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Neoliberalism Unshaken: A Report from the Disaster Zone

In this article, we describe states of emergency in the wake of the February 2011 Christchurch earthquake, focusing on our own institution, the University of Canterbury (UC), where we teach in the American Studies Programme. This essay explores the political economy of disaster, with particular focus on neoliberalism, an ideology that has gained ascendancy in New Zealand and has played a prominent role in our university's post-quake restructuring plans. Sections of the article break down as follows: 'The Disaster' is an account of Christchurch's catastrophic earthquake and its financial implications for the University of Canterbury. 'The Disaster Zone' explores the psychological and ideological impact of disasters, drawing on Naomi Klein's analysis of the neoliberal 'shock doctrine', and focusing on ongoing reform at our university. 'Re-Zoning the University' contextualizes restructuring at UC within recent neoliberal trends in higher education in New Zealand. 'Re-Zoning and the Rhetoric of Market Opportunity' discusses the way in which new university initiatives have been configured in neoliberal terms, while 'Re-Zoning Pedagogy' reflects on our own complicity in the neoliberal model, and the way in which our own pedagogical adaptations to the quake portend, in an ironic way, a new regime of 'neoliberal selves'. Finally 'The Zone Ahead' speculates on a possible counter-hegemonics within the academy that seeks to disrupt neoliberal understandings of, and responses to, disaster and its impacts.

The Disaster

At 12:51 on 22 February 2011, while the three of us were busy with the second day of the new semester, our city became a disaster zone. At that moment, a major earthquake struck ten kilometres south-east of the centre of Christchurch. Already accustomed to living and working in a quake zone, on the heels of the 4 September 2010 earthquake, we were nonetheless unprepared for the ferocity of the February quake. Whilst significantly smaller, at magnitude 6.3 on the Richter Scale, than the 7.1 September quake, the February quake was far more destructive, in part because its many damages – to buildings, land and the human psyche – were cumulative. More to the point, the February temblor exhibited far more violent ground-shaking than either the September quake, or any other earthquake to date.¹

One hundred and eighty-one people died in the quake, most within the Central Business District (CBD). Hundreds more across the city and its suburbs were seriously injured. Thousands were made homeless. The quake destroyed, or rendered fit for demolition only, more than one-third of all buildings in the CBD. Roads and railways throughout the city heaved, buckled and disappeared, making the flow of goods and people into, out of, and through the disaster zone often difficult if not impossible. In low-lying suburbs, liquefaction caused water, mixed with silt and often sewage from quake-damaged pipes, to burst forth from the ground, consuming building foundations, opening up sink holes large enough to swallow vehicles, and burying entire neighbourhoods in more than 100,000 tons of toxic goo.² Severe damage to power-grids, water mains, and sewage pump-stations meant many went without vital services for extended periods.³ At the same time, damage to banks, supermarkets and petrol stations meant that neither bottled water, food, fuel, nor cash were available.

¹ Considered in terms of Peak Ground Acceleration (PGA; a scale that, in distinction to the Richter measure of energy released, indicates the intensity of ground movement), the Christchurch February quake was, at the time, the most violent ever recorded (superseded only by the 11 March 2011 Tōhoku quake in Japan). 'Feb 22 2011 — Christchurch Badly Damaged by Magnitude 6.3 Earthquake', *Geonet*, (23 February 2011)

<<http://www.geonet.org.nz/news/feb-2011-christchurch-badly-damaged-by-magnitude-6-3-earthquake.html>> [accessed 18 August 2011]. The third highest PGA ever recorded was the 13 June 2011 Christchurch earthquake. 'Jun 13 2011 — Large Earthquakes Strike South-East of Christchurch', *Geonet*, (13 June 2011) <<http://www.geonet.org.nz/news/archives/2011/jun-2011-large-earthquakes-strike-south-east-of-christchurch.html>> [accessed 18 August 2011].

² 'Christchurch Quake: More Liquefaction than Sept', *3 News*, (25 February 2011) <<http://www.3news.co.nz/Christchurch-quake-More-liquefaction-than-Sept/tabid/423/articleID/199739/Default.aspx>> [accessed 18 August 2011].

³ 'Pump Station Repair Cuts Sewage Overflows', *Press*, (18 July 2011) <<http://www.stuff.co.nz/the-press/news/christchurch-earthquake-2011/5299042/Pump-station-repair-cuts-sewage-overflows>> [accessed 14 August 2011].

Insurance estimates of total costs associated with rebuilding have been assessed in excess of NZ\$15 billion (around 8% of GDP) and growing, while estimates of the eventual cost of business disruption are in the range of NZ\$30 billion, ranking the February quake as the nation's most costly natural disaster, and, in nominal terms, the third most costly earthquake ever recorded globally.⁴ In response to the quake, the government declared a National State of Emergency, the first time such extraordinary measures have been enacted in response to natural disaster.⁵ The CBD was quickly deemed the Red Zone, with access, even for residents and business owners, initially forbidden and subsequently significantly restricted and controlled by a police presence greatly expanded by the secondment of officers from other regions of New Zealand and from Australia, and by the New Zealand military.⁶

Located approximately seventeen kilometres from the epicentre of the February quake, our university fared relatively well, with no fatalities and a small number of injuries. Nine of approximately 240 campus buildings suffered structural damage: seven remain closed, two have been slated for demolition. Other buildings have been gradually reoccupied, a process which extended over a period of several months, beginning on 14 March when, after closing for nearly three weeks, the University launched its 'Progressive Re-Start'. A mammoth logistical effort, the Re-Start saw classes resume online, in tents erected on campus carparks and in buildings as they were cleared (after a five-step inspection process) as safe to re-occupy.

