its absolutist philosophy by awarding its highest league rankings to democratically-limited states such as Hong Kong and Singapore. It thus elevates economic over democratic freedom. Individual freedom is further downgraded in the manner of Hayek's preference for violent economic-liberal dictatorships (such as Pinochet's Chile) over democracy judged as 'devoid of liberalism' (i.e. socialist organisation) (Monbiot, 2016).

> Hong Kong and Singapore, once again, occupy the top two positions ... [followed by] New Zealand, Switzerland, United Arab Emirates, Mauritius, Jordan, Ireland, Canada, and the United Kingdom and Chile... (Gwartney *et al*., 2015, p. vi).

Business freedom subsumes individual freedom, an absolute passed down by the MPS. This corporatist bias is notable since there might once have been justification for academic collaboration with a project that promotes the free exchange of ideas, freedom of opinion and choice as the best approach to factual and truthful argument. Instead, free-market fundamentalism must be judged as a counterpoise to academic integrity.

Balancing the account

The agenda of Australia's neoliberal movement can be understood by examining a local (IPA) case-study. The Institute describes itself as:

> an independent, non-profit public policy think tank, dedicated to preserving and strengthening the foundations of economic and political freedom. Since 1943, the IPA has been at the forefront of the political and policy debate, defining the contemporary political landscape. (IPA n.d.).

Yet, its stated influence on political debate should be qualified if, as Beder (2006, p. 134) suggests, it:

> was set up in 1943 by a group of Melbourne businessmen concerned that the use of government intervention to regulate Australian society during the war might be extended .... The IPA's mission was to oppose the Australian Labor Party (ALP) and assist with the establishment of the Liberal Party and the development of policies for it.

Even if the IPA has, since the 1980s, refocussed upon a free-market agenda, it was founded on anti-interventionist stance and has strongly maintained party political links (Beder, 2006; Sourcewatch, 2011; Crook, 2013; Donovan, 2014). Hamilton (2012) suggests that much of its funding comes from the oil and mining industries and, hence, its policy advocacy towards economic development and climate change aligns with their interests. Beder's (2006, pp. 134-36) work exposes close ties among certain Australian think tanks, the MPS, and American think tanks beholden to business lobbies. Recently, Hamilton (2012) saw similar political bias in the IPA's 'long-running involvement in the climate debate' (see also Sourcewatch, 2011; Chubb & Nash, 2012; Copland, 2012). Commitment to the neoliberal agenda logically means that all environmentally-conscious restrictions on the free-market, especially those opposing the mining industry, are against the interests of IPA corporate donors, are a threat to liberty, and are socialistic in character.

To exemplify its stance, the IPA promotes a text entitled *Climate Change: The Facts* edited by its recent employee Alan Moran (2014). It features authors largely unrespected or unpublished (in refereed publications) in the field of climate change. The text challenges the reliability of research by most climate scientists and positions itself as the 'truthful' exposé of their misinformation campaign about carbon-based environmental damage. Though NASA (2015) has found that 'the 10 warmest years in the instrumental record, with the exception of 1998, have now occurred since 2000,' Ian Plimer (2015) argues in the text that, for the last 18 years, carbon dioxide emissions have

been increasing but there has been no subsequent rise in global atmospheric temperatures. The thesis purports to provide the definitive position, in that published, refereed explanations of human-induced climate change do not hold up to scrutiny, since contemporary temperature increases are part of natural variation. Thus, in what seems history's greatest academic fraud, the huge array of climate scientists is misleading the public out of self-interest. If correct, *Climate Change* would be an extremely important text and should generate a host of supportive appraisals by research institutes and unbiased scholars. Yet, it has not achieved public or academic acclaim and an online Google search for book reviews finds mainly those written by contributing authors, other neoliberal think tanks and obscure bloggers.

In climate science, the academic desire to promulgate 'truth' has thus been politicised and marginalised towards denial, portrayed as 'facts.' Think tanks self-publish literature to oppose market intervention or climate action; they align with dominant commercial media (Abbott, 2013b; Crook, 2013; Donovan, 2014) and collude with industries which benefit from inaction (Beder, 2006; Hamilton, 2012). Since laypeople are influenced less by contemporary (and often complex) empirical research and more by predispositions and populist arguments, scientists and academics seem undermined, rather than supported, by neoliberal interventionism.

