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**Academic Labor and Neo-Liberal Transformation of the University,  
Australia/USA: A Symposium at the University of Queensland (UQ), Brisbane,  
Australia, July 13, 1998**

*Participants:* Anthony O'Brien (moderator/editor), Barbara Bowen, Queens College, CUNY; Lloyd Davis, Carole Ferrier, Peter Holbrook, Anna Johnston, Murray Kane, Tseen Khoo, Alan Lawson, Bronwen Levy, Dan O'Neill, and Peter Thomas, University of Queensland

Appendix 1-A: Questions for the Symposium

**Murray Kane:** I'll make a brief economic point at the beginning. One of the things that we're trying to theorize here, in terms of the problems that you've outlined, is what's specific to the Australian environment compared to the US and the South African. We're looking at precise forms specific to Australia of economic determinism, which determine the problems with curricula and within the departments. As a general overview, we've got an incredible relationship with Asia, you know, up until the last year when it's become problematized due to the Asian crash. Australia's gone Asian, in the last ten years or something, as a major policy. There's been an awful lot of resources put into developing modes of communication, business and economics programs around that trade interchange that's so vital to Australia. On the other hand, there is Australia's dependence on primary industry, primary commodity production; the Australian economy is not as developed or as sophisticated as the US. The University of Queensland is one of the Big Seven universities, and one of the ways you understand the huge push towards research in the physical, mining, mineralogical sciences--whose paradigms have an effect on the humanities here--is that we've got so much tied up with the mining industry and its other related industries. So unless it's the same right across the developed world, and humanities intellectuals have the same problems everywhere, we're still trying to work out something specific about the Australian economy which will allow us a certain direction.

**Anthony O'Brien:** Is basic research in the sciences, good science, well-funded, as a result of that? Or is it all channeled into . . .

**Murray Kane:** Pure science has taken a kicking.

**Peter Holbrook:** In fact, recently one of the vice-chancellors [college presidents--Ed.] was saying that Australian science is really in danger of becoming pretty second-rate.

**Carole Ferrier:** Our physics department is just not able to do pure research.

**Peter Holbrook:** I have the impression that a possible difference between America and here is that the

culture wars in America--this document talks about a right-wing political agenda--are not as strong here; here it's always about money, economics, relevance, this kind of thing, and it's a less openly or overtly political or ideological agenda. It's more about efficiency, what the economy needs.

**Bronwen Levy:** Yes, there was a discourse and a set of practices under the Labor government, even before this new, more right-wing lot got in, which operated in the terms Peter described, so what we've got at the moment is actually a stronger, fiercer version of what we had before, but with some differences. We've been dealing with a kind of managerial-speak for quite some time, all through the Eighties, really.

**Alan Lawson:** There was an attempt round about 1992-93 to engender the culture wars in Australia. It was done through the pages of the higher education supplement of *The Australian* newspaper, and there were some fairly clumsy attempts to get some disputes going. It really didn't go very far, and I think in that sense Peter's right, that there was more fertile ground for that in the US than in Australia, largely because in the US a much larger number of people--at least that's my impression--care about culture and regard it as a matter for public discussion. Whereas in Australia, as Peter and Murray both suggested, it's so often been seen as a bit of a luxury.

**Bronwen Levy:** We really don't have that tradition of the small-l liberal philanthropist who funds projects . . . [Alan Lawson: "In Melbourne."] But even there it's not as substantial; that tradition really doesn't exist in Australia.

**Alan Lawson:** That is a really important difference, which underlies some of the misunderstandings of privatization of universities. A lot of higher education policy-makers in Australia look at the US as the site of privatized education, look at the course prospectuses and so on, see what large fees are levied, and believe that every student is paying those fees. But there are large-scale scholarships that are contributed to by alumni and other private benefactors, who see some sort of old-fashioned and very critiquable value in making those kinds of contributions to education, I mean to all kinds of cultural capital. That cultural capital here has not ever been very substantial. And so when universities in Australia try to get contributions from private individuals, it can only ever be on a kind of sale contract, as a direct exchange for services rendered. If I can give out a piece of privileged information [*laughter, pointing to tape recorder*]. . . I'm just trying to work out how many details I can omit . . . as Dean of Prospective Students I was given a proposal a couple of months ago from a private industry organization who wanted, they said, to fund a PhD student. In fact what they were going to do was offer about four or five thousand dollars a year for research expenses, they weren't paying the student's stipend at all; and this was for a commercializable piece of research and so therefore the student was going to have to sign an IP agreement, and also a commercial and confidentiality agreement--those are now increasingly common--but in this particular case the student was going to have to sign these things before being told what the PhD topic was, and so was the supervisor. Part of our procedure here is that part of a student's admission is that a supervisor agrees to supervise the given topic and makes a recommendation . . . [Carole Ferrier: Unless it's for making anthrax.] And in this case, because it was so commercializable and so secret, neither the student, the supervisor, the head of department, nor the Dean of Postgraduate Studies was allowed to know what the PhD project was [*laughter*]. Now I'm glad to say that the University of Queensland still has enough integrity to have turned that one down, but the fact that somebody thought it was a goer, the fact that it even got to my office, I thought was revealing of a certain creeping insensitivity.

**Bronwen Levy:** It's also a kind of Australian crudity that comes out of that economic difference.

**Alan Lawson:** That's right, yes, somebody thought they could buy the university for a while. At that stage we're not even discussing--George Bernard Shaw's words--we're not even discussing *what* we are, we're just discussing the price.

**Carole Ferrier:** Another aspect of the general points Murray brought out about the differences between you and us is the nature of the processes of colonization, and the different ethnic and racial composition of the two populations. It's fairly notorious, particularly in this university, that despite all the talk about access for the indigenous population, there's a really major difference with black populations here and in the States. With a very small black middle class, you've got comparatively powerful and influential ethnic groups as users of the university. That is a very interesting area, but one that's different in important ways to the set-up in the States, and the very different situation in South Africa.

**Alan Lawson:** Carole, you wouldn't compare black Australians to black Americans? I mean, the comparison is between black Australians and indigenous Americans.

