

# Towards a Market-Based Vision: Canadian Universities in the Era of Neoliberalism

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*Abstract: Canadian universities are widely considered to be a public good. Social and economic benefits are often touted by media, teachers, and others. However, over the last few decades, Canadian universities have been undergoing a neoliberal transformation. As a political-economic theory and ideology, neoliberalism is evident through corporate-like policies and practices in Canadian universities such as business-based governance models, increased tuition rates, and elevated student debt loads. In this paper, I cast a critical lens and investigate Canadian universities in the present context and uncover the ways that neoliberalism shapes Canadian universities. I briefly trace neoliberalism from a socio-historical context and examine its dissemination worldwide as well as its permeation in Canadian universities specifically. Drawing from expansive literature, I argue that Canadian universities are aligning their aims with market forces.*

*Keywords: Neoliberalism, Canadian universities, Critical Theory, Higher Education*

## Introduction

In an era of mass education and economies driven by innovation, universities are a ubiquitous entity in contemporary societies. They are largely policy-determined and rooted in social practices (Marginson, 2011). Universities are also knowledge transmitters where the creation and study of knowledge exists at a global scale. Knowledge is embedded in an international network of institutions attached to universities (Marginson, 2011). However, knowledge(s) need(s) to originate and be constructed somewhere and transported throughout the world. Thus, a question that I am curious about is: *what external forces shape Canadian universities at the current time?* In this paper, I argue that neoliberalism plays a pivotal role in shaping Canadian universities in the contemporary era.

Neoliberalism is a politico-economic theory that has seeped into social life (Brown, 2015; Brownlee, 2015; Harvey, 2005). The theory emphasizes market logic and a lessening of the state to intervene in the economy (Harvey, 2005; Kotz, 2002; Mintz, 2021). Its values are aligned with market forces that concentrate on deregulation, free trade, private property rights, and privatization. The state's function is reduced and is used to support and sustain markets by police, military, and legal structures, among others (Harvey, 2005).

Beyond the political and economic aspects of neoliberalism, it is also considered an ideology. According to Bourdieu (1972/1977), ideologies are "legitimizing discourses" (p. 188). Redfern Pucci (2017) mentions that "ideological power works through curtailing the types of conversations that are had and the conclusions that are reached" (p. 200). Ideologies, to Rose (2006), are unconscious beliefs that are deeply held and self-serving. Besides language as an integral aspect of ideology, Bourdieu (1972/1977) asserts that complicit silence is also a part of ideologies. Ultimately, ideologies construct a phenomenon/a by its legitimating and normalizing effects in the culture, making it difficult to conceive of other possibilities. With respect to neoliberalism, it has become normalized in the culture (Carter, 2016; Harvey, 2005; Mintz, 2021), the normative discourse (Bourdieu, 1998), and the dominant ideology (Kotz, 2002; Redfern Pucci, 2017). As Harvey (2005) states, neoliberalism has become commonsensical in the way people think and navigate the world. Before delineating further on the theory of neoliberalism, in what follows, I provide an explanation of critical theory.

## Critical Theory

Although there are many ways to perceive Canadian universities, I am viewing Canadian universities through the lens of critical theory. Critical theory is a helpful theoretical framework to unpack ideology and ideas of neoliberalism and how it negatively impacts Canadian universities. Lindström (2021) claims that critical theory is a critique of societal structures and cultural beliefs that are inherent in society. They further explain that as opposed to blaming individuals, many critical theorists seek to identify power structures as a main source of societal problems.