In the 1990s, Friedman (n.d.) argued that 'at the moment we [neoliberals] have not won the argument in practice, but I think in the long run ideas will dominate, and I think we will win the argument in practice as well as on the intellectual level.' The agenda is evidenced by Millar and Schneiders' (2013) finding that, between 2001 and 2013, the number of Australian media mentions of the IPA rose from (approximately) 350 to 2,300 (per annum). This increased exposure assists the neoliberal movement in 'conditioning' the public view that some ideas set forth by scientists and public media are socialistic and therefore untrustworthy and, more particularly, the domain of the 'loony left' (Greenslade, 2005). There is thus a conflation of protective ideas about the environment as an anti-capitalist, socialistic, irrational agenda (Antonio & Brulle, 2011; Goldenberg, 2013; Musil, 2013).

The public media, in the form of the ABC, has been subject to sustained criticism by the IPA and aligned journalists for its 'left-wing' bias (Warby, 1999 a, b; Manne, 2003; Hamilton, 2012; Donovan, 2014; Patterson, 2014 a, b, c). To appear balanced, it must match any exposure of environmental or social ideas with neoliberal, free-market ones (Chubb & Nash, 2012; Happs, 2013). For example, after the ABC ran articles expressing environmental concern about carbon dioxide emissions, the IPA campaigned against it as biased against the fossil fuel industry (Patterson, 2014 a, b, c). The IPA commissioned an Australian private sector media analysis firm to carry out an 'assessment of ABC bias by examining the ABC's coverage of Australia's energy choices.' It found against the ABC, since 'the dominant message broadcast by the ABC about CSG [coal seam gas] and coal mining was that the industries have a negative impact on the environment' (Patterson, 2014c). The Institute saw environmental reporting as biased because it ignored unrelated economic issues.

Likewise, Chubb & Nash (2012) demonstrate how the esteemed climate scientist, James Hansen, while attending a speaking tour in Australia, was relatively ignored in favour of the sceptic, Christopher Monckton, who had poor credentials regarding knowledge of climate science and had inflated his résumé. The issue of 'newsworthiness' seems important even to public broadcasters and now they must evaluate the politics of presenting information before it is aired. Any sensational 'othering' of climate scientists is newsworthy, whereas academic discovery is less so.

Within the 'conversation' – one which could actually be about the future of humanity – absence of a counter to scientific opinion becomes 'media bias', even though Goldenberg (2013) found that 'conservative billionaires' secretively provided 'nearly $120m (£77m) to more than 100 groups casting doubt about the science behind climate change.' If public information is being infiltrated by ideas from neoliberal think tanks and if academia's information processes are attacked as having negligible value, then, paradoxically, any libertarian desire for a free-market of ideas will be supplanted by fixed precepts. According to Burgin (2009, p. 164-65):

> The achievements of the neoliberal movement in the years following its emergence might be perceived … as manifestations of successful tactics and a failed philosophical project. In an irony of history, ideas tend to achieve political success through the very refusal to contest their own assumptions.

One issue in the apparent collaboration between Australia's IPA, the federal coalition government and an aligned media empire is that influence is essentially covert. Of additional concern is that those who are unaware that they are being propagandised are impressionable and therefore at risk of having their freedom of decision-making curtailed (Collison, 2003). This sort of ideological hegemony was the reason for the founding of Hayek's 'freedom' movement in the first place. The philosopher, de Jouvenel, of the MPS long ago recognised the tyranny

implicit in monopolistic control over information. 'We are of course in danger of doing what the Socialists have done,' he acknowledged. 'The criticism of Capitalism was their battle horse and they gave little thought to the problems of Socialism.... we must not fall into the same error' (cited by Burgin, 2009, p. 164). Burgin adds that it is easier to agree in criticism of a 'common enemy' than constructively to disagree.

The academy's view

Rear guard positioning

Just as medicine and law have been challenged by para-professionals and disruptive technologies, academia has effectively lost its monopoly on fact, rigour and truth. Yet, Jason Wilson (2014) of the Swinburne Media Centre argues that the 'freedom' agenda of the IPA and fellow travellers actually presents opportunities:

> A more vibrant and confident left might actually welcome the IPA's prominence, for this really is the best that Australia's intellectual right can do. IPA commentators (along with their colleagues in the Centre for Independent Studies) mostly incant the same old prescriptions for deregulation, marketisation and small government that have circulated through what Philip Mirowski calls the 'neoliberal thought collective' for decades. Whenever they stray from this familiar territory, their limitations quickly become apparent.