**Carole Ferrier:** Not at all: sure, yes. But it is another really important area, where there's a lot going on and basically very little progress being made--except in small, restricted areas--with things like real advances in indigenous education, indigenous participation. This university's been very very low in indigenous participation in education, and this is a State with a far bigger indigenous population than many of the others. That's important. Concerning the attempt mentioned before to launch political correctness attacks, there have been three scandals, which I suppose were scandals we had to have: one about race and one about class . . . [**Alan Lawson:** And one about gender.] Yes, the Darvil and the Garner and the Nicolmatri scandals, and so on . . . all tending to challenge political correctness (a term most of us avoid) and to suggest that all these things have gone too far. In that way it's similar, but the very different way those things tend to get played out here modifies those agendas, and that's why political correctness has not been easily importable, as Alan was saying; for years they were trying to do it, but it's difficult for them. They're trying other methods, but it's almost got to the stage where it doesn't matter, because there's so much cynicism out there about the inadequacy of Labour Party type programs (changing anything won't work, capitalism can't fix it)--that the *right-wing* agendas, also saying capitalism can't fix it, are taking over.

**Peter Holbrook:** There was one turning point: Borbage, who was premier of this State, was voted out in the One Nation surge [One Nation is a nationalist, racist, anti-immigrant party led by the Queenslander Pauline Hanson--Ed], and actually blamed academics for the loss! Bizarre, but . . . [**Dan O'Neill:** If only! **Bronwen Levy:** Yes, if only! **Barbara Bowen:** If only, right, if only!] And also Pauline Hanson, that sort of politician . . . very anti-intellectual, very hostile to the universities as subversive . . . [**Carole Ferrier:** If only!]

**Barbara Bowen:** Do you have the feeling that you're in a crisis? We're do at CUNY, but we're coming from a very different situation . . . If you asked the normal colleague or post-graduate student, would people in general say yes, this is a moment of crisis in the university . . . [**Carole Ferrier:** Yes.] Do you feel like this is a *particular* moment of crisis? What Alan was describing, a sort of transformation of the university into a wing of industry, for instance: is this gradual, or is this a sharp moment of crisis?

**Bronwen Levy:** We seem to have been in crisis for ages.

**Murray Kane:** Well, I tell you, I come from the Classics and Ancient History, and the atmosphere up there is just---it's past the crisis stage, it's now just pure depression. We were reviewed two or three years ago, a vicious, savage thing putting extreme conditions on our ability to teach language programs, and the atmosphere up there . . . And that's not subjective: I mean, we are just waiting for death. So if you put the question to them, they'd think the point in history's now come where quite a long university discipline, the Classics . . . Something's happened within the last five to ten years; there is a crisis in our discipline, and some of them generalize that out to the Humanities. But that differs in different parts of the Humanities, and part of our project is finding out what areas are being given life through funding and through

development of new forms: it seems to be inorganic. I'm thinking about switching, personally, switching to a different field; and if it's a question of looking at the areas of the humanities following industry, if you like, that should not necessarily be seen as automatically curtailing the Humanities project. For instance, I'd love to see some kind of intercourse and radical exchange and rethinking around this massive connection we've got with the Japanese and the Koreans, and all the interchange of students. We've got business and economic programs that are getting more and more sophisticated all the time, and we've got new subjects, like in philosophy where there's far more emphasis now on developing and teaching Eastern philosophy, not just as history but as something new too. So Classics has died in a way here because they did not adapt. Now I was never going to argue that they had to adapt or die, but some areas in the Humanities are in a stronger position to adapt in a radical way; they don't just have to adapt to survive--like English.

**Anthony O'Brien:** Because there's no funding for developing innovative programs in the traditional Humanities? You wouldn't be able to get a grant to rethink Classics and Ancient History in relation to Asian cultures?

**Carole Ferrier:** He might--on sex and violence in early Javanese literature or something; shouldn't be that hard.

**Murray Kane:** Maybe I should take steps.

**Alan Lawson:** You ask about a crisis: tomorrow there's a protest at Monash University, the old campus, where the Arts Faculty lives; it's proposed to cut more than 70 academic staff positions, on top of 60 already cut. [**Anthony O'Brien:** *That's a crisis: that question is answered!*] That's a Faculty with 300 staff members; it's the largest enrolment of any university in Australia. 300 staff members in Arts, and if the plans go through they'll have lost 130 of the 300 over twelve months.

**Carole Ferrier:** One thing that's really hitting us here we call flexible delivery: the notion is that you can almost endlessly replace instruction with this flexible material--you might send someone over to supervise, but mostly they're getting it through the computers--and there's a very strong push to replace a lot of academics with that kind of thing or even replace them with material bought from somewhere else. There's some rumor that Ipswich is going to have a number of courses bought from people at Random House that will be used for UQ students, but not prepared by UQ staff, just brought in as part of our teaching. I don't know how much that's getting under way.

**Anthony O'Brien:** But you're not relying nearly as much, I get the sense, on contingent academic workers--adjunct lecturers and part-timers and one-year contracts?

**Bronwen Levy:** Oh no, there are lots of part-timers, there's lots of that.

**Alan Lawson:** Probably not as high a proportion as there is in the United States, but the development is certainly under way here. The thing is, because Australia has such a strong industrial relations tradition [worker-management disputes adjudicated by industrial courts industry-wide, rather than by bargaining with individual companies, called "enterprise bargaining"--Ed.], such a strong central industrial court, it tends to nip these in the bud a bit, but we've had a series of what you called, quite usefully, contingent staff positions, and every ten years, you know, somebody protests to the federal industrial court and that gets corrected, and then universities (I suppose with the kinds of budget pressures they're under) devise new schemes. What we're going through at the moment is a very recent industrial court ruling which effectively outlawed the use of contract positions.

**Anthony O'Brien:** Yes, we saw that on the net, actually; someone from this university--an architect--posted it on the net. *That's* the way to go!

**Alan Lawson:** But you can see that what's going to happen very quickly is the replacement of contract people with part-time faculty who are recruited on an hourly instead of an annual basis.

**Carole Ferrier:** You can't make any gains: you have a victory like that and the next thing they've moved round it and there's something else. There's another shortage of money now, because we've got to support all those people who were in semi-permanent jobs: so there can't be any new jobs! It always comes round so that you're not winning.

