

“Everyone Should Have a Plan”: A Neoliberal Primer for Writing Program Directors

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ABSTRACT

While writing programs try to find good solutions to the problems we face, we do so within the conditions and constraints of neoliberalism which systematically casualizes labor, privatizes public services, and reduces social supports within and beyond higher education. Of particular concern for scholars in composition and rhetoric and for writing program directors is how neoliberalism operates rhetorically to train faculty and students to understand problems and seek their solutions in free-market terms. This plenary address offers a primer of neoliberal rhetorics and realities to help writing program directors come to terms with and find more effective and collective ways to resist this “do-more-with-less” political-economic agenda.

Because the conference theme is “Solving Problems Together,” Tony Scott and I want to situate the problems facing writing programs in the bigger context of neoliberal political economy. To paraphrase Marx, writing program directors try to find good solutions to the problems we face, but we do not do so in conditions of our own choosing. Our presentations are about critically elaborating the political-economic agenda that has largely shaped the conditions most or all of us find ourselves working within. In a nutshell, to solve problems, we need an elaborated understanding of what the problems and their drivers are. My role is to present a primer of neoliberal rhetorics and realities.

First, definitions. Neoliberalism is what has largely emerged as a global consensus that recurring crises in capital accumulation can be solved and corporate profitability restored through labor casualization, deregulation, reducing or eliminating social supports, and privatizing formerly public institutions and resources, including education, so as to reduce the cost of doing business and create new markets for doing business (the educa-

tion market, the healthcare market, the student loan market, and so on). June Jordan summed up neoliberalism brilliantly in her Reagan-era "Poem Towards a Final Solution":

An unidentified reporter then queried the Secretary as to whether this plan could be fairly be translated as take down the trees, tear-up the earth, evacuate the urban poor, and let the people hang, generally speaking. (96)

Neoliberalism isn't only rhetorical: it is materially rooted in persistent economic crises from the 1970s onward. But what I'm especially interested in today is the rhetoric that trains us to see problems and their solutions in free market terms—the role of rhetoric in the social reproduction of neoliberal ideas. For instance, in the 1990s—the era in which the Clinton administration pushed for "managed care" rather than a national "Medicare for All" solution to healthcare coverage—the Northwestern National Life Insurance Company ran a series of advertisements (which you can view at jerryfury.com/northwestern-national-life/) in human resource management magazines. These ads peddled health coverage policies that restrict benefits and shift premium costs from employer to employee. One ad suggests workers are hypochondriacs who, without gatekeeping checks, will run to the doctor "for every little thing" (Fury). Another argues that it is easier to train a dog for a tricycle-riding circus act than to teach employees to use their benefits wisely. For an audience of benefits managers, Northwestern National Life presents employee health insurance use as a problem and chirpily says, "Let's do something about it." The rhetorical work of such ads, of which this series is just one example, was to shift the nation's understanding of healthcare: from what since post-World War II era had been viewed as part of "labor's share" of the wealth workers produce to defining health benefits as a drain, a burdensome tax, or an unappreciated "gift."

Beyond training and disciplining the population to see themselves as consumers in all realms, including healthcare and education, neoliberalism's upward transfer of wealth has been facilitated by directing blame downward: making scapegoats of immigrants or "illegals" who are illogically said both to be lazy and to steal American jobs, chastising black men for a presumed lack of family values, dismissing black and brown kids as "no angel" when shot dead by the police, and faulting working-class homebuyers for accepting the bait of predatory lenders. In a stunning neoliberal sleight of hand, *The Economist* devotes its January 8, 2011 issue to faulting the entire public sector for causing the near collapse of the global finance system and ensuing Great Recession. An editorial cartoon in that issue depicts public-sector workers as a gluttonous woman demanding "fewer

hours,” “bigger unions,” and “better pay” while a tiny business-suited man appears to implore her to restrain her appetite and flames engulf them both. In sum, this issue of *The Economist* celebrates a massive financial crisis that was caused by rapacious private-sector greed as an opportunity to shift the blame onto the public sector. As its January 2011 cover proclaims, this issue declares war on public-sector workers, teachers, and their unions, the first major battle erupting in Wisconsin only a month later.