The academy's challenge is to deal with think tanks in that that they have relegated environmental and social science as either 'left agendas' (i.e. biased), or intellectually-conformist (i.e. questionable) (Plimer, 2015). Academia faces a significant ideological force which is consolidating worldwide. The intent now is to analyse the positioning of individual academics as distinct from the institutions of higher education and the public research sector. It will identify a number of hindrances and inconsistencies, viz.:

- Many academics aspire to pursue scientific and other 'truths' or explanations in their work to the betterment of humanity
- Yet, in attempting to counteract claims based on secular (market) ideology, academics cannot claim absolute truth in science
- Their potency has been further diminished by postmodern interpretations in social science and the humanities
- In leaning towards neoliberalism themselves, academic institutions might lack the will or the organisation to support individual researchers who dispute the think tanks' prescriptions.

The Philosophical stance

Invalidating the think tanks' arguments can be conceptually problematic, especially when dealing with 'wicked problems' of indefinite futures and intergenerational equity found in environmental science and politics. From the outset, academia is effectively hamstrung by certain of its own philosophical precepts. First, as is widely accepted, theories can: simplify complex phenomena (scientific reductionism); suggest frameworks for ordering data and information; and help explain observations. Via these means, the academy regularly presents supporting evidence for anthropomorphic climate change. Yet, Haggett and Chorley (1967, p. 24) argue that theory cannot be judged as 'true' (or 'false'), nor can science ever 'prove' anything, since doubt is the driver of discovery. The quest for explanation, in pursuit of 'truth', never ends and theories merely help in understanding reality. Hence, science cannot assert facts with the absolute certainty which could otherwise refute think-tank claims. Deniers co-opt doubt as justification for their narratives and appoint contrary authorities to support their contentions. In this context, empirically-thin arguments permit ongoing controversy around strongly-supported evidence regarding global warming, greenhouse gases, the onset of the 'anthropocene', and the extent of human influence.

Second, the social sciences have admitted postmodern thinking which fosters diversity and poly-vocality. Stanley Fish (2016) explains that a material world exists prior to our descriptions of it, but that our observational capacities are limited and our descriptions rely on disciplinary vocabularies. In the human process of 'framing' issues (Leach *et al.*, 2010), different vocabularies deliver different worlds. Thus, no neutral vantage point exists from which to achieve factual understanding. In practice, this means not only that people can hold different opinions, but that some actually dispute the relevance and substance of the firmest of evidence. They also reject the authority of disciplinary frameworks and the stability and standards which they reflect. Thus, deniers argue that climate science is dominated by an institutional conformity into which experts must fit and with which their own ideas courageously contrast (Plimer, 2015).

Historically, the Enlightenment transposed the power to define reality from divine authority to individual reason (Pomerantsev, 2016); thereafter, Descartes situated the locus of knowledge within individual human minds. Schopenhauer argued that the world was understood according to individual representations, but postmodernists subsequently added the argument that reality is interpreted according to power and

influence. Mass media can now empower vocabularies which challenge empirically-strong theory, and sponsor alternative ideological views. Though reality still exists and academia still seeks rigorously to discover it, captured knowledge can reflect oppressive power. Postmodern critique thus removes the capacity for the definitive demolition of empirically-unsupported logic. Savvy politicians and media can authoritatively recruit public support for illogical, emotional argument about biased science and left-wing conspiracies.The emotional realities of climate change are unappetising and people might shrink from the 'truth'.

Writers who acknowledge postmodern critiques have become soft targets for outsiders hostile to the academic enterprise (Hil, 2015a, p. 13). Indeed, the social sciences may be pilloried in respect of the topics for which their members receive research grants (*cf.* Carr, 2016).To avoid external criticism, managerial institutions might redirect funds towards practically-oriented and instrumentalist endeavours that display 'innovation.' Recursively, such universities reduce their ability to counter the think tanks, the domain of which is centrally within the social, rather than the hard, sciences.This step also moves the academy away from a mission to pursue (and promote) 'truth' which, though elusive, has long motivated academics.

Since, in the mass media, ideology needs only a consistent and positive spin to attract public support, it becomes possible to overlook the use of evidence, and the underpinnings of reason (*cf.* O'Grady, 2002). Policy must not jettison reason in favour of affect, nor should 'spin' replace logic in public problem solving. Recall that 97% of climate science academics understand the implications of anthropomorphic change, have concerns about what the 'truth' might be, and take their role seriously.