**Barbara Bowen:** So what you're hearing is shortage of money, that's the bottom line.

**Carole Ferrier:** It's not a shortage at all, it's an agenda. [**Barbara Bowen:**It's an agenda, right.] It's an agenda: philosophy is useless, art history is useless (for our purposes), so there's no money. Half a million dollars and you'd never have to worry any more about the humanities' and art history's survival.

**Alan Lawson:** But the federal minister for education only last week announced that universities were foolishly discarding traditional disciplines like Classics, and that if they sensibly managed their resources they'd be able to retain them. Now a number of letter-writers to the newspapers pointed out that this was the minister who was actually driving the economic agenda producing that kind of decision-making, but it was an interesting bit of cognitive dissonance on his part.

**Anthony O'Brien:** Interesting that he felt he had to *say* that, even while doing the opposite.

**Carole Ferrier:** It's often the people in the universities, on the ground, who've either been bought off or sold out; I mean if they would hold out, and say we're simply not doing these things. . . it's not a huge amount of money that's at issue; you can demonstrate it, it's not; but it becomes a pretext for something else that they have a use for.

**Anthony O'Brien:** Carole, I'd like to use that as my cue to shift into the issue of how people are reacting to this, in terms of forming organizations, working at the departmental level, or in other ways. At Monash, for example, how are people going to react? I can see one protest meeting, but underneath that? It's our experience that you can win all the arguments--not that *that's* easy either; it's very difficult to analyze what is going on; every new thing that comes up is never obvious, always very hard to grasp, let alone "theorize"--but suppose you get the analysis down, and win the argument, our experience is you still usually lose, because you need some form of very effective organization to back that up. What is the Australian experience? I'm hoping that you have something to teach us because--as you said--there is the strong Australian tradition of labor and so forth.

**Dan O'Neill:** One problem for us is the notion of simply *reacting* to workplace changes. I wouldn't want to deny the importance of any of the individual issues that have been raised, but it strikes me that a lot of the discussion so far has worked within the assumption that we have to react to an economic and financial situation. Recently there's been a restructuring of this university by the new vice-chancellor, who, within a very short period of arriving here, knew exactly what he wanted, and it looks much more like an American structure than it ever has. The effect of that has been to denude the previously existing structures of any collegiality and to produce a situation where the resistance--insofar as it exists--has necessarily become industrial [trade-union--Ed] resistance. [**Anthony O'Brien:** You mean faculty across every discipline getting together?] I mean through the unions.

**Carole Ferrier:** About 60% of the staff here are in the academic union, an industrial union now affiliated to the ACTU [equivalent of the AFL-CIO--Ed].

**Anthony O'Brien:** Oh you are! So you're a unionized faculty, then?

**Bronwen Levy:** Oh yes, yes. All through Australia. I was going to talk about our union before, the NTEU (National Tertiary Education Union). [**Murray Kane:** "One Big Union" . . .]

**Anthony O'Brien:** Right through Australia! Oh, I see. You are *way* ahead of us!

**Dan O'Neill:** In one way that's a good thing, but the trap is that you fall into the kind of internal contradiction that unionism has always faced within capitalism. [**Barbara Bowen:** Right, right.] And *I* think a much stronger resistance could be mounted, a theoretically very powerful one, if we actually went back--I noticed that you used the term "guild" before--went back to the medieval origins of the university, and thought the thing out in terms of the way that the requirements of intellectual life desiderate a kind of communication, a kind of community--that is of course being continually decimated--but we need to think through the resistance in terms simultaneously of the theory of the university and what it requires to operate as a critical and knowledge-producing and -distributing agency, at the same time how it could be organized in terms of profound internal--you could say, industrial-- democracy. I think the university tradition gives you resources for things that preceded capitalism, of that kind. And the interesting thing about it is, you can appeal to people across their existing divisions on the political spectrum.

**Barbara Bowen:** We have found that; that's exactly what we've found, yes.

**Dan O'Neill:** It struck me that on this occasion, and on the occasion of the previous vice- chancellor who started to move in this direction, one found one's allies in some of the people one was fighting against during the Vietnam War. Very strong allies, coming from the right, who believed very strongly in what you could ordinarily describe as academic values, and the intellectual tradition, and so on. Not enough work has been done on updating that kind of coalescence of economic resistance with intellectual resistance about the values that are being eroded.

**Barbara Bowen:** Well, that's fascinating--and tricky, right?

**Dan O'Neill:** Probably very difficult to do, though Murray's thing strikes me as really interesting--suppose a powerful argument got mounted that this is an *ideal* time in Australia to develop really new inflections on the difference between, say, the Greek and Hebrew and Latin traditions and the founding traditions that all our Asian students come out of and that form their goddamn *businessmen*, among other things. There could be a powerful new kind of intellectual movement. The only chance we've got is if there's something as powerful as the original emergence of universities within Western culture, something which could transform the universities within *this* culture. And probably not just the universities, but other agencies that'd necessarily have to connect with us in that way. It's such a big task that it kind of blinds us, and we get caught up in necessarily fragmentary reactions to all of the parts of the economy that impinge on us, in unpredictable ways; and while we're doing that, we're just scurrying around, like rats on a sinking ship or something.

**Anthony O'Brien:** Barbara, do you want to respond?

**Barbara Bowen:** It's fascinating, very interesting! Two things really struck me: one is your sense that there's a possible new epistemological formation which we need, and which is being denied and resisted in

the very attacks on us. The equivalent for us in the US might be formed within the new knowledge that could come from new populations who have slowly made their way into the university, but who are now being beaten back. We've lost some of our gains--and this goes to what Carole was saying before--we've lost some of the gains that we've made in terms of what we call people of color coming into the university. That's precisely one of the areas where we're under attack in the US--access to higher education for African Americans, Latinos, and other disenfranchised populations. *But* those populations have already suggested to us that there could be new formations, new knowledges, whole new ways of thinking about origins, about ideas of the individual, about whatever you would want to consider. So there are some new formations that are being glimpsed--and then very carefully pushed down. But the other thing that really fascinated me in what you said was your comment about the contradiction of unions under capitalism. At CUNY we have been struggling very hard to think about revitalizing faculty unions and fighting against conservative unionism. Most of this article I did [["This Old House"](#), WORKPLACE 1.1--Ed] studied why the bread-and-butter unionism and business unionism that we are suffering from in the US--more than you are here I think--why that's so particularly appealing to academics, and how our move has been to re-enliven the union as a force of resistance. We've thought, OK, we've got unions, let's get them out of their slump and try to use our abilities as cultural and intellectual workers to revive the union. But what you're saying is no, go back before that, go to a precapitalist period and draw on other forms of organization.

