

Neo-conned university

Andee Jones

Every day public opinion is the target of rewritten history, official amnesia and outright lying, all of which is benevolently termed 'spin', as if it were no more harmful than a ride on a merry-go-round. We know better than what they tell us, yet hope otherwise ... Needless to say, this is of inestimable value to those in power.

Thomas Pynchon

Censorship, says Australian political theorist John Keane (1991), can 'echo within us, take up residence within ourselves, spying on us, a private amanuensis who reminds us never to go too far ... It makes us zip our lips, tremble and think twice' (p. 39). It can also make us sick. At least that is my argument here: that, in the context of higher education, the demands made on academics by the commercial-in-confidence university, particularly for censorship of self and others, are detrimental to their health and wellbeing.

'We're very happy with the piece,' he said. 'It'll go in our first edition for the year.'

'He' being 'Eds', the 2012 editor of the student newspaper; me being a retired academic and current post-grad student; the article being a commentary on my experiences in two (unnamed) universities under the newly uncapped system. The edition duly appeared, the article didn't.

'Hi Eds. What happened to my piece?'

'We've held it over until next month.'

After the third no show and subsequent promise to publish 'next month', I sent the piece to *Australian Universities' Review*. 'Guess you'll be as relieved as I am,' I wrote to Eds, 'to know the article has found a spot elsewhere'.

Some weeks later, I sent Eds another piece – not as close to home – which he published within the month. Meanwhile, the close to homer appeared in *Australian Universities' Review*, and my university department – that is, the handful of people I knew in my department – duly sent me to Coventry. You know the kind of thing: not answering emails and phone messages, turning and walking the

other way when they see you coming or simply staring through you. While the department had all the patriarchal charm of a provincial pastorage, I was still caught off guard. After all, I sulked, I had been in their shoes and I was on their side. But, clearly, two or three disciples had gathered together about my name and declared it mud.

There's just no helping some people.

Less flippantly, though, had I been an up and coming academic, the glassy-eyed stares would've left me wondering if I was in the right job (which, of course, is their intent). In fact, given the compelling evidence about the deleterious effects of social disapproval on people's health and wellbeing (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009; Wilkinson, 2011; Shulevitz, 2013; McEwan, 2002), I might rather have been dead than rejected. I argued in a sequel to the *AUR* article that the commercialisation of public institutions, with its privileging of profit and concomitant devaluing of people, is compromising our health. More on how and why in a moment.

Why has critical thinking become thought crime? Is it just neo-liberal groupthink? Groupthink, said 1970s social researcher Irving Janis (1982), is the way a cohesive group sees things when its desire for unity overrides its capacity to think critically. The results can be devastating, says political scientist Paul 't Hart: 'a distorted view of reality, excessive optimism producing hasty and reckless policies, and a neglect of ethical issues' (p. 247). The impact varies depending on the group's prestige, power, political agenda and the degree to which members value the group (and their being part of it) above anything else ('t Hart, 1991). Arguably, though, some basics of Janis' theory will apply to most close knit groups. 'To preserve the clubby atmosphere,' says 't Hart, 'group members suppress personal doubts, silence dissenters, and follow the leader's suggestions' (p. 247). Alternative opinions, questions and statements of uncomfortable truth – even silences – are interpreted as personal attacks on the leadership.

Self-appointed 'mind guards' keep internal and external doubts at bay. Whenever members fail to toe the line, the others try to change their mind. Failing that, they start to exclude them. No one can trust anyone because, when push comes to shove, if you don't side with management against the doubter, you're out.

But why and how can such invalidation make us sick? Enter the monkey brain, the human brain's limbic system or emotional core. Given a mere sniff of rejection or belittlement, the monkey brain reacts involuntarily – just as it did millions of years ago – with blind terror (Short, 2005). Why? Because back then, to be abandoned by one's tribe meant certain death. Unlike the thinking brain, the limbic system still can't tell the difference between impending death and a cold shoulder. Groupthink works because social disapproval makes the monkey brain feel as if it's about to die. But what can be so harmful about a feeling? After all, there's no actual danger afoot.

There are sickening experiments that show how it works. On gazelles, for example. Frightened gazelles produce armies of stress hormones that pump them up for flight (Short, 2005). Normally, once out of danger, they run off the excess hormone that would otherwise damage their internal organs. But when, for experimental purposes, gazelles are immobilised and stressed, the hormone overload can cause heart attack and death.