Lacking the will

Though think tanks commonly claim to be 'independent' as if immaculately funded, they are in practice beholden to their donors (Beder, 2006; Hamilton, 2012). Once, universities, too, claimed to be autonomous and independent. Yet in recent years, they have started to extol their virtues regarding access to private student fees, outside research funding and philanthropy. Problematically for motivated academics, these extra-mural sources can be diverse, involving institutional connections and obligations which extend globally or corporately and which might relegate well-evidenced concerns about local community welfare.

In the globalised university, argumentation and campaigns are avoided to prevent administrative 'brands' from being damaged; subsequently, the neoliberal project can condition academic behaviour and compromise 'independence' (Hil, 2015a). Corporatised institutions become focused on growth and managerial power expands relative to academic autonomy. Constructive 'public intellectuals' are those who achieve grants, international awards or assist private enterprise. Contrarians and critics achieve isolation and, accordingly, the rewards for confrontation with agencies promoting public misinformation are scant. Such discourse is judged inferior to the aspiration of academic institutions seeking higher international acknowledgement and private sector sponsorship. As Fisher and Hayek's ideational project approaches Friedman's benchmark of success, these influences on academia can act to de-motivate academics and thereafter proceed without undue scrutiny.

Organisational factors

Now that their former monopoly on process and knowledge is disputed, how can universities and public research bodies better deploy information? Recent corporate practice has been problematic, judging first by two higher-level examples which require attention before we progress to frontline activities in Australia's 42 universities.

Climate change is inevitably controversial, even barring the input of neoliberal think tanks. In one notable imbroglio,

> the Abbott government [recently] found $4m for the climate contrarian Bjørn Lomborg to establish his "consensus centre" at an Australian university, even as it struggled to impose deep spending cuts on the higher education sector (Taylor, 2015).

Lomborg's published work on climate has been evaluated by the Union of Concerned Scientists as 'seriously flawed' and failing 'to meet basic standards of credible scientific analysis' (UCS, n.d.). Meanwhile, the Abbott Government's chief executive appointee to the Commonwealth Science and Industry Research Institute (CSIRO), Larry Marshall (ex Silicon Valley), quickly announced up to 175 job cuts to its oceans and atmosphere division, because 'the climate changing... question has been answered' (Pitman, 2016). His incursion, since moderated, prompted a worldwide outcry among climate and other scientists who recognise the value of CSIRO modelling (Hannam, 2016; Thodey, 2016). These two macro illustrations point to political disruptions engulfing whole institutions which reduce their public credibility.

Notwithstanding scholars' continuing aspirations towards 'truth', the lower-level issue of academic voice becomes challenging. It exists in an organisational work

context which assumes ubiquitous, self-seeking rationalism and, which, within its schools and departments applies managerialism both to reward standardised pursuits (Cupples & Pawson, 2012; Rea, 2016) and discourage non-conformity (Giroux, 2010). Society is told that markets can solve problems of the public good, and academia applies this instrumental rationality somewhat uncritically in reproducing employment-ready, 'competent' graduands and knowledge products (Giroux 2010; Hil, 2015b). Now, particularly in the United States, it is allegedly infantilising students in teaching practice (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015; Sherlock, 2015). This tendency can only diminish the robust intellectual atmosphere ('without fear or favour') which universities officially trumpet and which might act to counter the arguments of some of the think tanks.

For their part, think-tanks remunerate activist roles following the neoliberal agenda and in consort with aligned media. Rather than waiting months or years for grants with low chances of success, they have the ability quickly to mount special-focus projects, using existing staff, calling on their sponsors, or crowd-sourcing to create the necessary resources. A task force approach can be directed to focussed and applied research or critique, just as managed democracies achieve success within global economics. In this contest of ideas, the teaching and research (T and R) academic is hampered. Getting involved in public politics can be stressful and distracting. If fortunate and productive, s/he might achieve uninterrupted research on a half-sabbatical basis: otherwise, the regular course is to work up to 40 per cent of full time equivalence on ongoing investigations. Solo projects might indicate personal 'potential', but can be risky career-wise; alternatively, the assembly of project teams could take months before any (grant) progress occurs. Basic research attracts significant institutional effort but will likely escape popular commendation or even influence. Research institutes might have more opportunities, but much of their activity proceeds under tied contracts with limited scope for vicarious engagement. Moreover, around 80 per cent of research-only, full-time equivalent staff, throughout universities, work under fixed-term contracts (Rea, 2016).