**Carole Ferrier:** We've already got a very strong union, and it does take up issues other than economic ones.

**Barbara Bowen:** It does? Does it work? I mean, what's the record of your winning on non-union issues, as a strong national union of professors?

**Carole Ferrier:** We'll have a win, but then they'll say, oh well, you've won this salary increase, but that won't be paid for by the government, so the university has to find another so-many million dollars--which they then use to make some other cut, saying, well OK, you get your pay increase through your union (it's often just to keep up with the cost of living) . . . [**Barbara Bowen:** But you have to suffer for it!] But we will do something else, or the Executive Dean of Arts will have to save \$3 million in the Arts Faculty this year, so what's he going to do about curbing this incredible lavish expenditure? [**Barbara Bowen:** To keep faculty salaries from falling behind inflation.] So you can't beat it while the ideology is acquiesced to that there is this shortage of money and that things can't be afforded.

**Anthony O'Brien:** Some other questions about organizing resistance: I believe in the Northern Territory the Department of English was abolished? [**Peter Holbrook:** Yes, it was.] And the faculty actually agreed to that? Some body of faculty went along with that decision to fire their colleagues, which I can't imagine happening in the situation of a strong national union; it's so fundamentally opposed to any unionism that I've ever heard of. I was just told in Durban that two-thirds of the faculty senate voted to retrench colleagues in a restructuring exercise, but they have no union there to speak of.

**Carole Ferrier:** When we say "strong" . . . strong as compared to what you described.

**Dan O'Neill:** We have crucial meetings where we can't get a quorum. So how is that really strong?

**Anthony O'Brien:** This is very sobering! We've been working on the assumption that whatever their defects unions are potentially very powerful forms of faculty organization . . . [**Dan O'Neill:** Couldn't agree more.] So let's go into them knowing that we want more than traditional unionism. But if a strong national union can't prevent their own members voting to retrench colleagues . . .

**Dan O'Neill:** I think they should develop themselves as a new theoretical nucleus, a non-reformist sort of

unionism. The way to do that is to reach back to the guilds, and to actually develop simultaneously autonomy--you know, university autonomy--and a kind of guild unionism that's got more than economist objectives. I don't see any contradiction between that kind of stuff and industrial unionism. And if you develop that, it's intellectually challenging, it actually cuts across the existing left/right divisions--people don't know what you're talking about at first, or they do know and come on board--and you've got a new situation which is intellectually exciting and potentially very mobilizing.

**Anthony O'Brien:** Yes . . . Could I ask about different constituencies in relation to the union? Do the young, newly-hired faculty flock into the union, become activists in the union?

**Bronwen Levy, Tseen Khoo, Anna Johnston:** There are no new jobs! They're not getting jobs! They're not getting jobs!

**Anthony O'Brien:** Well, let's say the last generation who got jobs, it might be five years ago, or . . .

**Bronwen Levy:** We're a very unionized workforce, especially so in the Humanities, and English is virtually a closed shop. But for young academics--there is a part-time fee if you're a part-time person, but you've perhaps got to be a bit more motivated to take that up.

**Lloyd Davis:** That's one of the areas in which the union has seen that it has to adapt and broaden its activities to include a range of people who are part-time staff and who were not always acknowledged as part of the faculty but who obviously are in reality. There's an attempt by the union to include those people now.

**Bronwen Levy:** The union is trying, but if you're a part-timer, it's still an exercise to join.

**Peter Holbrook:** Unionism in general in Australia, I don't know . . . as Alan was saying, we've had a very strong union, but I think it took them a while . . . Unionism may be becoming in general more militant. I don't know if you know about the waterside workers?

**Anthony O'Brien:** The wharfies, in Melbourne? [An extremely militant mass strike on the Melbourne docks, with significant international support, in 1997--Ed] Oh yes! That buzzed around the net, as well.

**Peter Holbrook:** Yes. That was quite inspiring, for a lot of people, even though they lost, because for a long time, unions have been so acquiescent, partly because of the Labour government, which they relied on.

**Dan O'Neill:** Could you say more about your connection with the students, and the student movement?

**Barbara Bowen:** Yes, a little bit. It's a complicated question, and we're always reaching for a better connection. Tony and I both teach at the City University of New York (which is Lloyd's alma mater), which has a population of 217, 000 students, and they're mostly urban, working-class, and lots of first-generation immigrants . . . [Dan O'Neill: How many students?] 217, 000! At seventeen different campuses; there are a lot of different centers, but forming a single public university. Anyway, to answer quickly: students have organized, around particular issues that hit students very hard, and especially rising tuition; students will organize. Our students tend to take longer in the university than typical American students because most of ours are working, but that's one good thing about it, that they develop quite a long political tradition, because some of them are there for six, eight, ten years, and they've organized ad hoc, over and over; you see the same patterns--I'm sure you've seen this too--student organizations

forming and fighting the same issues. But recently faculty and student organizations--I would say for the last ten years-- have worked very hard on faculty/student movements. We've had a demonstration of 20,000 people at City Hall in New York, with faculty and students, with faculty lying down in front of mounted police horses who wanted to trample all over the students . . .

**Carole Ferrier:** What was this about?

**Barbara Bowen:** That was about tuition increases, and cuts: no cuts, no firings. Students were livid about tuition increases, we were livid about cuts. And we recently did a big protest--we're in court, in fact, today--we're in court against the Board of Trustees of our university, on the reduction of basic-level courses for entering students (which are deemed remedial or make-up courses), which would cut courses from students and cut faculty jobs. We had a faculty/student arrest over that, planned arrest, and disruption of the meeting, disruption of traffic on the street. So we've done some individual actions, and the next step that we're working on now is a community coalition, especially with the churches in the US, which in the minority communities are strong political forces; so they've invited us to come and preach one Sunday, to come and preach about courses and get in the pulpit, and we get to preach in their fabulous churches; so we're . . .

