

**The Master in the Marketplace: Masculine metaphors, academic agonism, and neoliberal policy in UK higher education**

Jessica Butler • Lancaster University

Presented at the Feminist and Women's Studies Association Biennial Conference 2017 on the theme 'making space for feminism in the neoliberal academy'

September 6<sup>th</sup> 2017 • University of Strathclyde, Glasgow

---

SLIDE ONE

This paper is to illustrate how the language of the 2016 Higher Education White Paper, *Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice*, can be interpreted as revealing the masculine ideology of neoliberalism, and neoliberal higher education in the UK, and how this relates to the masculine values underpinning traditional academia before marketisation became a guiding principle.<sup>1</sup>

SLIDE TWO

I will be focusing my white paper analysis on Jo Johnson's introduction and the executive summary. To outline the masculine nature of pre-neoliberal HE I will be drawing on some of my previous work, which focused on the gendered conventions of academic discourse, particularly the importance of constructing an argument and how this contributes to a culture of competition. I'll begin with an overview of this work, covering some of the main academic norms before looking at how these relate to George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's work on the structuring power of metaphor with reference to the metaphorical construction *argument is war*. I will then turn to demonstrate how metaphor and linguistic themes operate in the white paper to reveal a similarly gendered culture of competition, albeit one underpinned by a different logic to that created by the old boys of the ivory tower. This jostling of discourses, I conclude, is producing some hand-wringing about academic values on a number of fronts, but whilst both the intellectual elitism of more traditional academic competitiveness and the economic imperatives of neoliberal competitiveness are problematic for many in HE, including, but not limited to, feminists and under-represented groups more broadly, the expansion of UK higher education required to feed the knowledge economy also offers some possibilities for positive change.

In my previous work on academia I looked at how the traditional manner of putting forward new ideas or knowledge involved constructing an argument, entering into debate with existing work, and presenting this as an objective, rational, reasoned evaluation. Justifying one's own position – though it should not in fact be acknowledged as one's own position and simply as the *only* position – involved to a greater or lesser degree discrediting alternatives. This is kind of inherent in the project of objectivity, because within that framework only one view can be 'the truth'.

Helene Cixous refers to this as 'the discourse of mastery', implying a hierarchical relation of gendered power, for to be a master one must have mastery *over* something – a knowledge, a domain, a person or people.<sup>2</sup>

SLIDE THREE

I was particularly interested in how the discourse of mastery operates at both a linguistic and ideological level. What does privileging a mode of expression based on combative approaches and firmly attached to the idea that there is such a thing as 'universal knowledge', where authority is gained or

---

<sup>1</sup> Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, *Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice*, May 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Hélène Cixous, Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *The Newly-Born Woman*, trans. by Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 137.

maintained by successfully ‘defeating’ the work of ‘competitors’, mean for how those in academia interact with each other, and for how institutions are organised?

The main conclusion of my analysis of the discourse of mastery’s conventions was that they are all culturally associated with masculine traits and values. I don’t mean to suggest that men are necessarily endowed with an innate ability to think rationally, engage in combative discussion, or present a seemingly objective account, but to point out that archetypally speaking these characteristics are correlated with maleness – and particularly white, heterosexual, able-bodied maleness of a particular socioeconomic status.

Obviously not all white middle-class men are pinnacles of ideal masculinity, and there is nothing to say that individuals subscribe to this ideal or wish to emulate it. But given that not so very long ago the university was the exclusive domain of the middle-class white male, academia has to some extent been moulded on modes of thinking, seeing, communicating, and organising, that by and large are common to this demographic, either in actuality or aspirationally, and this may confer an advantage on those more familiar with these norms. This masculine normativity includes the idea of objectivity, which, far from being a neutral viewpoint, is simply the perspective of those with the most uncontested cultural dominance, those whose apparently universal point of view maintains its ascendancy largely by devaluing and discrediting the position of those who challenge it. To use feminist epistemologist Lorraine Code’s words, ‘ideal objectivity is a tacit generalisation from the *subjectivity* of quite a small social group, albeit a group that has the power, security, and prestige to believe that its experiences and normative ideals hold generally across the social order’.<sup>3</sup>