The most substantial damage wrought by the quake at UC was loss of enrolments. Overall, the University suffered a 13% drop in enrolments, with 25% of first year students leaving, and 8% of continuing students opting not to return. International enrolments, coveted because international students pay fees three to four times that of domestic students, dropped by 30%.⁷ The dollar value these lost enrolments represent, coupled with the costs of damage not covered by insurance, have left UC, according to Vice-Chancellor Rod Carr, 'facing significant

⁴ 'The Christchurch Earthquake: Challenges and Responses', *Innovating New Zealand*, (15 April 2011) <<http://www.innovatingnz.org.nz/news-and-case-studies/news-articles/the-christchurch-earthquake-challenges-and-responses>> [accessed 10 August 2011].

⁵ 'State of Emergency Lifted in Christchurch', *3news.co.nz*, (1 May 2011) <<http://www.3news.co.nz/State-of-emergency-lifted-in-Christchurch/tabid/423/articleID/209247/Default.aspx>> [accessed 9 October 2011].

⁶ 'Christchurch Earthquake: John Key Declares State of Emergency', *TVNZ One News*, (22 February 2011) <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aH-DTbBHbzW>> [accessed 13 August 2011] [hereafter 'Christchurch Earthquake: John Key']; 'Christchurch Quake: Latest Info', *stuff.co.nz*, (25 February 2011) <<http://www.stuff.co.nz/national/4688671/Christchurch-quake-latest-info>> [accessed 20 August 2011].

⁷ 'Canterbury Crumbles as Enrolments Decline', *Australian Online*, (4 October 2011) <<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/higher-education/canterbury-crumbles-as-enrolments-decline/story-e6frgcjx-1226158056545>> [accessed 6 October 2011].

financial challenges'. As a result, Carr stated, 'some redundancies are inevitable' while other 'rationalisations', such as increased courseloads for academic staff and programme disestablishment, are to be expected.⁸ While a document leaked by the Tertiary Employment Union (TEU) suggested that the number of projected redundancies might reach 350, Carr publicly denied that UC management had plans for redundancies 'of the magnitude suggested in the media reports'.⁹ The TEU-leaked document, Carr stated, was misleading and had 'caused unnecessary distress to our students and staff who have already had alot [sic] to deal with this year personally and professionally'.¹⁰ More recently, Carr has indicated that over the next three years, UC will need to reduce its staff by about 210 positions. On 3 October 2011, Carr wrote to University academic and general staff inviting voluntary redundancy applications, a step designed, he said, to reduce the number of likely forced redundancies.¹¹ Two days later, in an apparent reversal on the matter of distressing students and staff, Carr indicated that 'there was "no doubt" staff who were teaching a smaller number of students, researchers whose outputs were smaller and researchers who were not attracting grants would be at high risk of redundancy'.¹²

The Disaster Zone

As Anthony Oliver Smith points out, disasters 'are multidimensional because they are both physical and social event/processes'.¹³ The disaster zone is a space both of physical destruction and social disequilibrium, disorientation, and uncertainty. In Christchurch, a radically altered physical landscape produced cracks and fissures in the symbolic order, disrupting the very means by which sense-making is produced on an individual and collective level. The disappearance of familiar landmarks and historic buildings, and other reference points, the

⁸ 'UC Media Statement Released 1 September', *UC Communications*, (2 September 2011) <<http://www.comsdev.canterbury.ac.nz/rss/news/?articleId=191>> [accessed 4 October 2011] [hereafter 'UC Media Statement']; 'Staff say they will Defend UC for Cantabrians', *Tertiary Education Union*, (6 October 2011) <<http://teu.ac.nz/2011/10/staff-say-they-will-defend-uc-for-cantabrians/>> [accessed 8 October 2011].

⁹ 'TEU Will Oppose University of Canterbury Job Cuts', *Tertiary Education Union*, (8 September 2011) <<http://teu.ac.nz/2011/09/teu-will-oppose-university-of-canterbury-job-cuts/>> [accessed 2 October 2011]; 'UC Media Statement'.

¹⁰ 'UC Media Statement'.

¹¹ Tina Law, 'Canterbury Uni Invites Staff to Resign', *Press*, (4 October 2011) <<http://www.stuff.co.nz/the-press/news/5726614/Canterbury-Uni-invites-staff-to-resign>> [accessed 6 October 2011].

¹² Jo McKenzie-McLean, 'Small-class Lecturers set to be Among "Inevitable" Losers', *Press*, 5 October 2011, p. A5.

¹³ Anthony Oliver-Smith, 'Theorizing Disasters: Nature, Power, and Culture', in *Catastrophe and Culture: The Anthropology of Disaster*, ed. by Susanna M. Hoffman and Anthony Oliver-Smith (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 2001) pp. 23–49 (p. 24).

ever-changing traffic patterns, the constantly mutating detours, and the absence of public services and facilities, produced a collective experience of radical estrangement from the known world. Routes were altered, often without notice. Maps became obsolete overnight as whole neighbourhoods were ‘red-zoned’, deemed permanently uninhabitable.

Because the disaster zone is a space of symbolic breakdown, it is also a space of ideological crisis.¹⁴ As a result, taken-for-granted understandings of how the world works — in a place where it clearly does not — are challenged and disrupted. The disaster zone is thus a space of legitimation crisis. It is also a space of response to legitimation crisis, a response that attempts to construct a rationale for action that is consistent with hegemonic values, making a particular course of action seem natural and inevitable.¹⁵

The disaster zone is frequently a space where information flows are disrupted and dislocated, so that, without access to media reports or intra-national telephone services in the days immediately following the quake, we rang friends overseas to learn what was happening in our city.¹⁶ Yet, once communication services were restored, the disaster zone became a place where information flows not only resumed, but cascaded, as we learned when our inboxes quickly filled with notices from the University, enquiring of our well-being, querying our ability to return to work, and updating us, sometimes hourly, about details of the Re-Start.