**Anthony O'Brien:** It's quite a demanding job.

**Barbara Bowen:** It's a dream project for every academic . . . so we've been trying to move into the community. Also with labor: we show up at their hospital closings, put some people of ours at their demonstration, and then they come to ours; so, inching, inching toward a coalition, on the basis that the very same ideology and agenda that is cutting the hospital jobs is cutting the university courses. And in some cases they're the same people: the people losing their jobs are, meanwhile, our students! So it's very interlocked, but we haven't really been able to get to that tremendous place where everybody would see how interlocked it is and just struggle together. We haven't done that.

[pause to change rooms]

**Anthony O'Brien:** The City University as a whole is well over half black and Latino students. Looking at it another way, the average student at CUNY is black or Latino or Asian, female, above the age of 25, and very likely with a child. So it's a very different kind of population than here. I hope this is actually useful for you as well! Some of our problems might perhaps shed light on yours, in the sense that you seem to have the union situation well under control, and we are struggling desperately to try to construct that; and yet, are you any better off with your wonderful union than we are with our wretched botch of a thing?

**Murray Kane:** It looks like there are two sides to this. If we are looking at problems specific to the Humanities--intellectual questions, questions of curriculum, values, modes of teaching, modes of knowledge, and the possibilities of radical forms of critique--we're going to have to work more broadly than in individual departments. But somehow the possibility of mobilizing around that is weakened, in this period, by the shift toward economic unionism. You know, we're very confident about the economic issues in the NTEU, and it allows us to coordinate our industrial activity with the other unions at this campus. That's a significant point. We're not only a national union, but there's a demarcation dispute at the moment, which the NTEU might end up winning, between the NTEU and the ASU (the public sector union which has got nearly 2,000 staff here). The NTEU wants coverage of all workers at this campus--so far is it from being a guild union! Now that gets us a certain power, and during the MUA (Maritime Union of Australia) dispute--it wasn't just Melbourne, we had pickets of 200 workers here in Brisbane--we took the NTEU stuff along there, and there was a significant interplay between us because we're all, after all, in the same boat. But it dilutes our capacity to articulate intellectually, I think, the radical forms of

knowledge that we would like to mobilize around. The best opportunity to articulate the industrial side of our unionism with what, for lack of a better term, we have called the guild side, came in the restructuring of the university Dan referred to, which John Hay, the new vice-chancellor, initiated two years ago. There was a significant opportunity there; I'll give a brief account of it. Not only academics were outraged by the proposed restructuring, which was going to result in job cuts and disappearance of departments or subjects, but also the general staff here, who are in the public sector union, and the students. The three unions, the three major bodies of people on campus--students, academic staff, and non-academic staff--all found themselves together demonstrating, on the level of the job cuts; but the academics and students, and a few of the public sector workers who, a lot of them in a university, tend to be people with degrees as well, formed an organization, the University Reform Group, which put together a significant critique of the restructuring at the level of its rationale, its intellectual cohesion. We tried to show it up and draw the beast out of its lair to respond to the intellectual arguments, and we nearly had a big success. We galvanized the three unions, I think, partly through this document, and we could see an articulation of the academic interests and the industrial interests in that moment. We were searching for such moments, and I think that's the whole function of keeping a political culture going, often: you can respond when opportunity arises.

**Anthony O'Brien:** Oh, that sounds like *gold*, to me, I must say!

**Barbara Bowen:** Carole, you went further than the document? Because we've done that too, but then . . .  
**[Dan O'Neill:** We'll give you a copy of it.]

**Carole Ferrier:** No . . . you can win the intellectual arguments, but in fact, that all ended up just going kerflooey despite our side. **[Anthony O'Brien:** The restructuring went through?] Yes, and the setting up of the executive deans and the new financial accountability and everything else; it's all in place, despite our winning most of the arguments on the intellectual merits. People can win an argument, and then the next week something's happened as if you didn't! **[Barbara Bowen:** Exactly.] The same with the MUA strike: it was very inspiring, but it was an absolute disaster, and that union is now smashed. The disaster was complete for that union, that's the truth of it. That's not the way it comes over, but that's what the truth is. Half the workforce is going; they're all going to be casualized; the union officials totally sold out. We can say we had a terrific debate and process of organization about that restructuring, but it was totally defeated.

**Murray Kane:** Well, you see what your practice has done, and then . . .

**Anthony O'Brien:** Look, yes, I know . . .

**Dan O'Neill:** True, true . . .

**Carole Ferrier:** It's almost as if it had never been, as if nothing had happened; it couldn't be much worse now than if none of us had said "boo!"

**Murray Kane:** Except that there was a significant intellectual polarization, to the extent that at the crucial vote of the Academic Board there were nearly 50% who voted against the restructuring. And these were leading figures throughout the university who took on board the intellectual argument and voted on that basis. When push came to shove that vote was pushed through in a very underhand way . . .

**Carole Ferrier:** But a lot of them were the old farts who didn't want to change anything!

**Anthony O'Brien:** As soon as you started talking about it I was going to ask what are the processes-- how is the university ruled? I mean is there a democratic structure? [*Laughter*] Being a little deliberately naive here . . .

**Dan O'Neill:** There's a cult of personality at the top, and underneath that there are a few more cults of personality!

**Carole Ferrier:** And the money stops with them!

**Anthony O'Brien:** But in a formal sense, I mean, who would vote on this restructuring program? The senate is the group with power?

**Barbara Bowen:** Are they all government appointees? You don't have anyone on?

**Dan O'Neill:** A few faculty members, very few.

**Anthony O'Brien:** So it's like our Board of Trustees.

**Carole Ferrier:** It's like the House of Lords [*laughter*].

**Barbara Bowen:** OK, and they are people from the business world, as they say, professionals, and . . .

**Murray Kane:** Major and minor; a religious appointment . . .

**Barbara Bowen:** Somebody who's owed a little plum by somebody doing the appointing? And they are not people who have expertise? That's not how they're selected?