#### SLIDE FOUR

The illusion of objectivity is in part what enables a discursive style based on the creation of a rational argument. Deborah Tannen calls this ritualised practice ‘agonism’, or ‘conventionalised oppositional formats that result from underlying ideology by which intellectual interchange is conceptualised as a metaphorical battle’.<sup>4</sup>

#### SLIDE FIVE

This idea is especially interesting in light of the work of Lakoff and Johnson, whose seminal text *Metaphors We Live By* is based on the premise that metaphor is integral to the way we understand the world.<sup>5</sup> On this basis they reject the myth of objective truth, for ‘the idea that metaphor is just a matter of language and can at best only describe reality stems from the view that what is real is wholly external to, and independent of, how human beings conceptualise the world’ (p. 146). They point to the ideological role of metaphors, the impact they have on social reality, and their place within hegemonic power structures where ‘the people who get to impose their metaphors on the culture get to define what we consider to be true’ (p. 160). One of the first examples they use is the metaphor *argument is war*.

#### SLIDE SIX

In this construction, we can see that the way argument is described in English draws on metaphorical language from the semantic field of war. A claim is ‘indefensible’; we can ‘win’ or ‘lose’ an argument; our interlocutor is our ‘opponent’. This has obvious implications for academia, where argumentation is the most common framework for books, articles, and papers, and where the success of those outputs is used as a bargaining chip in what could be seen as the academic battleground more broadly. There is surely a correlation between the agonistic competitiveness of academic discourse and the competitive hierarchy of HE in general where individuals, institutions, and clustered groups in

---

<sup>3</sup> Lorraine Code, ‘Taking Subjectivity into Account’, in *Women, Knowledge, and Reality: Explorations in Feminist Philosophy*, 2nd edition, ed. by Ann Garry and Marilyn Pearsall (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 191-221, p. 197.

<sup>4</sup> Deborah Tannen, ‘Agonism in Academic Discourse’, *Journal of Pragmatics*, 34 (2002), 1651-1669 (p. 1652).

<sup>5</sup> George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

between are to some extent pitted against each other for the perceived or actual scarce resources of money, prestige, authority, and the aura of ‘success’.

The discourse of mastery is predicated on a certain kind of ivory tower conception of the academy where part of the prestige of achieving mastery, of ‘winning’, is derived from the confining of expertise and authority to a small number of experts. However, one of the central points of tension in neoliberal academia is that the expansion of higher education and the move towards fee-based income for institutions has not just resulted in widening participation but necessarily had this as a goal. There are, after all, only so many middle-class white boys, so to satisfy the imperatives of the knowledge economy and its reliance on the growth of the education sector, students and staff must be culled from more diverse groups. The ideology of mastery and the ideology of neoliberalism each have competitiveness and battle at their core, each prioritise a rhetoric of ‘success’ and ‘excellence’, and each rely on a conception of winning or achievement that relies on hierarchical, masculine values and the accrual of capital, but the forms of capital that signify success are shifting.

Access to intellectual and cultural capital has always been easier for those with financial capital, in large part because being of a higher socioeconomic status meant exposure to the discourses required to be at ease in contexts where such knowledge circulates. By putting a high price tag on higher education, neoliberal academia also requires a certain amount of financial capital – or the willingness and ability to take on significant debt – but the main difference I see, and this comes across quite clearly in the white paper, is that money is now the ‘point’; as a sector, higher education’s primary function is being reorientated towards generating income for the UK economy. Under this logic, the ‘point’ of knowledge production and research is not to increase knowledge, but to stimulate economic growth. This perhaps doesn’t chime with the values of many working in HE, but the transformation of students into customers, and education into a product, is already embedded in the corporate discourses circulating in government policy.

There is a lot to draw on in the white paper, but I’ve pulled out three main themes – the metaphor of the ‘level playing field’, which encompasses discourses related to hierarchies and competitiveness, the idea of ‘choice’, and notions of ‘value’.