Yet despite the communication overload, the disaster zone is often characterised by the ‘wreckage’ of language — the faltering of symbolic representation in the face of trauma. The Canterbury quakes challenged the limits of human comprehension and language. Prime Minister John Key, for example, seemed stupefied by the force of the February quake: ‘There is no reason that can make sense of this event. No words that can spare our pain. We are witnessing the havoc caused by a violent and ruthless act of nature’.¹⁷ Indeed, so unprecedented, so unimaginable, was the violence of the February quake, that it left a cognitive void, as conspicuous as the void at the city’s centre, where once had been the thriving CBD.

Collective shock and trauma leave a void in language and discourse as well. Studies in trauma confirm that the traumatic experience escapes and exceeds language; Cathy Caruth, for example, argues that the traumatic experience is always in some sense inexplicable and

¹⁴ Kevin Rozario, *The Culture of Calamity: Disaster and the Making of Modern America*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007) p. 37.

¹⁵ Wolf R. Dombrowsky, ‘Debate — Test — Dummy: Reaction to Hewitt’, in *What Is A Disaster?: Perspectives on the Question*, ed. by Enrico Louis Quarantelli (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 99–100 (p. 99).

¹⁶ Chris Rumford, ‘Theorizing Borders’, *European Journal of Social Theory*, 9 (2006), 155–69 (p. 156).

¹⁷ ‘Christchurch Earthquake: John Key’.

resists integration into the symbolic order.¹⁸ Indeed, in the wake of the earthquake, experts and officials, like Key, seemed temporarily struck dumb. No one knew exactly how to talk about the earthquake or assess its implications. Expert geologists appeared on television explaining the network of fault lines beneath the city, but this seemed only to create more anxiety.

In *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, Naomi Klein refers to the trauma and disorientation caused by psychiatric shock therapy, a dazed blankness in the face of bodily and mental trauma.¹⁹ Klein applies this principle, by analogy, to the realm of political economy, focusing on neoliberalism, a term which signifies economic policies of market deregulation and the privatisation of state enterprises; its central theme the inevitability — and the benefits — of corporate-dominated globalisation and perpetual economic growth.

For Klein, neoliberalism is an ideological paradigm that ruthlessly seeks to transfer control of the economy from the public to the private sector, with the goal of marketising formerly public functions, such as education, social welfare, and incarceration.²⁰ Neoliberalism frequently advocates a yet more extreme variant of privatisation that rejects the notion of a public good in favour of public choice theory, wherein individuals are transformed into self-reliant entrepreneurial selves who are ‘rational maximizers of their own self interests’ who should be left to ‘freely’ pursue their private goods, and be held accountable for their individual free-market ‘choices’.²¹ Klein argues that neoliberalism uses disasters, both man made (e.g. political upheaval, terrorism, violence and torture) and natural (e.g. Hurricane Katrina) to advance corporate and corporatising goals: ‘using moments of collective trauma to engage in radical social and economic engineering’.²²

Klein’s argument — that neoliberalism seizes the opportunities created by the dazed blankness that disasters produce to rebuild society along free market lines — is anticipated in Caruth’s studies of trauma. Caruth argues that because the traumatic event is experienced as inexplicable, it can only be reconstructed retrospectively, after the event.²³ Caruth’s observations imply that in moments of collective trauma, signification is ‘suspended’, is momentarily up for grabs. One discourse that is well adapted to the task of marshalling

¹⁸ Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995) pp. 6–8.

¹⁹ Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007) pp. 35–39.

²⁰ Klein, *The Shock Doctrine*, passim.

²¹ Mark Olssen, John Codd and Anne-Marie O’Neill, *Education Policy: Globalization, Citizenship and Democracy* (London: Sage Publications, 2004) p. 153.

²² Klein, *The Shock Doctrine*, p. 9.

²³ Caruth, *Trauma*, pp. 6–8.

signification and filling the void in language is that of neoliberalism, because neoliberal rhetoric is, precisely, a rhetoric of crisis. No less a figure than neoliberalism's chief founder, Milton Friedman, wrote that 'only a crisis — actual or perceived — produces real change'. Significantly, Friedman goes on to say: 'When that crisis occurs, the actions taken depend on the ideas lying on the ground'.²⁴

In Christchurch, what was 'lying on the ground' at the moment it shook with such fury, was neoliberalism. Having gained ascendancy as 'Rogernomics' — a series of Labour-led economic reforms initiated in 1984 by Finance Minister Roger Douglas, that included adoption of a monetarist currency policy, reduction of government economic intervention and subsidies, and the privatisation of public assets — neoliberalism attained bi-partisan hegemonic status in New Zealand in the early 1990s, when a National government continued to marketise and privatise formerly public functions under the leadership of Finance Minister Ruth Richardson. 'Ruthanasia', as these radical free-market economic policies became known, involved the sale of yet further government-owned assets, the reduction of social welfare benefits, the introduction of fees for healthcare and tertiary education, the institution of competitive funding models in the tertiary sector, and the significant disempowerment of labour unions. Evidence suggests that Rogernomics and Ruthanasia were economic failures;

Unemployment has gone from virtually nothing to average nearly 7 per cent for the twenty years. Economic growth was nearly halved, to just over one percent [*sic*] per year. Productivity has stagnated. Inflation was either too high or too low, and averaged 9.1 per cent. Government expenditure has doubled in real terms, though most citizens would say that the quality of public services received has deteriorated. Most miserably, real wages — the purchasing power of ordinary citizens — trended steadily downwards.²⁵

Yet, whatever its operational efficacy, neoliberalism has guided economic and political policy for much of the last three decades. Neoliberalism has gained sufficient hegemonic force in New Zealand that its core values, as well as most of its established practices, are endorsed by nearly all major political parties. Indeed, so thorough has been the 'neo-liberal experiment' in New Zealand, Jane Kelsey observes, that it is widely regarded as 'the most radical in the OECD, if not the world'.²⁶

Within New Zealand tertiary education, neoliberal reforms have transferred a sizeable proportion of the costs of tertiary funding to the individual (with the elimination of free

²⁴ Quoted in Klein, *The Shock Doctrine*, p. 7.