Critical theory was developed at the Frankfurt School in Germany (Geuss, 1981) and founded in 1922 (Lindström, 2021). According to Deetz (2005), the theoretical framework helps to comprehend relations of power, social/cultural practices, language, and treatment of struggles. The author further expresses that the usage of concepts associated with critical theory are prominent to support studies regarding social relations, structures, and work organization practices. For Lindström (2021), critical theory implies that to view the world through a critical lens is about unravelling various taken-for-granted assumptions. By redirecting the attention placed on individuals towards cultural and social factors along with how power operates in society, critical theory may help to redefine or reshape various concepts, theories, and assumptions to create a more egalitarian society. Ultimately, critical theory emphasizes the ideological (Walton, 2005). Critical theory helps inform my thinking and critique of neoliberalism and its negative effects on Canadian universities, which will be explained in more detail below. Before discussing Canadian universities, I briefly delineate the rise of neoliberalism.

### **The Rise of Neoliberalism**

The etymology of neoliberalism is elusive but can be traced by Thorsen and Lie (2006) who claim that the term neoliberal was used by a French economist, named Charles Gide, roughly by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, Peters (2021) suggests that the more recent development of neoliberalism can be located at the establishment of the Mont Pelerin Society (MPS). According to Peters (2021), the meeting was held in 1947 at the MPS with mainly economists participating, such as George Stigler, Friedrich Hayek, Milton Friedman, and Ludwig von Mises, among others. The author suggests that the aim of the MPS was to deliberate about the purported danger to liberal values of freedom such as freedom of thought and human dignity. More specifically, the MPS's statement of aims proposes that, overall, unrestrained markets are morally just and a venue towards freedom; and the role of the state should be minimized (Mont Pelerin, 1947, as cited in The Mont Pelerin Society, n.d.).

Another event that promulgated the rise of neoliberalism was the spread of neoliberal ideology in Chile. Brown (2015) claims that Chile's former president was overthrown in 1973 and the new president, named Augusto Pinochet, along with Chilean economists, alias "Chicago Boys," implemented a neoliberal project in Chile. Bockman (2019) expresses that the Chicago Boys studied at the Chicago School of Economics, where neoliberal ideals such as anti-state, private ownership, and pro-market were taught. Bockman (2019) also mentions that the economists eventually dispersed neoliberal economic policies in Chile. Harvey (2005) emphasizes that the Chicago Boys' purpose was to create a Chilean economic reform. The author goes on to explain that the economy, being largely a state-owned economy, would transition into a neoliberal state of, for example, privatization of enterprises.

Prominent figures, such as economists, have also played a role in the development of neoliberalism. Harvey (2005) names three foundational thinkers, namely Milton Friedman, Ludwig von Mises, and Friedrich Hayek, from Chicago and Austrian economic schools, respectively. Among the liberal values used as a justification for neoliberal ideology and ideas are the appellations "freedom" and "choice." Although such rhetoric sounds captivating, a critical question to ask is: freedom and choice for whom? In their book titled, *Capitalism and Freedom*, Friedman (1962/2020) contends that beliefs regarding equality and welfare were *de facto* substitutes to freedom. According to Friedman (1962/2020), freedom aids in the freedom to choose for consumers; thus, economies that are market-oriented are superior and more efficient than economies that are controlled. (See [Hayek, 1944/2006; von Mises, 1944] for further discussion regarding neoliberal ideas and socialism, respectively).

The ascendancy of neoliberalism can also be attributed to government regimes of the 1980s in the USA under Ronald Reagan, Britain under Margaret Thatcher, and Canada under Brian Mulroney (Albo, 2002). As a case in point in the Canadian context: Cohen et al. (1995) states that during the Mulroney government, the welfare state underwent various changes. They mention that the idea that the state should help its citizens has deteriorated to an idea that welfare equates to handouts to those who are unfortunate; it also means that people should help themselves. The authors add that around the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, institutions and programs were gradually eroded via tax changes and budget cuts, among other aspects.

The clarion calls to neoliberal ideology and ideas are evident. From discussions with economists to the subsequent promulgation of neoliberal ideology and ideas from politicians to the dissemination and imbibing of neoliberalism globally. In the contemporary era, as Connell (2010) states, to maintain legitimacy, various people, such as neoliberal politicians and businessmen, and numerous social institutions, for instance, mass media and think-tanks, continue to promote neoliberal ideals such as choice, competition, individualism, and entrepreneurship; although neoliberalism's effects are not identical between countries, but rather context specific (Savage, 2017). In the next sections, I discuss finances in the neoliberal university and the governance model and decision making.