Though keen to praise individual academics who receive teaching and, sometimes, research awards, universities are unlikely to advocate a corporate position or encourage disputation with particular social or political movements. Hence, the think tanks and their media partners can operate comfortably in the thick of politics. Their strategic advantage additionally overcomes university marketing and information departments, which either advertise to attract students (Hil, 2015b) or direct media enquiries to individual researchers with minimal support, unless corporate funding is a likely outcome.

Cupples and Pawson (2012) use Foucauldian analysis to argue that the culture of the academy contains contradictions which make managerial auditors incapable of adequately defining outcomes for academic activities in a market society. More simply:

> the centre has lost its authority, not devolved it, because the dispersal of power leads to a fragmented, disjointed and messy outcome where agencies and individuals begin to negotiate their own interests, reinterpret the lines of accountability and exploit the ambiguities inherent in the evaluation and assessment process (Cupples & Pawson, 2012, p. 20).

Assuming that the reach of the think tanks will in future grow rather than recede, the questions which arise from this organisational appraisal are threefold: (a) to what extent should the universities (and public scientific outlets) reorganise to meet forthcoming challenges; (b) have they the desire to do so or are they now themselves co-opted as part of an unstoppable neoliberal project; and (c) is some accord with selected think tanks socially desirable, given the collateral which the latter have accumulated? Answers will determine whether there is space for contestation and redefinition of goals within the academy and negotiation of better accountability measures for recognising the public good. There is little point in rushing into putative strategies until due analysis and these fundamental responses are to hand. To do so would contravene the measured, scientific principles on which academia stands.

Conclusion

We have discussed how a very effective global movement latterly committed to a strong ideology of market freedom has shaped public understanding of significant issues affecting the future of humanity. Rather than lively participation, the academic response has lagged (Bourdieu 2003). Maxwell (2014) perceives universities as organised rationally for pursuing knowledge, rather than for solving the problems of a complex world. By contrast, Bawden (2007, pp. 299-300) seeks cognitive strategies to address the contemporary ecological and political 'mess' we face. His prescription is intellectually demanding, in that 'we can't solve problems by using the same level of cognitive development we used to create them', thus requiring a constant renewal of 'systems of knowledge and systematic processes of knowing.' Such advances require

some coordinated international networking (*cf.* the Atlas Foundation) of universities along disciplinary lines, and national strategies for accessing empirically-supportable knowledge through shared databases and informed spokespersons (i.e. science educators or communicators). One interpretation of Bawden's (2007) analysis is that there is need for actions that are creative (cognitively-developed), cooperative (strategically focussed as structural reforms) and collectivist (socially organised for the common good), perhaps ironically reproducing the strategic success of the neoliberal movement. It established the MPS as a core for informing its precepts, then developed a plethora of well-resourced, activist think-tanks strategically linked to the market agenda, and finally created a collectivist network which supported its structures with moral goals, connective projects and internationalist credentials.

Many academics are individually isolated and overwhelmed by the teaching, research and administration accountabilities (Chatterton *et al.*, 2010; Kliewer, 2013). Nonetheless, the consequences of ignoring the external neoliberal agenda are significant. Even the world's lesser governments are now acting on climate change and, if they can mobilise, then why can academia not? Its solution might begin with a meta-analysis involving general recognition of the success of the neoliberal movement. The think tanks must be seen not as upstarts but as a valid object of study; the mission of the academy internationally must be discussed; and planning processes which define research objectives must include efforts to promulgate lines of enquiry more effectively and efficiently in the public domain. The agenda moves beyond the current promotion of scholarly supernovas: in the contemporary neoliberal context, both corporate and self-protection is required if academics are to promote discovery that is too complex, contested, methodologically challenging and therefore difficult for management to acknowledge as valid effort. Through activism and collective bargaining, recognised activity might expand to include the analysis and rebuttal of public misconceptions (Giroux, 2010; Hurst & Wall, 2011). The needs of democracy require that the output of departments and research institutes more thoroughly acknowledge integrated information dissemination, policy reform and wider academic advocacy. These various lines should be the subject of future research enquiry.

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