

What are universities for? Professor Leslie Swartz's career in the context of the neoliberal university



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Introduction

In 2017, in a curious and somehow overdue announcement, the International Monetary Fund declared that neoliberalism *does exist* and then went even further to question its benefits (Metcalf 2017). Part of the reason for this announcement was that neoliberalism has become so pervasive and successful that it is seen as less of an ideology than a form of 'natural law' (Monbiot & Hutchinson 2024).

In this article celebrating Professor Leslie Swartz's career, we comment on the neoliberal model of the university, a model that appears to have been embraced by the majority of tertiary institutions around the world over the past few decades. As politically and socially engaged teachers and scholars, we consider the illustrious career of Professor Leslie Swartz in the context of concerns about sustainability, corporatism and the commodification of knowledge that characterise the neoliberal university. Professor Swartz and his contribution to society exemplify the challenges, pitfalls and victories characteristic of a scientist who is committed to engaged scholarship and social justice. We make a broader point about scholarship, censorship, the neoliberal university, and the small and large sacrifices that may have to be made to 'stay on principle'.

Neoliberalism and the decay of intellectualism

In 2005, the late anarchist Dr David Graeber was denied tenure at Yale University with no reasons given (Frank 2020). Professor Graeber was widely published, his application received enthusiastic support from peers in the form of letters of reference and he was well liked by students. It was likely that he was refused tenure because of his anarchist politics (Frank 2020). In his eviscerating book on bureaucracy more broadly and academia in particular, *Bullshit Jobs* (Graeber 2018), Graeber described the 'bullshitisation' of academic life as the process by which academics have begun to spend more and more time in committees, doing performance appraisals, signing letters of reference and being managers of other academics – all tasks that they increasingly see as utterly pointless (Graeber 2018).

'Managerial feudalism' (Graeber 2018) has become the order of the day with an ever-increasing number of administrative staff surrounding themselves with 'flashy entourages' (a Deputy Dean must, of course, have a personal assistant and a marketing consultant regardless of the nature of the actual work).

At the time of this writing, a cursory search of Professor Swartz on SCOPUS yielded 406 scientific articles with a Hirsch index of 44. Professor Swartz's work has been cited over 10000 times, and his A rating with the South African National Research Foundation is testimony to his stature in his field, indicating that he is seen by his peers as a leading international scholar in the fields of psychology, psychiatry and disability studies. Of course, Professor Swartz would probably be the first to point out that these metrics should be treated with caution as they are the embodiment of an audit culture of the neoliberal corporate university. Terms such as throughput, output, publication units, intellectual capital, subsidy-generating articles, ratings, rankings, branding, third stream funding, cost recovery and the knowledge economy are commonly used among university managers.

The emphasis on metrics forms part of a managerialist culture that has permeated public universities the world over, with university managers such as department heads, deans and vice-chancellors increasingly serving as chief executive officers in their environments rather than scholar leaders.

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The effect of an audit culture of this nature is to direct scholarship, including teaching and research, to activities that influence measurable performance outcomes. Attention is thus diverted from the social value of principled scholarship, which may not as easily be operationalised and measurable (Ball 2012). Value-informed science and a commitment to improving the lives of people who have been oppressed and marginalised often defy the injunctions of neoliberalism and its emphasis on measurable outcomes in tertiary institutions. The work of Professor Swartz exemplifies this.

The university as a political space

Recent international events have brought the tensions at neoliberal tertiary institutions into sharp focus. At universities, international as well as local, outrage at the genocide that Israel has perpetrated on the people of Gaza has taken the form of student demonstrations, sit-ins, marches, webinars, seminars and petitions. University managers have been largely silent, however, betraying their capitulation to the donor class.

Of course, there have been exceptions, with the University of Western Cape flying the Palestinian flag and calling for an immediate ceasefire as well as full academic disengagement from Israeli academic institutions. But such resolutions were quickly followed by reports of threats to withhold funds to universities in retaliation (Naidu 2024). Recently, reports from the University of Cape Town (UCT) have suggested that as much as R750 million in funding was withdrawn following the decision by the UCT Senate to condemn the genocide in Gaza (Feinberg 2025). Such blatant blackmail suggests that South African universities are increasingly facing fierce pressure from the donor classes to the extent that (following Graeber) we may even see a move from a neoliberal to an imperial university (Frank 2020).

Similarly, at Professor Swartz's institution, Stellenbosch University, there have been attempts to censor academic freedom so as not to risk alienating donors. In 2024, the dean of the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences attempted to stop a seminar on health care in Gaza from taking place. Students were instructed by the university management to remove the Palestinian flag from the university library as it could risk offending others. Stellenbosch University's Senate, the highest academic decision-making body at the institution, in 2024 voted against a motion calling for a ceasefire in Gaza and an end to the genocide. These incidents are examples of political apathy, censorship and the so-called neutrality that have become characteristic of the neoliberal university. Professor Swartz's Leslie's activist scholarship is a challenge to this disturbing trend.