### **Financials in the Neoliberal University**

Universities are becoming increasingly corporatized (Acker & Haque, 2015; Brownlee, 2015; Giroux, 2006; Spooner, 2015); shifting the purpose of higher education from a liberal university of critical thought to vocational guidance for increased performance (Troiani & Dutson, 2021). Consequently, a dilution of democratic ideals that foster intellectual, social, and civic engagement has materialized (Giroux, 2006). Thus, higher education is perceived primarily as an investment (Noonan & Coral, 2015) rather than other aspects such as emancipation or for critical thought (Freire, 1970) or for intellectual possibilities (Krause-Jensen & Garsten, 2014). Though this does not mean that universities function dichotomously between the beliefs of, for instance, emancipation or market ideals, but there is clear tension between them (Redfern Pucci, 2017).

Canada has three main sources of funding for post-secondary education, namely public funds from provincial and federal governments, private funds from endowments, contracts, and donations, and user fees, such as tuition and other types of fees that students pay (CUPE, 2019). Governments were, at one time, the most important funders for higher education; however, the shift from governments as the main source of funding to corporations, students, and donors has come to fruition (CUPE, 2019). Recent data suggests that:

The federal government's cash transfer for post-secondary education is smaller today than it was 25 years ago, even after adjusting for inflation. On a per student basis, the difference is even more striking. In 1992-93, the federal government's contribution (adjusted for inflation) amounted to \$3,291 per post-secondary student; in 2015-16, the federal government's per student contribution was only \$2,007 per student. That is almost 40 per cent less per student! (CUPE, 2018, p. 1)

Given the loss of funding from governments as well as the implementation of neoliberal policies, it is understandable that universities must pursue other financial sources (Redfern Pucci, 2017). However, calls have been made to lobby provincial governments to increase post-secondary funding in Canada. For example, the Ontario government recently announced approximately \$1.3 billion in funds towards struggling higher educational institutions (OSSTF, 2024). Despite the announcement, Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation, a Canadian union representing educational professionals in Ontario, responded by stating that more funding is necessary. The union is also calling for an enhanced strategy for the provincial government next year (OSSTF, 2024). With funding cuts to post-secondary education in Alberta, Acuña (2022) calls for various evidence-based solutions to improve its post-secondary system. As an example, two evidence-based solutions that they propose are abolishing performance-based funding and implementing a tuition formula based on student affordability that also places limitations on year-over-year rising tuition fees.

Students are one group of members in the university that have been affected by the reduction of state support as well as a source of income for universities. The rate increases are, in part, a result of market ideology that emphasizes competition by attracting students to universities (Gupta, 2018). For instance, universities especially emphasize the recruitment of international students due to large profits and balancing budgets, as can be viewed by higher tuition fees (Altbach & Reisberg, 2013). By extension, student loans in total surpassed \$22.3 billion that are owed to the Government of Canada, excluding \$5-8 billion toward provincial student debt or other types of loans such as lines of credit and credit cards, *inter alia* (CFS, 2021). Additionally, Burley (2016) maintains that post-secondary institutions in Canada permit additional compulsory fees to be paid by students to evade provincial tuition regulations. They add that post-secondary institutions can circumvent additional compulsory fees because not all provinces regulate them. The user-pay system, as discussed by Thornton (2014), has stemmed from proponents of neoliberalism, such as Friedman and Hayek, who created a rationale for students to pay for their education. The author mentions that the

economists' rationale was, at least partly, because it is an investment that would (allegedly) increase earnings in the future.