Neoliberalism depends on the packaging of a world view that includes not only privatizing public resources and dismantling public services but also on privatizing—offloading onto the individual or nuclear family—social needs. And well beyond the financial press, it needs to promote justifications for “letting the people hang.” Consider, for instance, an ad from the Department of Homeland Security, which includes the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), that ran during the summer of 2006 in such upscale magazines as *Food and Wine*. Under the banner “Everyone Should Have a Plan,” the ad features a white, middle-class family standing outside their tidy, flag-adorned suburban home. In case of “terrorist attack or other emergency,” each family member—even the mannerly white Labrador retriever—has a role. The bread-winning dad will “Fill up the gas tank, drive home [from the office], pack minivan with emergency kit.” The apparently stay-at-home mom (presumably in the family’s second car) will fetch the kids from school, then return home to ready the family’s “overnight bags” and await “official instructions.” Every family should have their own (privately funded, self-provisioned) plan, the ad advises, adding, “There’s no reason not to.”

At first glance, such an ad might seem benign, even banal—just another piece of the neoliberal educational apparatus promoting leave-it-to-the-family solutions for mass public needs. For abundantly provisioned *Food and Wine* elites, such counsel may seem reasonable and wise, a matter of common sense. But consider, too, this additional piece of the ad’s historical and rhetorical context: It and similar ads in the campaign ran less than a year after Hurricane Katrina stranded thousands of poor and predominantly black New Orleanians and it ran despite the failure of privatized evacuation plans that resulted in drained gas pumps and clogged highways as Texans tried to flee Hurricane Rita. In this rhetorical context, we can understand the work of the “Everyone should have a plan” ad not as deliberative, concerned with assisting readers in puzzling through how to respond to the next mass shooting or climate disaster but instead as epideictic: ceremonially offloading blame for debacles from Homeland Security and FEMA onto the poor instead. Everyone should have their own privatized plan; no one should expect mass social supports for mass social problems.

The project of the chapters collected in *Composition in the Age of Austerity* (Welch and Scott) is to reveal the connections between this broader articulation of neoliberal realities and rhetorics and the specific conditions and challenges for composition programs in neoliberalized universities—programs that are admonished to come up with their own self-provisioning plans to deliver first-year composition and basic writing, prison literacy programs, the National Writing Project, and more. The urgent question is, of course, what to do. Even though we did not put together *Composition in the Age of Austerity* with the impossible aim of providing solutions to a political-economic consensus that extends well beyond any one college, university, or university administrator, contributors do offer some very good counsel—about coalition-building and solidarity, for instance—and instances of effective resistance—such as the University of Illinois at Chicago faculty strike in 2014 or Quebec’s province-wide casserole protests in 2012. To these I want to add a few more.

First, understand that the scarcities we’re facing are manufactured. It’s not that there isn’t money enough but that the money has been funneled elsewhere. At my university, for instance, a decade-long trend of replacing an aging, tenure-track professoriate with contingent faculty has netted the university close to \$12 million annually for spending on administrative activities outside the academic mission (Bunsis). The university’s budget hasn’t gotten smaller; the share for academics is what’s gotten smaller. So, understanding where the money comes from and where the money goes really matters. That’s something that we can do at my home institution of University of Vermont (UVM) because all faculty—full-time and part-time, tenure-track and non-tenure-track—are unionized. We’re able to enlist the help of AAUP in auditing the university’s financial records *and* then find ways to provide some counter-rhetorical education for the campus. In one such event, faculty invited students outside the library to spin a “Wheel of Misfortune” and learn about the golden parachutes and secret bonuses claimed by top administrators while staff and lecturers faced cuts. In coming together to plan and stage such an event, faculty step out of an exclusive focus on their programs and internecine competition between departments to—as several contributors in *Composition in the Age of Austerity* likewise advise—seek alliances and build solidarity. In fact, the Wheel of Misfortune emcee was a professor in environmental engineering who was also gravely concerned that first-year composition for engineering students was being stripped of critical inquiry and restless creativity in favor of narrowly instrumental outcomes.