#### SLIDE SEVEN

It is also worth noting that the frequent use of ‘we’ and ‘our’ serves to bring the reader on side, but designates a group that is both unclear and unstable. For instance, the opening line of Jo Johnson’s foreword – ‘our universities rank among our most valuable national assets’ (p. 5) – presumably refers to ‘our’ country, the United Kingdom (although many of the policy changes will not apply to devolved nations, muddying things further), whereas ‘we have made the possibility of participation in [HE] a reality’ (p. 5) indicates ‘we the Conservative Government’.

#### SLIDE EIGHT

By not drawing a distinction between these groups, and by implicating the reader with inclusive language, ‘we’ are being invited to consider the country and the Tory party synonymous, and ourselves a member of, and ally to, both. Note also that in the first sentence the idea of hierarchy has been introduced with ‘rank’ and universities have been appraised in financial terms as ‘valuable assets’.

The metaphor of the level playing field is invoked several times in the white paper, and is the title of an entire sub-section. This is interesting when read in conjunction with my previous interpretation of academia being an institution operating under an ideology of battle and competition. It is used in the context of higher education ‘providers’ competing against each other in the market, but I’d suggest it is also linked to students through the language of equality used when the issue of access to HE is raised. I’ll come back to this in a moment, though it’s worth noting this change of terminology, from ‘institution’, something we are a part of, to ‘provider’, something we are in a power relationship with, dispensing or receiving. The level playing field is as much an illusion, or myth, as ideal objectivity, but the white paper sells the idea of it pretty hard. The importance of ‘strategy’ reappears several times, as does the need to

be ‘agile’ and ‘flexible’. New institutions are referred to as ‘challengers’ who will ‘incentivise’ existing universities to ‘raise their game’; they will be permitted to enter the market as long as they ‘clear our high quality bar’ because an established ‘track record’ is not enough to justify favouring ‘incumbent’ institutions. The logic is that by deregulating the sector and permitting new education providers to open and offer the same products, market forces will decide how these institutions should be valued, supposedly democratising the process. However, whilst this may be a move away from the discourse of mastery and its focus on elitism and prestige based on intellectual capital, market ideology doesn’t, in my view, serve to ‘level’ the ground, it merely changes the metrics. The most successful universities in this model are not the ones with the ‘best’ students and academics or with the most robust reputations – however problematic the way ‘best’ is measured might be – but those who make the most money. Thus, in the unlikely event that, say, Oxford, failed to implement a sufficiently strategic business model and exited the market, one of the UK’s most historic cultural institutions would be lost because, quote, ‘the Government should not be in the business of rescuing failing institutions’ (p. 10).

#### SLIDE NINE

It’s okay though, the white paper reassures us, somewhat in the style of a teen magazine agony aunt: ‘the possibility of exit is a natural part of a healthy, competitive, well-functioning market’ (p. 10). As a related aside, I’ll just briefly pick up on the notable change of tone and use of body-related metaphors, which I’d suggest invoke a more ‘feminine’, sympathetic discourse, and which reappears in the repeated statement that certain things – usually ‘choice’ and ‘competition’ – are ‘at the heart of’ the system, humanising and feminising what otherwise asserts itself as being an aggressively masculine set of proposals.

I’m slightly over-stressing the point here because clearly there are issues with the unequal statuses of HEIs and the perceived value of some universities over others, as I alluded to earlier. However, that is not to say the solution to this is subjecting HE to the whims of the market. For one thing, it’s not possible – no amount of ‘challengers’ are going to reduce the cultural cachet of Oxbridge and the Russell Group. And it’s not the same as buying a packet of biscuits from Asda because they’re cheaper than the same ones at Waitrose. All English degree programmes are not the same, all English degree students are not the same, and regardless of the accuracy of the perception, not all first class English certificates come with the same kudos attached to them. Whatever the white paper might have us believe, this is not simply because teaching quality varies. Learning quality also varies: knowledge is active, not passively absorbed, and attending university is an experience encompassing far more than however many contact hours per week students attend. Of course it’s important to ensure teaching standards are good; my point is more that the notion of the level playing field is false because introducing a teaching assessment exercise and shoving a bunch of new providers into the market isn’t going to put all HEIs on an equal footing, and that the neoliberal logic on which it’s based escalates the reframing of education as a product, students as customers, and institutions as service providers. It makes the value of further study something that is assessed along primarily financial lines, subordinating the value of knowledge for its societal, cultural, or personal benefits to its instrumental benefits. It also overlooks a raft of systemic inequalities, which is something it has in common with the discourse of choice, which I’ll cover next – although it should be noted that the idea of the level playing field isn’t about creating actual equality but is something more along the lines of that old chestnut ‘equality of opportunity’. It appeals only for a flat battle-ground on which competitors can then eviscerate each other without handicap.