Research has also been affected by corporatization. Spooner (2015) suggests that audit culture has created a system in research in that what counts as knowledge is based on algorithms such as rankings for journal impact, the quantity of peer-reviewed publications, and research grants. Excluded are aspects of research such as longitudinal research, dedicating time to teaching, and alternative methods to dissemination and scholarship, among others. Slaughter and Rhoades (2000) maintain that research is redefined as producing work that is relevant to the marketplace for purposes of external revenue.

Accordingly, funds provided by the state are funnelled mainly in fields such as mathematics, engineering, and physical science research. What this means for graduate students is that, as Slaughter and Rhoades (2000) argue, "the disparities in resources are such that the resources devoted to recruiting and supporting *graduate students* in some fields exceed those devoted to recruiting and supporting *tenure-track* faculty in others" (p. 75, emphasis in original). To put it concretely, one avenue to cut costs is associated with utilizing adjunct faculty, part-time lecturers, graduate students, among others, to teach at the university (Aronowitz, 2000; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Some students may even teach courses on contracts at other universities (Maldonado et al., 2013). Beyond the precarious and often low-paid contract work, Slaughter and Rhoades (2000) note that from a business model standpoint students are viewed as helping to pay for higher education expenditures via tuition, auxiliary units, and services, *inter alia*.

### University Governance and Decision Making

In the 1970's, a new form of managerialism began emanating in public institutions, with control and organization schemes being transplanted to public sector agencies from business (Connell, 2010). Comparable to other countries in the world, Canadian universities are undergoing various changes that are reshaping the decision-making process. These changes include, but are not limited to, accountability and quality, technologies, internationalization, globalization, and the knowledge economy. Universities must respond to the social and economic forces that are affecting the world (Jones et al., 2001).

Under a corporate model of university governance, Canadian universities have adopted business values and beliefs such as efficiency, productivity, and competition. Such re-structuring assumes that the public sector is, for example, overly bureaucratic and decision-making is convoluted; while the private sphere is cost-conscious, well-managed, and accountable (Brownlee, 2014). As Polster and Newson (2015) put it:

This governance structure has been displaced and narrowly circumscribed by greatly expanded and highly specialized university managements. As these managements have adopted private sector corporate methods to advance their institutions' competitive advantage and respond to changing economic conditions, collegial bodies such as departments and faculties have become less and less effective at mediating and buffering, much less resisting, managerial interventions into academic matters. (p. 4)

Polster and Newson (2015) point to the diminishing academic governance and the increased corporate governance in Canadian universities.

From the erosion of democratic governance soon emerged the "knowledge managers," as Peters (2013) refers to them, consisting of the deans, vice-chancellors, and department heads that are "charged with running the university through a strategic planning process in accordance with targets, new incentive structures, and policy directives" (p. 13). As Brownlee (2015) notes, most upper administrative positions were, in large part, pulled from the academic community, which, at the current time, has been altered. Brownlee (2015) further explicates that administrative expansion, business-like CEOs, declining role of senates, and the increase in businesspeople who often gain access to the board of governors to sway resources. This is not surprising given the dominant discourses that pervade higher educational institutions such as improvement, reform, and accountability (Levin, 2005).

According to Slaughter and Rhoades (2000), managers legitimate their actions under the concepts of cost efficiency and demands related to the market and consumers. They use the example of managerial practices that have shifted power from full-time faculty to administrators. To this end, the corporatization of university management and the people who are positioned in such roles means that the educational sphere is subsumed under corporate power. For example, Brownlee (2016) reports that a KPMG executive was selected by Government of Alberta to be placed on the University of Calgary's Board; and an Ernst & Young executive was appointed by the Government of British Columbia to be placed on the Board of the University of British Columbia (UBC). When business leaders influence educational reform (Brownlee, 2015), faculty input has been shown to reduce sharply (Peters, 2013).