'Under acute conditions stress protects,' says neuro-endocrinologist Bruce McEwan (2002), 'but when activated chronically it can cause damage and accelerate disease' (p. 4). While 'stress in the sense of challenging events is inevitable to some degree,' says McEwan, 'being "stressed out" is not' (p. 4). People:

suffering from intense or ongoing stress,' he says, may develop cardiovascular problems, including heart attacks, hardening of the arteries and stroke. The immune system can be compromised, making people more susceptible to colds and infections, for example, or – in ratcheting up its response – bring on allergies, asthma or autoimmune conditions. Other conditions include clinical anxiety and depression, diabetes, colitis, chronic fatigue syndrome, fibromyalgia, eczema and ulcers (pp. 3–4).

Although I was stressed by the ostracism and subsequently afflicted by a cold sore, I was comforted that I hadn't been blacklisted by Eds, just smudged. A year later, something more like splodging occurred, not just by the new Eds, but also by some bigger boys. Why hadn't I quit while I was ... well, not ahead, but still upright? Did I prefer to be hung for a sheep as for a lamb? Perhaps, compared to the quiescent flock I know, I've got less to lose. I don't want a job in academia. Of what use to me is an offer of

casual teaching hours – the usual carrot for winning post grad compliance?

Academics, says University of Sydney political economist Tim Anderson (2010), are 'a fairly conformist lot' (p. 13). So what's happened to that public good that the University of Melbourne's Vice-Chancellor Glyn Davis (2010) is fond of saying we ought to practise, namely, speaking truth to power? In these days of fear and trembling, or, more to the point, in the broader post-US loss in Vietnam era, the truth favoured by institutionalised power in the New American Century is that there is no such thing as truth. 'Mutability of the past', as Orwell (2004[1949]) puts it. As an aside, perhaps that's why the policy of the university-funded journal *The Conversation* is not to publish articles by retired (non-adjunct) academics, many of whom might be sick of, if not from, duckspeaking. For those unfamiliar with the term, to duckspeak, according to Orwell, is 'to quack like a duck' or speak automatically. Provided the opinions quacked are orthodox, the term is complimentary (p. 383).

A specific target of Anderson's (2010) article was the dearth of academic protest against the Rupert Murdoch-inspired, Howard-backed, commercial in confidence protected United States Studies Centre installed at Sydney University in 2007. Murdoch, it seems, had had a gutful of anti-American prejudice in Australia and said so to the American Australian Association. The level of hostility, he reportedly said, 'is ridiculous. What are you blokes going to do about it?' (p. 12). What they did was get then Prime Minister Howard to pledge A\$25 million of public money to start the Centre. Its research focus, said the then Vice-Chancellor, would be on core themes of 'power and democracy', 'wealth creation and rights protection', and 'American thinking' (p. 12). Despite there being no immediate benefits, says Anderson, academics volunteered to teach units of study at the Centre, whose courses include US 'exceptionalism' and 'Obama's America' (p. 16). The American Australian Association, as a private business lobby group, he says, exercises unique control over the finances and academic appointments at the Centre (p. 11) and openly talks of pulling funding if it doesn't get what it wants (p. 13).

Despite widespread ignorance about the psychological and other damage inflicted by imperialistic bullying, it's nothing new. What is new, says social epidemiologist Richard Wilkinson (2011), is our understanding that such 'chronic stress from social sources' can make us ill and shorten our lives (p. 4). The stress that most reliably raises levels of cortisol (the central stress hormone), says Wilkinson, is 'social-evaluative threat', that is, threats to

self-esteem or social status 'in which others can negatively judge your performance' (p. 4).

And the New American Century – or should that be 'centurion' – taps us on the shoulder and over we go. 'University managers and academics themselves,' says ANU Law Professor Margaret Thornton (2008a), have contributed to 'subverting the independence and critical social conscience that constitutes the linchpin of what remains of the idea of the university'. Academics, Thornton says, 'have been remarkably quiescent ... testament to the effectiveness of the compliance strategies' (p. 9).

And it's not just the humanities' limited money making potential that neo-liberalism finds distasteful, says Thornton (2008b), but their reflexivity and independent critique: their potential to 'draw attention to the exploitative practices of the market', the 'resilient from the public good' and neo-liberalism's 'morally conservative policies' (p. 10). Even if commercialisation appears unstoppable, she says, academics must speak out in order to salvage 'the last vestiges of the idea of a university' (p. 10). But we've rolled over so readily, so far and for so long that standing up makes us feel dizzy. So, take your time, breathe slowly, kneel up carefully and ... consider your options.

Good night. And good luck.

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