

# Knowledge Commodified and the New Economies of Higher Education

MAGDA LEWIS  
*Queen's University*

The ground on which we stand has dramatically shifted. The neoconservatives have put into place a new set of myths, performances, narratives, and stories—a new set of laws that threaten to destroy what we mean by freedom and democracy.

(Denzin and Giardin, 2006, p. xi)

**T**HE VIRULENT AND UBIQUITOUS RISE of the commodification of every day life and all human activity is widely noted by critical social theorists who warn against its devastating promise for our social, economic, and environmental future. Encapsulated by “double speak,” of which the now much over-referenced phrase “war on terror” is an alarming example, we are, in 2007, only 23 years behind schedule in achieving the Orwellian state as described in the cautionary novel, *1984*, where “unlimited terror” and “ideological and psychological manipulation” (Orwell 1949/1961, p. 260) turned citizens to believe that “War is Peace”; “Freedom is Slavery”; and “Ignorance is Strength” (Orwell, 1949/1961, p. 7).

In these early years of the new millennium, we might now add to Orwell’s dystopian vision: Consumption is Patriotism; Information is Knowledge; Capitalism is Democracy. Coupled with Orwell’s capacity to see modernism’s “Truth constructing” project was his ability to foresee the emergence of war-fueled technologies turned to control-through-surveillance of vast populations of the world resulting in the extraordinary and unprecedented intrusion into the personal lives of citizens long before the general population had any notion that the power of these newly developing technologies and mechanisms would be turned to this purpose. Surveillance Studies Network (2006), BBC News (2006), and ACLU (2003) represent only a minimal sampling of the critique of a world-wide phenomenon of data collection on individual persons aided by the increasingly complex technologies of communication.

It was deep in the chill of the Cold War that Erich Fromm wrote the 1961 “Afterword” to the New American Library of World Literature version of *1984*. In it, Fromm articulated the then collective fear of many people that growing international militarism would bring the world to the

brink, and beyond, of a global thermonuclear holocaust. In schools we practiced nuclear holocaust strategies-for-survival. The weekly training programme of ducking under our school desks on command of our teacher, who must have been “in-serviced” on the procedure, served as testament to the “double speak” of militarism that such a catastrophic global event could have been survived under cover of a thin piece of wood—our desk top. The frames of reference for our early adolescent imaginations by which we could conceive of the event that would bring on the “big bang,” signaling not the beginning but the end of life on the planet, were entirely focused on what we believed to be as simple as the flick of a switch.

The exponential growth of military weaponry notwithstanding, today it seems more likely that not George Orwell but T.S. Eliot (1925) may have gotten it right: *This is the way the world ends/This is the way the world ends/This is the way the world ends/Not with a bang but a whimper*. Indeed, we live in what Denzin and Giardina (above) identify as “a time of global uncertainty” that, rather than challenged by a complex world-wide social democracy, is fed by a ravenous capitalism that has condensed a vast variety of global social, cultural, economic, political, and scientific operational forces into the ultimate threat to life through slow and quiet environmental devastation (Carson, 1962; Monbiot, 2006). As the publication dates of Carson’s and Monbiot’s respective books indicate, this is not a situation about which we have just become aware. The problem is not, it seems, lack of knowledge but rather lack of collective will to hold “governments of the people” accountable to those whom they represent.

As governments throughout the world become increasingly less independent of corporate interests (Smith, 2003), the “double-speak” of a capitalist-democracy is maintained by the control of vast populations through fear of the threat of terror in a context where useful historical, geographical, economic, political, scientific, philosophical and artistic knowledge is manipulated or withheld. Partial or distorted knowledge makes it difficult for citizens of all nations to understand and reflect critically upon global relations. The displacement of social/cultural, political, and economic knowledge with the opiate of commodity-consumption in all EuroWestern nations, and increasingly in nations that represent vast new markets for consumer products in eastern and southern nations—including exporting “schooling services” from the north/west to the east and the south—has effected a destabilization of populations to such an extent that the terms of democracy in nations that claim it as a stabilizing political structure has all but disappeared behind a deep wall of cynicism and well-earned mistrust of the political process and politicians.

Much is at stake for which academics, scholars, intellectuals, and researchers might take responsibility. Yet in higher education, the industrialization of our collective enterprise is also apparent, at the very least, in the rise of surveillance and control mechanisms such as performance audits and measures of academic production and merit, in work intensification, in the entrepreneurialization of academic work, and in academic practices that seem increasingly to close down research and scholarship aimed at critical social intervention. In AngloAmerican influenced nations, embraced by capitalist modes of production, measures of higher education performance based on research outputs, scholarship linked to research grants, and academic/corporate/industry partnerships collude with newly articulated research ethics guidelines to create frigid conditions for the investigation of these very processes of commodification. Knowledge as commodity, learning as credentialization, data as the driving force for decision making, and “excellence” measured by an explosion of audit mechanisms that require endless reporting on ‘productivity’ disguised as standards in the name of accountability, have significantly transformed academic work over the past decade and a half from a historically creative undertaking to a largely entrepreneurial enterprise.