In addition to management, research communities in universities have always been pressured by political, institutional, and economic forces. Such influence may direct research a certain way (Caulfield & Ogbogu, 2015). Commercialization of research in Canadian universities is increasingly emphasized (Caulfield & Ogbogu, 2015; Rasmussen, 2008). According to the University of Alberta (2024), commercialization is one method to transfer inventions, created by researchers in universities, outside "of the university to shape the future, drive prosperity and economic diversity and improve lives locally and across the globe" (para. 1). Although commercialization can be useful in transferring public knowledge in the economy and potentially raise living standards, one issue, as Jessop (2018) states, is that research and education are produced and sold. Such production and selling of educational products may be geared towards profit-oriented over public-oriented.

In line with economic productivity, academic governance, and commercialization in universities are curricular alterations. What knowledge is highly prized and how universities endorse and disseminate it is an important distinction to note. What this resembles in the university is the endorsement and prioritization of STEM-related fields (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) over non-STEM fields (social sciences and humanities). As Drori (2013) notes, curricular decisions are sometimes based on economic decisions over pedagogical ones. Related to STEM courses are the fields of research that offer commercial value.

Saunders (2011) argues that ultimately, "the curriculum is explicitly structured to meet the needs of capital while student development and desired outcomes are defined by job training and career development" (p. 46). Brownlee (2014) notes that proponents of a market-oriented curriculum argue that it enhances the connection between meeting the demands of employers and university education. Business internships, industry sponsored courses, work placement programs, research projects funded by corporations, have aided in technical, hands-on experience and training for students. Such training and experience increase skills and job market competitiveness.

Since universities are increasingly in need of funds, corporations not only offer funds, but, in some cases, also dictate how the money is distributed by business representatives. Programs considered expendable, such as those in the humanities, are predictably eliminated, marginalized or underfunded. A main reason is that such programs do not possess as much value in terms of profitability (Giroux, 2003). Troiani and Dutson (2021) aver that STEM subjects mostly receive more funding than research in Arts and Humanities, which can be attributed to the real-world problem solving and revenue-making potential STEM research offers. In addition, sciences and arts programs have targeted business people by offering nonthesis master's degrees (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2000).

Brownlee (2014) mentions university administrators and governments have allocated more resources to STEM-related courses and less resources towards arts-based disciplines, which reinforces business-minded objectives. They add that liberal arts education is reframed as impractical and useless and vocational education as an educational ideal. They further explain that such institutional shifts in disciplinary priorities are more broadly associated with rationalizing the advantages of higher education from an economic perspective.

In addition to curricular changes in universities are quantitative targets often used for performance measurements. As Espeland and Sauder (2007) put it, "measures, because they standardize, simplify, and provoke comparison, become sturdy vehicles for transporting practices and values from one site to another:

from one country to another, from business to education, from the academy to the military, and so on” (p. 36). The authors allude to the forms of control and discipline created by a culture of accountability and evaluation that has become normalized.

In the context of neoliberalism, decreasing/ed academic faculty influence and heightened private partnerships create a new university terrain wherein economics and private interests are the driving forces in the decision-making process. University governance is comprised mainly of elites in positions of power who act in part to influence the role of the university to mimic market forces. In other words, what is happening in the market will inevitably influence what is happening inside the university. Part of the discussion above also highlights the idea that efficiency and competition under corporatization is assumed to be more effective than state-supported institutions.

## Conclusion

It is evident that Canadian universities, generally, are malleable and everchanging entities. In the contemporary era, neoliberalism has permeated the social, cultural, and political spheres. Through neoliberal rhetoric, policies, and practices, neoliberalism has manifested stealthily as the dominant ideology and has been incorporated in the common-sense way of thinking and decisions made by individuals and corporate entities. What this means for Canadian universities generally is that emancipatory ideals of education such as critical thought are intertwined with the market-oriented approach to education, which has become a powerful and influential force. It is with this conviction that Canadian universities have increasingly concentrated their aims and efforts with market demands as a result of market forces placing pressure on them to espouse market-based practices and policies. Further research should focus on, for instance, possible recommendations to disrupt neoliberal policies and practices in Canadian universities and/or the effects of neoliberalism on specific groups of students in Canadian universities.

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