**Dan O'Neill:** It's government appointments, very, very mainline.

**Peter Holbrook:** They're State appointees, under the Queensland legislature.

**Barbara Bowen:** And they vote on all the restructuring of the university?

**Carole Ferrier:** They approve what is proposed, and they can veto.

**Murray Kane:** Actually what we're attempting to do is lay bare the power structure.

**Anthony O'Brien:** Yes, exposing the power structure is what I would call social-movement unionism--at least within the university it is.

**Barbara Bowen:** And so the group that you were talking about before, not this appointed Senate, it was a group below that, the Faculty Board?

**Carole Ferrier:** The Faculty Board is like the House of Commons, and the Senate is like the House of Lords.

**Anthony O'Brien:** So the Board proposes and the Senate disposes?

**Murray Kane:** What's the American term?

**Barbara Bowen:** We can adjust . . . we have heard, we have heard vaguely, of the House . . . [*laughter*]; it rings a bell. OK so, then, you made your inroads on, we'll call it the House of Commons level, where you had elected faculty representatives, who normally vote with the Administration, but you made some pretty heavy inroads, so that it didn't just go 100% with the Administration. Your "Academic Board" is like our "Faculty Senate," but ours is utterly powerless, that's why it's a little hard for us to understand.

**Peter Thomas** There was some movement at that level, some influence, but at the end of the day the only thing valuable that came out of that experience was the cohesion of interests across different unions and groups inside the university, around the idea that it would be possible to form an intellectual project and move that through action. It remained fairly limited in its scope and reach, and for a whole variety of reasons the sustainability of that becomes a bit of a problem in a certain period. But that at least is *something*--seeing there was some possibility of that.

**Anthony O'Brien:** It certainly is something! To clarify: is the Academic Board made up of senior professors, like the heads of departments, who sit ex officio, that kind of thing? The bulk of the vote would be people in the academic hierarchy?

**Carole Ferrier:** Heads of departments and 24 elected members.

**Peter Thomas** This is all changed with the restructuring since they abolished Faculty Boards. [**Anthony O'Brien:** *Did they really?*] And now the Executive Dean is a CEO who's advised by committee. [**Anthony O'Brien:** So even that is gone, basically.]

**Dan O'Neill:** There was a total of sixteen Faculties--fourteen or sixteen--and what they did was cut it down to a total of seven, so they amalgamated previously distinct Faculties; you now have, e.g., one Faculty of Law, Business, and Economics. You create those new bodies in order to put at the head of them guys called Executive Deans--and I think they're all guys, aren't they? [**Carole Ferrier:** One isn't. Social Work!] [*laughter*] So those people now run the show; any committee is just an advisory committee.

**Barbara Bowen:** OK, we recognize that move, the move toward appointed heads. [**Carole Ferrier:** Yes]. It's definitely a corporate structure, a managerial class, basically. That's one of our big struggles, to keep elected faculty chairs.

**Peter Holbrook:** You also have--and I think this is coming to Australia too--very highly paid CEO Presidents. [**Barbara Bowen:** We do, yes!] We call them Vice-Chancellors, although *our* Vice-Chancellor would actually like to be called President.

**Barbara Bowen:** Oh! Ours would probably like to be called Chancellor! Is he an Australian?

**Peter Holbrook:** He's Australian, but he says that apparently when he goes to America people don't realize how important he is.

**Barbara Bowen:** And what's the average length in the job of a university president: 3.9 years, something like that? [**Dan O'Neill:** 3.9? *What's 3.9?*] Something like that, yes, the average length of time that you stay a university president at an American university. They're on the market as soon as they take up office; it's a resum,-building, purely careerist job.

**Peter Thomas** John Hay, who's now here, was previously at Monash, and redesigned the whole Open Learning series there--at Deakin, sorry; that was at Deakin; he was at Monash before. That's a trend here as well; you get a head-kicker vice-chancellor for a few years to do radical restructuring then move on.

**Barbara Bowen:** Then they move on; they take that "skill" that they've developed . . . [**Carole Ferrier:** Where do they go?] Some place there'll be a chance to move up.

**Dan O'Neill:** Some place where he can be called President all the time.

**Peter Thomas** He'll probably go to the City University of New York.

**Barbara Bowen:** He'll love that!

**Murray Kane:** Going back to that moment, the most significant in recent times here at the university, I think that part of our project was based on the fact that there was an awful lot of dissent, but not *expressed* dissent, within the academic community. As you said earlier, Tony, if you go to anybody and ask "Is there a crisis?"--well, then you'd have got the answer "Yes, yes, there's this, and that." As intellectuals, they're going to talk about it at some level or other, and they've got some cogent analysis to offer; and there's some hope in that process. What happened was that when they proposed such a radical restructuring of this university they *had* to put out a paper on the proposed change, and they got 120 full written responses from staff, from academics. None of them were made public! [**Anthony O'Brien:** Oh! Is that right?] Right. And we went blue in the face trying to make these public, because nobody knew what the other person was doing! It was only the Vice-Chancellor's man got to read the proposals! And they'd come out with things like "There's no significant dissent"! And when you got to the people who wrote them [*laughter*]--it was a farce, you know?

**Anthony O'Brien:** Could the NTEU have come in at that point, to raise the issue of transparency, making the deliberations public? Would the union have had the clout to do that?

**Murray Kane:** We did, we had--at the vital moment, you know, the Senate meeting's going on upstairs--we had the three unions down in the foyer, each with their banners, all the unions there *officially*, over this demand, transparency. The major demands were: make the material public, delay for at least six months to a year the process that they were trying to ram through, because it's so important to slow them down. [**Barbara Bowen:** That's *exactly* what we tried to do, yes!]

**Carole Ferrier:** It's like Oliver Cromwell, you know? [**Barbara Bowen:** Yes.] And however good your arguments are . . . one thing they came up with all the time when they first started was "Oh, but obviously things have got to change and improve, and there's all these people who don't want to bother thinking about change, or resisting change personally"; that was one they used all the time . . . [**Barbara Bowen:** Yes, "academics don't like to change."] Early on it was actually very effective, because a lot of us were saying "Of course it could be better, right, and *some* change would be good," but then that becomes a blanket approval of all these draconian changes. The way a lot of people were trying to resist was actually to stop any change, and that wasn't a position that had any credibility. It's just the same as happened, say, with changes in the English department: we've spent 25 years trying to bring in black writing and women's writing--we've actually destroyed the canon, we've destroyed literature in the department, you know, involuntarily . . .