The language of choice, on the other hand, is mostly applied to students, or ‘customers’, and serves to disguise inequalities between those entering higher education. In case you were in doubt about the significance of choice in the white paper, the word appears up to seven times per page on 83 of the 85 pages – that being every page except one holding copyright information and one containing only a barcode. Other frequent buzzwords that I’ve considered part of the choice discourse include those around ‘access’ and ‘availability’. There is also an emphasis on how the proposed changes will enable students to make the ‘right’ choice, suggesting that at present they often make the wrong one, and this is at various

points connected to studies showing, for example, the fact that 20% of graduates are not in so-called ‘graduate jobs’ (p. 8), directly connecting deviations from the government’s desired outcomes to students making poor decisions about which programme or institution to attend.

#### SLIDE TEN

It is acknowledged that ‘access remains uneven’ (p. 7) and that there is ‘large variation in graduate outcomes’ (p. 8), but this is not seen as being due to, say, the general landscape of social inequality, the large variation in incoming undergraduates, or differences in motivation. None of that matters, says the white paper – ‘at the heart of this lies insufficient competition and a lack of informed choice’ (p. 8).

A similarly simplistic logic is applied to widening participation. The white paper is very proud to announce that ‘higher education is no longer limited to the academic elite’ (p. 7) and we are ‘closer than ever’ to Lord Robbins’ claim that HE “should be available to all who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue it” (p. 7).

#### SLIDE ELEVEN

Sticking a pin in whether we agree that academia has sloughed off its association with the elite, I want to highlight the conflation of availability with access and the rather naïve idea that everyone has an equal opportunity to demonstrate their ability or attain to their fullest potential. This completely ignores structural barriers to both entering higher education in the first place and to fully accessing education once there and not simply accessing the building (which might also be a problem for some). The blind spots here are even more glaring considering the very next paragraph discusses the funding reforms that mean ‘those who benefit the most’ (p. 7) from education foot the bill. We are also told that the decision to triple tuition fees for students was ‘to adjust to these new demands’ of increased participation in higher education. Immediately I take issue with the idea that the main beneficiary of education is the student, but let’s also consider how after being sold the utopian ideal of HE being available to all we are told the price-tag on it is so high as to alarm all except the financial elite... And, furthermore, that this cost is the inevitable consequence of the very diversification that would allow someone from a disadvantaged background to attend university – if only they could actually afford it. In speaking of choice and availability, inequalities in HE and wider society are pushed to the background, and ‘success’ – which in this context means increased social mobility and high financial productivity – becomes a matter of making the correct decision between a suitable number of offerings. The fact that this vision of success might not be the goal for many attending HE, or that all options on offer are not equally available to everyone, is obscured.

The importance of making the right choice is strongly linked to achieving the ‘right’ outcome, and the right outcome is one that represents good value. ‘Value’, in this document, is almost entirely financial – the system must ‘deliver good value for students, for employers and for the taxpayers who underwrite it’ (p. 5). The taxpayer is mentioned several times. Despite the fact that the non-monetary contribution education makes to society is largely glossed over, the connection between the HE sector and the wider public is made clear only in fiscal terms. ‘Taxpayer’ is also a slightly jarring category given that it includes both students and employers, and excludes significant portions of the population. Does the value academia delivers not extend beyond its ability to endow graduates with skills employers want so that they can attract a wage that enables them to pay back their student loan?

According to the white paper, largely not. There are numerous references to ‘productivity’, pledges to ‘drive up’ economic growth, and to make universities ‘engines’ and ‘catalysts’ of social mobility. Employment outcomes are given substantial attention, and HE ‘continues to be a sound financial and personal investment’ (p. 7) by virtue of the ‘graduate premium’ that confers greater life earnings on those with a degree. This in itself is obviously agreeable to the exchequer, but furthermore ‘a 1% increase in the share of the workforce with a university degree raises long-run productivity’ (pp. 8-9).