Scholars in composition and rhetoric can also take up as a key research topic how neoliberal rhetoric works and consider what role our curricula

can play in teaching students discernment and resistance. I've already touched on the blame-shifts, sleights of hand, and appeals to bootstraps self-reliance. And I've noted *The Economist* as one example of where neoliberalism's architects talk openly and transparently about what they're up to and why. But, as I've written elsewhere (Welch, "*La Langue*"; see also Lecerle), neoliberal rhetoric operates above all through obfuscation: through the fuzzy rhetorical games of *la langue de coton*, or woolen rhetoric. We can, of course, take *la langue de coton* as empty rhetoric—as in this excerpt from *Across the Green*, a regular series of memos distributed by my university's provost:

We have been careful and purposeful in planning for the changes underway at UVM, with critical input and participation by faculty and staff, but the flywheel is most certainly spinning now. If I can extend this metaphor just a bit more, I would characterize the flywheel at maximum rotational velocity now. We took about three years to get to this point, but we should not expect the rate of change to increase without bound. We are moving at a good pace and are guided by a clear set of goals. The key now is to remain engaged and committed to our shared goals of academic excellence and student success—to keep the flywheel spinning. (Rosowsky)

Yet these kinds of somnambulistic administrative texts that arrive through email or that we hear in Faculty Senate meetings week in and week out *do* effective persuasive work. Most especially, neoliberalism's *langue de coton* aims to persuade an audience that there has already been, usually among vague "stakeholders," a democratic process of consultation and that the present course is one everyone has already agreed on. (See Lecerle for more on the markers of neoliberal discourse.) In the above example, the "flywheel" of university restructuring—that is, the imposition of austerity measures and the promotion of entrepreneurialism—is already spinning and now the task is to keep it going. The memo tells readers that change is already happening, has already been decided upon, and vague "stakeholders" have already been consulted: neoliberalism depends on the presupposition of consensus, usually cast in passive voice. I'll confess that one way I deal with the woolen rhetoric that comes into my email inbox is to cut it and paste it into Helen Sword's "The Writers' Diet Test." But more seriously, I think we need to contend with how vulnerable our own cherished rhetorical ideals and pedagogies make us and our students to these fuzzy claims of consultation, consensus, and neoliberalized civility.

Before I unpack this more, an historical footnote: In summer 2017 I attended a commemoration of the 40th anniversary of the Combahee River

Collective Statement (Frazier et al.), an early articulation of the intersectional understanding that the injustices produced by manifold forms of oppression and class exploitation don't occur on separate planes but simultaneously (Combahee River Collective). With its declaration that "When Black women get free, we all get free" (134), the Combahee River Collective Statement presages the primary assertion of today's Black Lives Matter movement: When black people get free, we all get free. In her remarks for the 40th anniversary panel, Barbara Smith also talked about the events shaping her own political consciousness. The particular event she mentioned that really caught my attention was the 1969 mass student sit-down at the University of Chicago in defense of a sociology professor turned down for tenure shortly after she spoke publicly against the war in Vietnam. Smith was a part of that protest. Her sense of the sit-in's importance and also the problems it revealed with New Left masculinism and middle-class white feminism moved her toward formulating a black and socialist feminist vision.

This moment in Barbara Smith's biography caught my attention because the dean the protest was waged against was eminent rhetorician Wayne Booth. What the students sought to persuade him of was that the sociology professor should be granted tenure and that governance at the University of Chicago should be democratized to include students and residents of the surrounding community. Booth's response: "Well, if there's anything I can do for you short of giving you what you want, please let me know" (Golus). What happened in the end is that Booth oversaw the dismissal—through suspensions and expulsions—of scores of the students for what he saw as a coercive, not a rhetorical, act. (See the introduction to Booth's *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent* for his account of the sit-in and its influence on his rhetorical thinking. See also Welch, "Informed," for an extended discussion of Booth's civility rhetoric).