**Anthony O'Brien:** Surely it has a samizdat status, somewhere?

**Carole Ferrier:** Now, having changed everything, we're lined up with the right, trying to bring back Western culture and Western values and, you know, men middle-class writers, because nobody's interested in them anymore! *[laughter]* But that is a powerful way they force assent . . . it's as though they've done all their market research--in fact, that's one way you can help us, if you can tell us what they're doing over there; it's probably the next thing they've got lined up for us. It's the same with enterprise bargaining [union contract bargaining with individual firms rather than, as in the Australian TU tradition, industry-wide--Ed] coming in on the US model; one of the crucial gains of unions was industrial bargaining, and this overrides it all. The same in the university.

**Peter Holbrook:** The other thing that's happened in the Australian system is, unlike the US system, for a long time we actually had a very standardized national system. If you were a Lecturer in Perth you got paid more or less the same as a Lecturer anywhere in the country . . . **[Anthony O'Brien:** According to the national union contract.] The union contract. All that's gone, or going, anyway; we're now in a much worse system, enterprise bargaining. The whole system is being broken up into elite universities and less elite--of course that always operated to some extent, there were always the better, older places (so-called "better," with more money)--all that's changed. Carole's right that if it's happening over there it's going to happen here, because we're also heading toward that system in America where we'll have star professors being paid lots of money . . . **[Lloyd Davis:** There are already, in certain faculties.]

**Carole Ferrier:** It's not only one way: Britain's adopting our fees-paying thing; it's not all coming to us.

**Barbara Bowen:** Yes, the restructuring you did a couple of years before we did. That whole scenario about academics not wanting to change, they use it so cleverly: you're just stick-in-the-muds and we're the visionaries. But what you said is very interesting: the position of no change you saw as a useless position for faculty to take. **[Carole Ferrier:** It's laziness, really, is what it is.] I'm also really interested in the debate between you two about how to think about a moment where things come together and where you did shift the discourse, and you did produce this collective document-- which I can't wait to read, and is the kind of thing that we struggle to do--the debate about, even though you lost the vote, what does it mean?

**Carole Ferrier:** We shift the discourse all the time, but it's as though this steamroller rolls on . . .

**Dan O'Neill:** Yes, but see, they're the most powerful . . .

**Carole Ferrier:** And we win all the intellectual arguments, but they've got the guns and the money so it doesn't make any difference!

**Anthony O'Brien:** There must be some military tactical manual . . .

**Peter Thomas** Go to the hills, comrades!

**Carole Ferrier:** We want our guns back!

**Barbara Bowen:** Arm ourselves! *[laughter]*

**Anthony O'Brien:** It sounds like you have to move to a different level, if you're running headlong into the power set-up. **[Carole Ferrier:** Oh we're always moving to a higher level!] *[laughter]* But if you run head-on into their arbitrary use of power in the university, that has to become the issue, doesn't it, who controls the university? Perhaps you do that already, in this document--or was this a learning experience

for a lot of people? Because, I know, having been an academic all my adult life, you have the illusion that you run things: this is how this job is *different*, you know, from working in a corporation.

**Peter Holbrook:** Academics are perhaps a little bit different to a lot of other workers in that we have--call it illusions, or commitments--to a certain image of ourselves; and that idea--which I actually think is a great image, of the scholar, alone, pursuing . . . it's very, very difficult for people to make that transition, to think of themselves as workers in that kind of industrial sense. And partly we *don't* actually want to see the university like that. [**Barbara Bowen:** Exactly!] We actually don't want to see the university as a factory with workers pitted against management.

**Dan O'Neill:** I think you can make that transition by thinking through the intellectual and organizational preconditions of intellectual work, incorporating new relations with students, as well--that needs to be thought through. Some work like that was going on all around the world in the late Sixties, but it just got aborted. I think that's how we started to get more organized. When we saw what was happening we started a group called the University Reform Group, which started as a study group: we wanted a series of seminars; somebody produced a bibliography of books on the university and its history of the university, and we were going to work our way through all that stuff. [**Barbara Bowen:** That's great.] When you start to look seriously at all that stuff, it sharpens your awareness of what's being threatened. [**Barbara Bowen:** It does, yes.]

**Anthony O'Brien:** Do you think this has been reproduced in other Australian universities, or is UQ a very special case? Because this sounds like a very advanced level that you've got to here.

**Carole Ferrier:** It's because in Queensland we've always had it tough, we've been fighting an extreme right wing State government for many years, the Bjelke-Petersen government.

**Dan O'Neill:** But the student movement here was very strong in the Sixties.

**Carole Ferrier:** Dan's been here since '67, I've been in it since '72, but we've always had something out there.

**Dan O'Neill:** We published a book here on the universities in '70, which was written by 100 staff and students; we collaborated over the whole of a summer to produce the book; it was a comprehensive critique of this university, but as an example of the contemporary university. [**Barbara Bowen:** And what's that called?] It's called *Up the Right Channels*.

**Anthony O'Brien:** We actually have a similar document for the City University at around the same time, the Seventies, around '75, called *CUNY in Crisis*.

**Dan O'Neill:** This is the only student movement that produced that in Australia; Monash had something like that, but not as strong. Yes, I think that aspect of the movement got more strongly rooted here, and I think that tradition probably survived.

**Barbara Bowen:** Did you get press coverage in the restructuring fight?

**Murray Kane:** Yes, at the time we did; a lot of press coverage--made the front page. [**Barbara Bowen:** I'm not surprised.] Yes, There was other stuff in there as well; there was direct action as well as this document.

**Anthony O'Brien:** This raises the question of continuity, too: having done this, how do you keep doing it? And also modifying it, taking account of these real differences that exist in the faculty.

**Carole Ferrier:** Well, people have had their consciousness raised, you have some sort of victory, which encourages them: but you haven't--it's like the MUA dispute, the whole resistance was smashed.