For example, in Canada, a national review and audit policy<sup>1</sup> for academic research developed and implemented over the past ten years has had a significant impact on research and scholarship in the Humanities, Social Sciences, and Education. Embedded in the policy is a newly strengthened biomedical model working in tandem with historically dominant empirical and positivist research paradigms. While the current policy is under debate,<sup>2</sup> there appear to be simultaneously increasing pressures toward narrower research agendas, methods, and scholarship through the imposition of limitations on admissible methodologies, and of positivist approaches to knowledge production (Lewis, 2008). These issues are not particular to the Canadian context. Researchers and scholars in the humanities, social sciences and education, at least in nations influenced by the Anglo American paradigm, are experiencing similar pressures, which appear to be aimed at clawing back gains made during the progressive movements of the past thirty years.

In editing this issue of *JCT* it was my intention to contribute to a growing international conversation on the implications of the return to empiricism and positivism in research and scholarship, to provide a venue in which to document and investigate these issues, and to uncover the possible sources of their driving ideologies. Issues that need urgent analysis and critique include, but are not exhausted by:

- The rise of an audit culture in the academy
- Funding issues related to research methodology
- The relationship between the commodification of knowledge and research
- Definitions of research and the criteria for legitimacy in qualitative research paradigms in a new era of empiricism
- The distinction between empirical research and scholarship that arises from a critical investigation of lived experience and social context
- The limits and possibilities of the new audit culture in research on autobiography as research or scholarship
- The use of the internet for research as well as researching the internet
- The particularities of qualitative and philosophical research that do not fit a positivist model
- The current politics of Research Ethics Boards

The strategic call for papers for this issue was sent to scholars and researchers with national and international reputations for insight into the field as delineated above by the sampling of possible directions for discussion. In point of fact, the thirteen authors, whose work is included here, are representative of a much larger community of concerned scholars for whom academic as well as popular venues for discussion must continue to be made available. Pointedly including contributors from different countries and continents is intended to help us better see how the national differences in the processes of commodification of higher education and the particularities of audit, surveillance and new managerialistic approaches are superficial only in their specificity while they are deeply coherent in their ideological intent and outcome. These papers from Australia, the United Kingdom, Denmark, Canada, Norway, and the United States of America are only the tip of the iceberg. The direction that higher education is taking in the  $\frac{3}{4}$  world of plundered nations and the newly capitalized countries must also be included in these discussions in the next round of planned publications. It is my hope that this collection will stimulate ongoing discussion and collective action both within and beyond the academy not only in the research and scholarship that we produce but in what we and our students do in our/their

life's work as decision makers, policy developers, and social actors in a wide range of occupations and professions. Here lies the possibility of hope beyond *1984* in 2007.

## About the Author

Magda Lewis is Queen's National Scholar and Professor of Cultural and Policy Studies at the Faculty of Education at Queen's University, Canada. Her early publications contributed internationally to the development of critical feminist theory. More recently her publications and research concern themselves with the commodification of higher education, the deployment of newly crafted ethics review processes, and other methods of surveillance and control as these affect the culture of the academy.

## NOTES

1. Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Human Subjects (TCPS), (1998/2000/2002), can be found at <http://www.pre.ethics.gc.ca/english/policystatement/policystatement.cfm>
2. Giving Voice to the Spectrum: Report of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Special Working Committee (2004), can be found at <http://www.pre.ethics.gc.ca/english/workgroups/sshwc/reporttopre.cfm>

## REFERENCES

- ACLU (American Civil Liberties Union). (2003). Surveillance under the USA PATRIOT Act (4/3/2003). Accessed on May 25, 2007 at: <http://www.aclu.org/safefree/general/1732res20030403.html>
- BBC NEWS (2006/11/02 15:40:57 GMT). Britain is 'surveillance society': Fears that the UK would "sleep-walk into a surveillance society" have become a reality, the government's information commissioner has said. Accessed on May 25, 2007 at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/6108496.stm>
- Carson, R. (1962). *Silent spring*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Denzin, N. K., & Giardina, M. D. (2006). *Qualitative inquiry and the conservative challenge*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.
- Eliot, T. S. (1925). The hollow men. Accessed on May 25 at: <http://www.geocities.com/Paris/LeftBank/9824/hollow.htm>
- Lewis, M. (2008). New strategies of control: Academic freedom and research ethics boards. *International Journal of Qualitative Inquiry*, 14(5), 684–699.
- Monbiot, G. (2006). *Heat: How to stop the planet from burning*. Toronto: Double Day Press.
- Orwell, G. (1961). *1984*. New York: The New American Library of World Literature. (Original published 1949)
- Smith, M. E. G. (2003). Part ten: The economy. In J. C. Blackwell, M.E.G. Smith, & J. S. Sorenson (Eds.), *Culture of prejudice: Arguments in critical social science*. Peterborough, Ontario, Canada: Broadview Press.
- Surveillance Studies Network (2006). A report on the surveillance society: Full report. Accessed on May 25, 2007 at: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/02\\_11\\_06\\_surveillance.pdf](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/02_11_06_surveillance.pdf)