Yet, the pressures on an academic such as Professor Swartz are broad ranging. As the editor of the *South African Journal of Science (SAJS)*, Professor Swartz is a de facto official of the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf). In October 2024, ASSAf issued a draft statement on 'armed conflict' to which it requested responses from its members. The draft statement

contained language on the consequences of armed conflict, specifically humanitarian devastation, fatalities, injuries, damage to critical infrastructure and the environment, forced population movements and the spread of disease. However, the statement was silent on the matter of the Gaza genocide, even as thousands of people in Gaza were being annihilated at the very time that the statement was being released into the public domain. Several ASSAf members protested at this omission and signed a petition objecting to it, calling on the organisation to clearly condemn genocide. However, most members, including all ASSAf office bearers as well as the SAJS editor, were silent on the matter. Of course, the requirement of an editor is, ostensibly, to invite all opinions on the statement, rather than to take a specific political stand. As such, there was probably no alternative to such a position if one is a journal editor, and the situation betrays an ostensibly unsolvable flaw in the reasoning behind the notion of academic freedom. We are confident that Professor Swartz would acknowledge and interrogate this and argue that such seemingly unsolvable positions are also fair game for scholarly inquiry and engagement.

When representing an organisation such as ASSAf, liberal notions of the academy require office holders, including editors, to assume a neutral stance and allow debate to flow, without indicating their own position. Yet, institutional neutrality and silence in the context of human rights violations and social injustice are also a political position. The ASSAf Council ultimately decided to 'avoid issuing any statement, as doing so could potentially cause division within the Academy and could inadvertently draw ASSAf into a politically sensitive space'. Notions such as 'controversy' and 'political sensitivity' are part of a discourse used by institutions to avoid taking a political stand against injustice as doing so may risk alienation of its donor base.

It appears that this paradoxical stance is inescapable and represents the tension of being a scholar activist on the one hand and an editor and official of ASSAf on the other. For Graeber, holding difficult positions, even radical ones, is perfectly acceptable if one is not prepared to act on them. Writing about the genocide in Gaza is acceptable. Issuing a statement from the Senate and the university leadership condemning genocidal Israeli action is not.

Professor Swartz's moral leadership

Under Professor Swartz's editorship, the *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research (SJDR)*, a leading journal in the field of disability studies, recently issued a call for article for a special collection on Disability, Political Violence and Genocide (Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research 2024). Other organisations such as the American Psychological Association and the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies have avoided discussions about the Gaza genocide and have, in fact, steered clear of even using the term.

Rather than shrinking from controversy, Professor Swartz's work has always been political and responsive to the human rights challenges facing the world, including South Africa.

His area of focus, namely disability studies, is highly relevant to the case of Gaza where thousands of men, women and children are disabled (in addition to those being killed) because of injuries sustained in Israeli attacks. Cases of amputations without anaesthetic abound, in addition to spinal cord injury, traumatic brain injury, and visual and hearing impairments because of Israel's bombing campaign. Professor Swartz has addressed the moral, ethical and human rights challenges head on with his editorship of the SJDR and we laud him for this.

Such a position is an example of scholar activism that pushes against the current of political acquiescence, conformity to an unspoken status quo and silence in the face of gross human rights violations that have unfortunately become a feature of academic institutions. Because of concerns about threats to their funding streams, academic institutions, scholarly organisations and journals have become compliant with the political agenda of the donor class that is located mainly in the rich world.

There does not appear to be a way out of this conundrum. With steadily receding state funding over the past several years, universities have become reliant on external research grants, contracts with private sector firms and philanthropic donations for their continued sustainability. Several universities in low- and middle-income (LMICs) countries rely on funding from USAID, PEPFAR, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and National Institutes of Health (NIH) to conduct research and provide medical services to their populations. The Trump administration's intention to punish states that are not politically aligned with its agenda, including its uncritical funding of and support for Israel's aggression against the Palestinian people, will have lasting consequences.

We view the university, where Professor Swartz has spent most of his career, as an intrinsically controversial and uncomfortable political space. Institutions of higher learning form part of the matrix that comprises the state, the economy, civil society and political culture. We may not be able to stop the slide of universities towards corporatism and an acceptance of market economics. However, we herald our colleague Professor Swartz's steadfast refusal to succumb to the trappings of neoliberalism and the commodification of intellectual engagement.

The university will endure, and we would like to imagine that tertiary institutions will not give up their role of conducting critical activist scholarship. Rather than succumbing to an audit culture that includes 'bullshit jobs', we believe that universities should be responsive to their contexts and address the critical issues of our time. These critical issues include social inequality, health disparities, human rights violations, climate change and the benefits and hazards of artificial intelligence.

Conclusion

As a mentor, respected colleague and friend, Leslie has had a profound influence on us and our careers as scholars, teachers and global citizens. It is with wistful gratitude that we acknowledge his formal departure from the university. Several cohorts of scholars have gained from Professor Swartz's avuncular manner, his gregariousness and his clear-eyed dedication to social justice. We know he is not done yet, and we are confident that he will continue with his scholar activism in the coming years with the same resolve and determination.

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