**Peter Holbrook:** I think that's a bit exaggerated.

**Peter Thomas** No, no, the MUA have been smashed, Peter; look at the figures--they have been smashed. [**Peter Holbrook:** Really?] It's just not being published: half the workforce is gone.

**Peter Holbrook:** Well, it is partly image, but it's certainly not as if it felt like a defeat; that was not the image out there.

**Carole Ferrier:** But that's the truth.

**Peter Holbrook:** Yes, certainly they lost a lot; but you see, for so long the unions have been quiescent in everything, and I also thought it was very inspiring to see actual, real, global--there's so much talk about globalization--we had globalized unionism! The American, Californian . . .

**Barbara Bowen:** Yes, they went on strike in California, the Longshoremen; that's a progressive union, in California.

**Carole Ferrier:** But it was completely defeated, for a whole bunch of reasons; and it's the same at the university--we might as well never have had that campaign.

**Murray Kane:** What have you said, Carole? We might as well never have had that campaign?

**Anthony O'Brien:** I have to dig back into my old Maoist manuals here . . .

**Peter Thomas** Better to have tried and lost than never have tried at all, Carole.

**Carole Ferrier:** It made no tangible difference, except for the politicization.

**Barbara Bowen:** Maybe we don't know, we can't know . . .

**Murray Kane:** If we hadn't done it, it would have been a lot worse than it ended up.

**Peter Thomas** To say that it made no political difference other than the politicization of a few people is too despairing.

**Barbara Bowen:** That's never true.

**Peter Thomas** It is to miss the point that that "no difference" is a whole range of differences. If we're actually going to confront the whole attack on intellectual culture through the universities that's going on, it's going to take a long process of working out how we do it, and what it is we're fighting. [**Barbara Bowen:** Yes.]

**Carole Ferrier:** Yes, but what I'm saying is the basis for the desperation that people feel: however many arguments you win, however hard you organize, it still happens. And maybe you push it, you stick your finger in the dike here, you know, and it's all pouring out through the next hole.

**Anthony O'Brien:** You have to find a different narrative for that, though; you can tell that story in a lot of different ways, I mean, apart from just constant defeats, it's also . . .

**Carole Ferrier:** I'm not being negative . . .

**Anthony O'Brien:** Oh no, no, I'm not accusing you of anything--I think it's very valuable for you to put that point, that it was smashed.

**Peter Holbrook:** I actually agree with you on that. It can be seen as a period of defeat for a long time now--they're doing it in the USA, they're doing the same thing here--but the thing is, you can't *not* fight it, you've got to look for those seeds of resistance, because those little things can make the difference. [Carole Ferrier: We rush around frenziedly watering every one that might be there!]

**Barbara Bowen:** One thing that's important is just the fact that we go through the same thing--in New York we have one administrator saying "I'm the visionary guy, and I've got this great plan for this institution." Then you come here to Brisbane and you find out that there's the same guy declaiming, with the exact same tape-recorder playing in his head, and similar forms of resistance--that's very powerful, because we each go through that moment of thinking "Well, you know, maybe we do need to have a change, and maybe this guy has some good ideas, and it could be the wave of the future," and then you find out that there's a massive plan, that *they* are paying attention to a certain manual that they have got . . . [Carole Ferrier: You get about 10% of the real agenda--the good parts--and then the other parts . . .] Yes, exactly; and then you see the rest of it when you go someplace else: that's very valuable. We might all have been struggling in our little different places thinking this is a local issue, when it's clearly *not* a local issue: and surely we can do something more with *that* knowledge.

**Dan O'Neill:** Well this link on the net would be good.

**Anthony O'Brien:** Yes, I think we should see if somebody here would be a contributing editor for WORKPLACE or if you would like to write for it. We have to stop--for me this was a very valuable meeting of minds, and I look forward to continuing it. Thanks very much to you all.

*Ed. Anthony O'Brien, Queens College, CUNY*

## **Appendix 1-A**

### **Questions for the Symposium**

1. The institution of the university is itself--reflexively--becoming the object of study, the crisis in institutional culture the subtext of every academic conference. Please comment from a South African/Australian perspective on the things that most trouble us in the US university today--the shrinking of tenure-track jobs and a future for young scholars; reliance on grossly underpaid adjunct lecturers, a form of contingent labor; newly aggressive corporate-style management by university administrators; budget cuts by the state legislatures; a right-wing political agenda to shut down access and gear curriculum to the labor market just as more students of color and immigrants are making the public universities their own. Are there reflections of these changes in the South African/Australian university

too?

2. What issues trouble you in the South African/Australian university that are quite different from those mentioned above? What is unique to your own situation?

3. Could you all comment on specific transformations in the post-apartheid universities? Is a reform agenda (e.g., affirmative action, curriculum changes for new student constituencies) well under way? What alternatives do you imagine for the University of Durban-Natal?

4. Macroeconomic constraints are often urged as the reason for budget cuts, downsizing, loss of tenured jobs, and narrowing of the curriculum. In the US we often don't believe this argument, but I get the sense that in South Africa there is general agreement that it is made in good faith by the post-apartheid State. What are your views? What is the view in Australia?

5. Aside from that argument, it is often said in the US that higher education is a private good, an investment by the student in his or her financial future. Is that conventional wisdom here too? How can we make the contrary case for higher education as a public good, a necessity in the public sphere?

6. Looking at what we can identify as issues we have in common in South Africa/Australia and the USA, how would you analyze their social roots? Cary Nelson speaks of late capitalism coming to the campus, with its scorn for labor and for academic tradition, its love of contingent labor and privatization, its instrumentalism and economic determinism, its global reach, its belief in pure market forces. How much of the explanation of our woes lies here? How else do you see it?

7. These questions have emphasized structure, but there is also and always agency. What forms of faculty organization have been tried to defend faculty interests and ally faculty with the interests of students? Is unionization the answer? What are the problems of effective unionization of faculty? What should be the scope of a union of intellectuals--bread-and-butter unionism, or social-movement unionism? How can a faculty union link up with the larger union movement?

8. To the extent that we have issues and interests in common in the South African/Australian and the US university, how can we join forces and share experiences? What forms of solidarity or common action can you envisage? Is it possible to act together as intellectuals across national borders?

9. Finally, please comment on other questions you think are important.