#### SLIDE TWELVE

That so much focus is given to the financial dividends and future employment benefits of higher education surely has an impact on how the purpose and benefits of a degree are viewed. The white paper

cites studies that find students are dissatisfied with the value for money their programme offers (p. 11), potentially because ‘elements of their course are worse than expected’ (p. 8), but fails to consider what ‘value for money’ might mean to students, or how students may not recognise the array of expenditures their so-called ‘tuition’ fees cover, or whether their expectations were accurate in the first place. The inclusion of students’ perspectives on value feeds into the axiom ‘the customer is always right’, furthering the construction of students as customers and thus, by extension, education as a product.

#### SLIDE THIRTEEN

This move isn’t exactly highly disguised. From page eight: ‘competition between providers in any market incentivises them to raise their game, offering consumers a greater choice of more innovative and better quality products and services at lower costs. Higher education is no exception’. There’s a lot to take issue with there – is education a ‘product’ or ‘service’ we can ‘consume’; is it really just like any other market? – but my point is that this is the discourse under which contemporary academia is operating, and whilst in many ways the white paper tries to distance itself from the elitist principles of traditional higher education, it seems to me it’s really only reconfiguring them slightly into a hierarchical system based more explicitly on money than the days when the aura of ‘genius’ obscured the fact our academic elites also had, by necessity, enormous wallets. The discourse of mastery may be losing its ascendancy as ‘alternative objectivities’ come into the academy, but the primacy of competition and hierarchical structures continues to dominate. This means academia continues to be a challenging environment for those who don’t want to succeed on those terms or who aren’t well-trained in masculine modes of combat, and especially for those working in less marketable fields or from perspectives based on principles opposed to the prevailing ideology – such as feminism.

However, the expansion of higher education does bring with it some positive features. There is greater diversification in both staff and student bodies – nowhere near as much as there should be, and more so in some institutions or disciplines than others, but something to work with. There are communities of allies to be found – hence events such as this – and although I see neoliberalism as having its feet in masculine principles, because its effects in the context of higher education are proving distasteful regardless of gender, where feminism makes resisting neoliberal imperatives a priority there may be an opportunity to find support from new sources. I’m seeing more work on academic kindness, on care, and collectives like the Res-Sisters, who are speaking here, forming, foregrounding the importance of feminist networks, co-operation, collaboration, and communication. I recently joined a community of female academics on Facebook, and see the value in having places to discuss the kinds of issues or experiences pertinent to particular groups, in having people to go to, and there is a large academic presence on Twitter too.

#### SLIDE FOURTEEN

I think maybe part of making space for feminism in the neoliberal academy is simply in making space for our self, whatever that looks like to each of us, within an environment that places increasing emphasis on the sustainability of the institution, on productivity, on fulfilling the needs of students and management, that constantly tries to squeeze more from its citizens. Before there can be room for anything else, there has to be room to breathe.

• • •

With thanks to: the North West Consortium Doctoral Training Partnership for funding my attendance at this conference; Felix McNulty for last-minute assistance cutting the original draft into something that (just about!) fitted into 20 minutes; my supervisors Dr Anne Cronin and Professor Carolyn Jackson for their support during what have turned out to be a difficult first few months of research; and all the wonderful, inspiring, supportive feminist colleagues at this event for their encouraging feedback on my presentation and their excellent papers, workshops, and conversations over the three days.

## References

- Cixous, Hélène, and Clément, Catherine, *The Newly-Born Woman*, trans. by Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986)
- Code, Lorraine, 'Taking Subjectivity into Account', in *Women, Knowledge, and Reality: Explorations in Feminist Philosophy*, 2nd edition, ed. by Ann Garry and Marilyn Pearsall (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 191-221
- Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, *Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice*, May 2016
- Lakoff, George, and Johnson, Mark, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003)
- Tannen, Deborah, 'Agonism in Academic Discourse', *Journal of Pragmatics*, 34 (2002), 1651-1669