²⁵ Tim Hazledine, *Taking New Zealand Seriously: The Economics of Decency* (Auckland: HarperCollins, 1998) p. 21.

²⁶ Jane Kelsey, 'Privatizing the Universities', *Journal of Law and Society*, 25 (1998), 51–70 (p. 62).

tuition and the institution of student fees), increased substantially the role corporations and other business ‘stakeholders’ play in the governance, funding and operation of the university, and instituted competitive government funding models, whereby individual universities are apportioned support based on their ability to out-perform other tertiary providers in attracting and retaining students, producing research, and garnering external research funding. These changes have been accompanied by a cultural transformation within universities, with traditions of self governance and review subsumed by the rapid growth of management, and the adoption of corporate-inspired moves toward greater ‘accountability’, ‘efficiency’ and ‘productivity’. Government and university management policies have also instantiated a perpetual state of financial instability, a defining mechanism of neoliberal projects.²⁷

At UC, neoliberal reform has been characterised by the restructuring of such regularity so that redundancies are no longer exigencies mobilised in the face of crisis, but rather matters of standing policy geared toward ‘continuous improvement and resource optimisation’: ‘In line with our long-term strategy, we need to *continuously* assess our mix of provision of courses and programmes’.²⁸ Such a UC policy is undergirded by a philosophy of ‘divesting to reinvest’, such that, Carr reported to the University Council just nine weeks before the quake, ‘up to 50 staff redundancies out of 3000 staff in any year was a small level of staff turnover’.²⁹ On the eve of the February temblor, the University had just concluded a wide-ranging restructuring of its service departments that resulted in the disestablishment of more than 100 positions, while the College of Arts (COA) at Canterbury had been in the process of initiating its third round of restructuring and redundancies in six years. At Canterbury, the neoliberal impulse to perpetually ‘move forward’ mimics capitalism itself, as a ‘permanently revolutionary force which perpetually reshapes the world we live in’.³⁰

While neoliberalism is thus both frequently invoked and practised by UC management, it is at times a reactive process, driven by the need to meet the dictates of neoliberal government funding models and policies. That neoliberalism in New Zealand higher education is, in

²⁷ Patrick Fitzsimon, ‘Neoliberalism and education: the autonomous chooser’, *Radical Pedagogy*, (2002) <http://radicalpedagogy.icaap.org/content/issue4_2/04_fitzsimons.html> [accessed 3 October 2011].

²⁸ ‘AVC Māori and Pasifika: Summary Document’, *University of Canterbury*, September 2010 <http://www.canterbury.ac.nz/theuni/star/documents/summary_avcmaori_decisions.pdf> [accessed 6 October 2011]; Rod Carr, ‘All Staff Announcement: 2012 Budget’, e-mail communication, (2 August 2011) [emphasis ours] [hereafter ‘All Staff’].

²⁹ UC Council, ‘Minutes’, *University of Canterbury*, (14 December 2010) <<http://www.canterbury.ac.nz/theuni/council/Documents/Council%20Minutes/2010/101214.pdf>> [accessed 9 October 2011] p. 3.

³⁰ David Harvey, *The Limits to Capital* (London: Verso, 1982) p. 156.

essence, a government dictate, explains, perhaps, what we take to be the frustration our Vice-Chancellor occasionally expresses about the difficulty of reconciling the university's traditional goals with neoliberalism:

Our focus is and should always be on the students and graduates of the University — what they learn and what that knowledge enables them to contribute. As the Government balances competing demands on it, Universities are being encouraged to seek more fee paying international students, philanthropic support and revenue from commercialisation to pay for its [*sic*] teaching and research. Commercialisation as a source of resources is something that does not come easily to the University which is set up to create and disseminate knowledge through teaching and publication rather than through the capture and commercialisation of ideas through patents and copyright.³¹

The troubles universities have in enacting neoliberalism, as Carr suggests, indeed derive from a fundamental contradiction in the Government's understanding of what the university is and should be. Surely, government funding models that require universities to pay more and more of their own way, and to produce surpluses (i.e. profits), stand in awkward relation to the statutory obligation of the New Zealand university to 'accept a role as critic and conscience of society', given that social critique rarely pays dividends in hard cash.³² Further evidence of this fundamental contradiction is found in the Ministry of Education's 'Tertiary Education Strategy 2010–2015' policy document. It foregrounds the Government's expectation that New Zealand universities 'create and share new knowledge that contributes to New Zealand's economic and social development' with the recognition that the university has three core roles: 'to undertake research that adds to the store of knowledge, to provide a wide range of research-led degree and post-graduate education that is of an international standard, [and] to act as sources of critical thinking and intellectual talent'.³³ That the Ministry of Education strategy acknowledges no contradiction, no disconnect between humanist goals and market-driven expectations here, makes clear that the difficulty Carr identifies is one rooted in neoliberalism itself, which can but pay lip service to functions and undertakings that have no apparent market value.

³¹ 'UC Acknowledges Scholarship Donors', *UC Communications*, (30 September 2011) <<http://www.comsdev.canterbury.ac.nz/rss/news/?articleId=220>> [accessed 4 October 2011].

³² Education Act 1989 No 80, s162(4)(a) (as at 30 August 2011), Public Act, (30 August 2011) <<http://www.legislation.govt.nz/act/public/1989/0080/latest/DLM183668.html>> [accessed 4 October 2011].

³³ Office of the Minister of Tertiary Education, *Tertiary Education Strategy 2010–2015*, (January 2010) <http://www.minedu.govt.nz/NZEducation/EducationPolicies/TertiaryEducation/PolicyAndStrategy/~/_media/MinEdu/Files/TheMinistry/TertiaryEducationStrategy2010/TES2010to2015.pdf> [accessed 8 July 2011], p. 18.