Barbara Smith and Wayne Booth both represent a set of ideas and a history that many of us want to claim for our scholarship and our daily work. Yet they also present two very different positions from which to see the University of Chicago sit-in that was, for both, a defining moment—and two very different articulations of the problem that moment presented. For Barbara Smith, it was one of several consciousness-raising encounters that led her to co-author the Combahee River Collective Statement and lay out the problem of how to build a liberation movement that could take on all interlocking forms of oppression. For Booth, the sit-in was a perplexing refusal of a dean's traditional authority that led him to write *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent* and define the problem as the "inability of most

protest groups to get themselves heard . . . and [of administrators] to make their responses intelligible” (ix).

In fact, it’s because protest groups of the 1960s *did* get themselves heard that universities saw in the student body, faculty, and curriculum the significant democratization that neoliberalism has since rolled back. Student strikes at City College of New York, San Francisco State University, and elsewhere created the conditions for composition as a contemporary discipline. But in *Modern Dogma* and other foundational writing in composition and rhetoric, we have the articulation of ideals that have shaped contemporary composition pedagogies: the ideals of people coming together on a plane of equality to solve problems together not through debate or protest or argument but through cooperation, mediation, fact-based discursive deliberation, and consensus-building. These are ideals we find everywhere in our field, most recently in op-eds that promote, as John Duffy puts it, “conditions of friendship between readers and writer,” the teaching of which is posited as an antidote to the alarming enmity of our political sphere (242).

The problem is that neoliberalism strips away all of necessary preconditions that this Habermasian communicative ideal depends on. Booth himself anticipated the assault on civic space for civil discourse in a chillingly prescient footnote near the very end of *Modern Dogma*. In that footnote, he despairs that democratic institutions and commitments to mutuality will survive within an “inhumane economic system” increasingly defined by “viciousness, deception, and privatization to the point of psychosis” (201–02n32). At the moment he was completing his book for publication in 1974, the tenets of neoliberalism were just being advanced as a solution to economic crisis and slump. In fact, the University of Chicago, with its “Chicago School” followers of Milton Friedman, was one of the earliest incubators for what Booth was already beginning to recognize as a full assault on any notion of shared responsibility and public good.

So what to do? I think part of the answer is found in cultivating as much as possible the spaces of solidarity and democracy where people really can come together for genuine exchange. That means not falling into the traps of competition: my program versus theirs, tenure-track versus lecturers. Indeed, to take inspiration from the Combahee and Black Lives Matter slogans, an important slogan for academics might be “When adjunct faculty get free, we all get free.” Part of the answer rests in teaching ourselves and our students critical apperception of neoliberalism’s fuzzy language games as well as the material economic, political, and social reordering these games assist. From those spaces of solidarity and in response to what we discern, we can strive to practice as democratically as we can and with

as many others as we can muster what Marxist linguist Jean-Jacques Lecercle names as the antidote to *la langue de coton*: that is, *la langue de bois*, or wooden language, that our rhetorical theories have largely ignored and our pedagogies have tended to counsel against. *La langue de bois*, explains Lecercle, expresses a position, it expresses opposition and who it is opposed to, and it also assembles friends and allies (217).

I know that when we think about solving problems together, the idea of *la langue de bois*—the language of resistance, opposition, and protest—may not be foremost. Few of us have had any kind of formal education in the rich tradition of social movement rhetorics. We're trained instead to try to act as rhetorically savvy individuals, each left to devise our own "Everyone should have a plan" solution for every emergency that descends on our programs. But some of you are also from campuses that have recently won important victories for your programs and students because faculty went on strike. And even if you are at a private college or in the kind of "right to work" state we may all soon find ourselves in, if you look back just a few decades, you'll likely find plenty of *la langue de bois* on your campus—the mass rhetorical action necessary to win the university access, equality, and democracy now being dismantled, a social rhetorical spirit we can defend and reclaim.

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