What is equally apparent in the Ministry of Education strategy is that neoliberal thought has become so widespread and commonplace that any such apparent conflict of purpose is all but elided. Indeed, neoliberalism is so hegemonic that to even delineate its modes and methods is to state the obvious, to narrate commonsensical understandings of ‘the way the world works’. Neoliberalism is naturalised, understood not as a specific ideological position and practice, but rather as pragmatism in the face of ‘reality’. And to suggest that reality might be otherwise is to defy common sense. It is possible to imagine that, faced with the devastation of the Christchurch quakes, the government – which recently demonstrated its priorities with a commitment to cover a projected NZ\$39 million loss on investments in the 2011 Rugby World Cup – and our university administration might have responded by refusing to allow the quakes to enact further destruction via programme closures and job losses.³⁴ Yet, such a position becomes fanciful under neoliberalism. Neoliberal common sense dictates that hard times make, as our Vice-Chancellor has said, for ‘hard choices’ and ‘short term pain’.³⁵ Here the austerity measure is configured not as an ideologically-driven choice, but rather as necessity. The boundaries of hegemonic thought render job cuts and programme closures at Canterbury the only conceivable option, much like Margaret Thatcher’s policies were proselytized as the only possible way forward in the slogan ‘TINA, There is No Alternative’.³⁶

Re-Zoning the University

Neoliberal reforms in higher education have amounted to a revolutionary re-conceptualization of the university and its role in society. Once conceived as an autonomous zone of disinterested non-utilitarian inquiry, the university is currently being re-zoned, in terms of its discourses and practices, along free market lines. Until fairly recently, the university was considered to exist outside the realm of the free market, protected from market demands and dictates, as its work was understood to reside squarely within the realm of the common good, which, by definition, warrants public funding.³⁷ But neoliberalism has significantly altered the place of the university in society.

³⁴ ‘RWC Still Expected to Make a Loss’, *TVNZ News*, (27 September 2011) <<http://tvnz.co.nz/national-news/rwc-still-expected-make-loss-4421262>> [accessed 4 October 2011].

³⁵ Carr, ‘All Staff’.

³⁶ Stephen Pollard, ‘Thatcher’s Legacy’, *New York Times* 16 January 2009

<<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/18/books/review/Pollard-t.html>> [accessed 2 October 2011].

³⁷ Brian Pusser, ‘Reconsidering Higher Education and the Public Good: The Role of Public Spheres’, in *Governance and the Public Good*, ed. by William G Tierney (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006) 11–28 (p. 18).

[W]ith the rise of knowledge capitalism, where knowledge and highly skilled human capital are the ascendant means of production, turning control and ownership of public universities over to the free market has become a priority for the government and businesses. Consequently, a comprehensive system of policies and programs has been used to re-orient the goals of universities toward the market and also to impede their ability to uphold their commitment to democratic values. The transformation of the functions of post-secondary institutions in turn promotes an argument that higher education is a private good, bringing added legitimacy to the neo-liberal ideology.³⁸

While struggles over how to publicly fund higher education are nothing new, the current sense that universities should pay their own way by competing for profits in a free market is a major historical departure. The university has been stripped of its autonomy, reterritorialised via changes to funding schemas and modes of governance that have left the university's ideals of critic and conscience of society and self-governance thoroughly decontextualised and seemingly anachronistic. This fateful departure is reflected in the displacement of ethical/critical discourse by a corporate managerial discourse that refers to articles and books as 'outputs', to students as 'stakeholders' (or, worse, 'clients'), to thought as 'productivity'. The collateral damage that such a re-zoning of higher education threatens for democratic societies, Henry Giroux reminds us, is dire.

Fundamental to the rise of a vibrant democratic culture is the recognition that education must be treated as a public good — as a crucial site where students gain a public voice and come to grips with their own power as individual and social agents. Public and higher education cannot be viewed merely as sites for commercial investment or for affirming a notion of the private good based exclusively on the fulfilment of individual needs. Reducing higher education to the handmaiden of corporate culture works against the critical social imperative of educating citizens who can sustain and develop inclusive democratic public spheres.³⁹

Re-Zoning and the Rhetoric of Market Opportunity

At UC, as elsewhere in the disaster zone, the void in language left by the quakes was quickly and opportunistically filled with neoliberal rhetoric. For many staff, the earthquake meant spending the bulk of their time attending memorial services, re-configuring lectures for 'alternative' delivery, providing extraordinary support for traumatised students who, in their studies, required far more guidance and reassurance than is customarily the case, dealing with

³⁸ Victoria Sit, 'The Erosion of the University as a Public Sphere', *MRzine*, (26 January 2008) <<http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/2008/sit260108.html>> [accessed 3 October 2011].

³⁹ Henry A. Giroux, 'Neoliberalism and the Vocationalization of Higher Education', *henryagiroux.com*, (n.d.) <http://www.henryagiroux.com/online_articles/vocalization.htm> [accessed 3 October 2011].

insurance companies, searching for accommodation, enduring commutes lengthened by ‘quake traffic’ of up to thrice as long as usual, standing in lines for water, digging out from under liquefaction, and dealing with upset family members who couldn’t sleep at night. Yet, UC administration consistently talked about the ways the earthquake provided transforming opportunities to remake the institution into a world-class university.

While students and staff wrestled with the hardships of living and working in a disaster zone, management increasingly turned its sights toward opportunity, recognising market potential in the quake itself. In the seven months since the disaster, new quake-related initiatives have poured forth: the inauguration of a new digital archive dubbed CEISMIC (Canterbury Earthquakes Images, Stories, and Media, an Integrated Collection); the use, as a marketing tool, of students who, of their own initiative and without either UC affiliation or support, volunteered to clean up liquefaction; the establishment of a new course, ‘Christchurch 101’, focusing on community service; and the expansion of cost-effective ‘flexible learning’. Many of these initiatives had their roots not in neoliberal intent, but rather in the more traditional university impulse to undergird teaching and research with moral imperative. Yet, such initiatives have nevertheless been configured by UC pronouncements in neoliberal terms, hailed as potential marketing tools and revenue streams. The Vice-Chancellor, in an e-mail that foreshadowed potential program closures, signalled that further ‘opportunities’ might yet arise from the quake: ‘There may also be new programmes that could be launched to leverage the earthquake experience, which will require additional investment to succeed and deliver extra revenue’.⁴⁰

During the early days of the Re-Start, this theme of ‘leveraging’ the quake was reiterated in staff fora conducted in hastily-erected tents. The tents would later become, for many of us, our primary on-campus teaching spaces for much of the first term — despite the fact that few had desks upon which students could take notes, many were without audio/visual equipment, and virtually all were without heat to combat the cold or insulation to combat the deafening noise of wind once winter set in; conditions that were minimised in official UC announcements and communications, including the ‘Happy Campus’ images prominently displayed on the UC website. The fora, designed to win ‘buy-in’ for the decision to resume teaching three weeks after the quake — at a time when whole sections of the campus had been zoned off limits — gave us our first introduction to the neoliberalist language of ‘opportunities and challenges’ that would become mantra-like in the weeks to come. The Pro-Vice-Chancellor (PVC) of Arts argued that as terrible as disasters were, they often provided unique

⁴⁰ Carr, ‘All Staff’.

‘opportunities’ to reflect on how institutions could improve. This message was reiterated in the campus student magazine, which published an interview with the PVC that stressed just how transformative instances of disaster could be. While noting that at Tulane University, in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, such transformation had resulted in a large number of redundancies and program disestablishments and acknowledging that ‘this was a contentious move, as some believed the university used the hurricane as an excuse to enact restructuring plans it could not have otherwise’, the article failed to develop such critique further.⁴¹ Nor did it mention that Tulane had been, from June 2007 until November 2009, under official censure by the American Association of University Professors for violating the rights of academic staff in closing programs and firing staff.⁴² Rather, the article allowed management’s use of Tulane as a potential model for Canterbury’s future prospects to stand:

Nevertheless, a handful of years later, Tulane’s enrolments are up to the heady levels they were before. ‘Tulane is a very attractive place’, says [the PVC], ‘and I would say it has a persona now in terms of an institution that people want to go to because it’s a very interesting and special place, that is probably enhanced over what it was before Katrina’.

That the University re-published the article on its own website provides an example of just how vigorously underway were the processes of mobilising and proselytising neoliberalist figurations of the quake amongst both students and staff.⁴³

The impulse to ‘build back better’, of course, might be understood as a ‘natural’, ideologically-neutral, laudable human impulse. But, the fact that UC management, in the weeks before the quake, had been preparing to restructure academic programmes in the Arts, suggests that the UC administration was, in much the way that Klein found in post-Katrina New Orleans, preparing to use the disaster to advance its plans. The fact that earlier efforts to restructure the Arts at Canterbury had, for the administration, met with some frustrating obstacles further suggests that the quake is currently being ‘leveraged’ to achieve extant management goals that might otherwise have proven tricky. Attempts to re-zone areas of knowledge in the Arts — an intellectual zone that on its face offers so little to the neoliberal state, which prefers economic actors over critical thinkers — in 2005 and 2008 had been only partially successful. Resistance from staff,

⁴¹ ‘Universality: Rebuilding in the Wake of Disaster’, *UC Communications*, (6 May 2011) <<http://www.comsdev.canterbury.ac.nz/news/2011/110506a.shtml>> [accessed 20 August 2011] [hereafter ‘Universality’].

⁴² ‘AAUP Lifts Censure of Tulane’, *Inside Higher Ed*, (12 November 2009) <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2009/11/12/qt/aaup_lifts_censure_of_tulane> [accessed 4 October 2011].

⁴³ ‘Universality’.

students, and the union prevented management from achieving all of its goals in seeking to reconfigure the Arts via the disestablishment of two interdisciplinary programs and the attendant elimination of academic and general staff positions, the reduction of academic input into College management, and the implementation of a new internal funding model linking program budgets to (increased) student:staff ratios.⁴⁴ Carr's recent statements about the 'inevitability' of redundancies, as well as his comments, targeting for redundancy those who under-produce in terms measurable in dollars (in the form of government and external research funds and EFTs, Equivalent Full Time enrolments — 'bums on seats' in the vernacular) further suggest that UC management will 'leverage' the quake in order to achieve structural changes along neoliberalist lines.

That neoliberalism remains operative in the wake of the quake at the level of the government is apparent as well. As was the case in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, the drive for privatization of public institutions is evident in Christchurch in the recent announcement of plans to introduce privately-run Charter Schools targeted for 'low-decile' socio-economic areas of the city. In spite of resistance from teacher unions and school principals who point out that there is scant evidence that charter schools are good for pupils, the move is justified (as it was in New Orleans) in terms of the neoliberal impulse to treat disasters as exciting market opportunities. In coalition with the National Government, the right-wing Act Party is backing the move, explaining that 'Christchurch was chosen as a trial area because of the opportunities that had arisen from the earthquakes'.⁴⁵ While the government has recently agreed not to reduce UC funding for 2012, it has otherwise, to date, offered little hope that extraordinary support will be forthcoming to assist UC in recovering from quake-induced projected budget shortfalls of up to NZ\$300 million over the next eight years, a sum equal to what the government currently borrows per week, suggesting that relief for Canterbury would weaken the government's current financial position only slightly.⁴⁶ Rather, in a statement that aligns well with the neoliberal mandate for market-driven funding systems to stimulate 'rationalisation' of courses, Minister of Tertiary Education Steven Joyce has advised that 'the University of Canterbury might have to look at itself and say, well, are we

⁴⁴ 'Change Proposal'. College of Arts, University of Canterbury, (January, 2008).

⁴⁵ 'Unease at Charter School Trial in the City', *Press*, (7 December 2011) <<http://www.stuff.co.nz/the-press/news/6096775/Unease-at-charter-school-trial-in-city>> [accessed 13 December 2011].

⁴⁶ Steven Joyce, 'Govt Provides Funding Certainty for Canterbury Tertiary Institutions', (21 September 2011) <<http://beehive.govt.nz/release/govt-provides-funding-certainty-canterbury-tertiary-institutions-o>> [accessed 24 September 2011]; 'PM John Key's State of the Nation speech', *stuff.co.nz*, (26 January 2011) <<http://www.stuff.co.nz/national/politics/4584114/PM-John-Keys-State-of-the-Nation-speech>> [accessed 20 August 2011].

going to have the same student body that we had before the earthquakes and if not, what are our opportunities for growth, what are our opportunities to make changes'.⁴⁷ In a similar vein, the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC), the government body charged with overseeing higher education in New Zealand, has been unwilling, to date, to accommodate the requests of both TEU and UC management to cancel, postpone or radically alter the upcoming research performance review, the means by which government research funding is competitively awarded to New Zealand universities. Just as under neoliberalism, 'distracting moral or philosophical concerns constitute "market distortions"' that are best ignored, superseded or resisted, the Canterbury quakes, the TEC position suggests, have failed to rattle the government's faith in neoliberalism.⁴⁸ That the TEC stance on research funding has been characterised as 'business as usual' for Canterbury academics — who have been, until very recently, without access to full library and research facilities since September 2010, and whose lives have been so thoroughly disrupted, a development bound to reduce the productivity and efficiency of staff labouring in a system that prizes nothing more than these very qualities — is suggestive of just how marketised 'the business' of academia has become.⁴⁹ What both the UC administration and the government have made clear is that the 'free market' of higher education shall not be undone by the quakes and their fallout. If Canterbury institutions of higher learning find themselves less competitive — in terms of bums on seats or research outputs — as a result of the quake(s), such are the vagaries of free enterprise.

Re-Zoning Pedagogy

Given just how dire UC's post-quake financial position was projected to be, and given our wish to deliver on the University's promise to students 'to ensur[e] that UC students are not disadvantaged as a result of the earthquake, and that [they] receive quality programmes of study, research and student experience', the three of us opted to run all of our courses in the

⁴⁷ Kelsey, 'Privatizing the Universities', p. 56; John Hartevelt, 'Fears of \$14m Loss in Varsity Revenue', *Press*, (17 June 2011) <<http://www.stuff.co.nz/business/rebuilding-christchurch/5155715/Fears-of-14m-loss-in-varsity-revenue>> [accessed 10 August 2011].

⁴⁸ Stanley Fish, 'Neoliberalism and Higher Education', *Opinionator*, *New York Times*, (8 March 2009) <<http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/03/08/neoliberalism-and-higher-education/?pagemode=print>> [accessed 3 August 2011].

⁴⁹ "Business as Usual" Not Realistic for Canterbury Academics', *scoop.co.nz*, (23 May 2011) <<http://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/ED1105/S00095/business-as-usual-not-realistic-for-canterbury-academics.htm>> [accessed 20 August 2011].

wake of the earthquake.⁵⁰ We videoed many of our lectures and, after negotiating with senior management at Google, Inc., uploaded these lectures to a private space on YouTube. Overwhelming positive student feedback about these video lectures has convinced us to offer, this summer, a new course, designed for strictly online delivery, in part as a means to try to accommodate students needing to make up missed credits this year who either can't or won't spend the summer in Christchurch, and in part to try to 'claw back' some of those vital bums on seats the quakes have cost us.

And therein is the moral box canyon in which we find ourselves entrapped. As theoretically critical as we are of the imposition, and subsequent integration, of neoliberalism into the realm of the academe, we find that, in practice, in order to survive in a neoliberal university ravaged by natural disaster, we must become 'neoliberal selves'. Given the limited access to facilities on campus and the fact that two of us live in the what is locally known as the Shagged Zone — so dubbed in tribute to local landmark Shag Rock, which crumbled to a fraction of its former imposing bulk in the quake — where severe road damage makes travel to campus difficult and lengthy, we worked from home. We bought a video camera, borrowed a tripod, taught ourselves video-editing software, and videoed and edited, around the clock. Management neither compelled nor encouraged us take such measures. Yet, in assembling what amounted to a 'Homemade University', we found ourselves enacting Browyn Davies's claim that 'in order to hold their job, neoliberal selves are necessarily flexible, multiskilled, mobile, able to respond to new demands and new situations'.⁵¹ That, in manifesting such flexibility, we have created private solutions to public problems finds its parallel in the neoliberal impulse to privatise as many public functions — from education, to social welfare, to incarceration — as is feasible. That market concerns about bums on seats prompt us to extend our disaster response into new 'opportunities' for 'revenue streams' similarly incorporates us into the sort of neoliberal shock doctrine politics that Naomi Klein explicates so well. That we find ourselves unable to narrate our dilemma without mobilising, albeit in scare quotes, language so market-ese as to make us cringe, confirms Wendy Brown's assertion that, in establishing its hegemonic place in popular thought, neoliberalism produces, in public

⁵⁰ Rod Carr, 'Weekend Planning Underway for Progressive Re-start of University of Canterbury — An Update from the Vice-Chancellor', *UC Progressive Re-Start, University of Canterbury*, (26 February 2011) <http://www.canterbury.ac.nz/restartfeb/announcements/VCmessage_26feb.shtml> [accessed 10 August 2011].

⁵¹ Bronwyn Davies, 'The (Im)Possibility of Intellectual Work in Neoliberal Regimes', *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 26 (2005), 91–103 (p. 93).

institutions, ‘governance criteria [...] of productivity and profitability, with the consequence that governance talk increasingly becomes market-speak’.⁵²

In moving out of the zone of the classroom and into the zone of cyberspace, we have undoubtedly assisted our students, allowing them to continue with their learning in the absence of brick-and-mortar teaching spaces, and accommodating those burdened with post-quake timetable clashes and increased family and work obligations. But, at the same time, we have also subjected our students to the neoliberal bait and switch that camouflages the devaluation of their education, via the reduction of face-to-face time with lecturers and fellow students, as beneficial ‘flexible learning’, all the while masking the neoliberal impulse to foist more and more responsibility onto the individual for ‘self-care, [that is] their ability to provide for their own needs and service their own ambitions [...] as [...] university students’.⁵³ Even as we critique the process whereby the ‘value’ of education in New Zealand and at UC in the aftermath of the quake has been far too often thought about in strictly market-based terms — as evinced by UC ‘updates’ that provided nearly as much information about the number of EFTs lost as about actual conditions for learning and researching — the *bottom line* is that, we, ourselves, are intractably complicit in that process.⁵⁴

The Zone Ahead

In recent staff fora and COA communications briefing us on — and seeking our ‘creative’ input about — funding cuts, increased teaching loads and restructuring, we have been encouraged to view the challenges of the disaster zone with enthusiasm, to abide the counsel of American economist Paul Romer that ‘a crisis is a terrible thing to waste’.⁵⁵ Such advice convinces us that, at Canterbury, neoliberalism has managed to fill the void in language and exploit the collective trauma that the earthquakes have produced. It is a neoliberal logic that allows management to ask those of us who, having exerted Herculean efforts to operationalise management’s decision to re-open the university under what were, in many ways, third-world conditions, to now think creatively about how we might abolish programs, render ourselves or our colleagues unemployed, and otherwise function as ever-adaptive workers in the neoliberal crisis zone. Convinced of the centrality of democracy to the public function of the university

⁵² Wendy Brown, ‘American Nightmare: Neoliberalism, Neoconservatism, and De-Democratization’, *Political Theory*, 34 (2006), 690–714 (p. 694).

⁵³ Brown, ‘American Nightmare’, p. 694.

⁵⁴ See, for example, ‘University of Canterbury VC Update — Monday 7 March 2011’, *University of Canterbury*, (7 March 2011) <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l6JBWtwqIRw>> [accessed 10 August 2011].

⁵⁵ ‘Arts Matters’, University of Canterbury, electronic newsletter, 19 August 2011.

and the critical role the ‘liberal arts and humanities [play] in fostering an educational culture that is about the practice of freedom and mutual empowerment’, we are distressed by the invocation of Paul Romer.⁵⁶

A scholar/entrepreneur, Romer has garnered particular favour amongst neoliberalists who would put profit before democracy, proposing a neo-colonialist solution to poverty wherein third-world nations establish ‘Charter Cities’ controlled by foreign (first-world) governments that oversee these economic zones via the appointment of autocratic viceroys who protect the interests of the mother nation and of the corporations that invest in the cities.⁵⁷ That Romer strikes our senior management team as a potential source of inspiration, suggests just how thoroughly neoliberalism might guide our future at UC. So too does the recent announcement that the University will soon confer upon Ruth Richardson, architect of Ruthanasia, an honorary doctorate in recognition of her ‘significant contributions to the political and business communities both nationally and internationally’.⁵⁸

While we find neoliberal configurations of the quake as ‘opportunity’ increasingly dispiriting and distasteful, there are, nonetheless, reasons to remain optimistic within the disaster zone. While neoliberalism has taken deep root in New Zealand and at UC, hegemony, we realize, is never complete. Frustration over neoliberal policies on a global scale is evident in the Occupy Wall Street movement and its own global spread, so that an encampment of protesters has recently been set up in Hagley Park in Christchurch. And evidence of counter-hegemonies is increasingly visible at UC as well, as various individuals and groups seek to disrupt neoliberal understandings of the disaster and its impacts. Recently, many staff have engaged in an e-mail discussion about a plan to voluntarily contribute 10% of our salaries to UC in an attempt to help our university recover, and to stave off job cuts. Meanwhile, our students have remained intellectually engaged and remarkably tolerant of the disruptions to their education that the quake has produced. Many staff and students have volunteered their labour and their expertise in helping others during the disaster and in contributing to visions of how the city might be re-built. That nearly half of UC students volunteered in quake clean-

⁵⁶ Henry Giroux, ‘Beyond the Swindle of the Corporate University: Higher Education in the Service of Democracy’, *Truthout*, (18 January 2011) <<http://www.truth-out.org/beyond-swindle-corporate-university-higher-education-service-democracy66945>> [accessed 18 August 2011].

⁵⁷ Sebastian Mallaby, ‘Future Cities Need to Hand Over the Keys’, *Financial Times*, (3 February 2011) <<http://cachef.ft.com/cms/s/o/d4b4214e-2fed-11e0-91f8-00144feabdco.html>> [accessed 21 August 2011]; Paul Romer, ‘Paul Romer’s Radical Idea: Charter Cities’, *TED Talks*, (August 2009) <http://www.ted.com/talks/paul_romer.html> [accessed 18 August 2011].

⁵⁸ ‘Honorary Doctorates for Arts Patron and Former MP’, *UC Communications*, (15 July 2011) <<http://www.comsdev.canterbury.ac.nz/rss/news/?articleId=163>> [accessed 20 August 2011].

up efforts, for no quantifiable 'gain', makes it clear to us that there is room to resist the neoliberalisation of the self. That students, posting on the UC Re-Start Facebook page, occasionally critiqued and mocked certain UC decisions post-quake, prompting quick deletions of derogatory comments, suggests that new technologies may provide ever more space for resistance, even within the disaster zone. And, that the TEU has vowed to resist job losses, and to campaign on behalf of staff who remain deeply committed to the wellbeing of their university in spite of threatened cuts, suggests that higher education in the disaster zone may soon become a zone of contestation, with staff resisting opportunistic neoliberalism amidst human tragedy.

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