

# Who gets the research loot?

The challenges of being a postdoctoral fellow in a neoliberal university

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## Looting

My thoughts are anthropological, environmental, and geographical in that my family and I find ourselves in new cultural, geographical, and academic surrounds. I have recently moved with partner and 26-month-old daughter to rural New South Wales to take up a three-year postdoctoral research fellowship at a regional university. The fellowship scheme is part of a new initiative to attract fresh talent to this institution, Australia's oldest regional university, an establishment with an already impressive research record. The new fellowship program allows fellows the opportunity to procure more research funds and attract more research status to the university. Such an arrangement should not surprise any of us operating in what can be considered a neoliberal research sector.

It is expected that during my incumbency I will publish as much as possible and apply for research grants which, if successful, will be encouraged to be attached to this university, and through which my future salary will be paid. I am a part of an intellectual yet ultimately business-driven investment: 'We give you a certain amount of financial resources for three years and provide you with the institutional support for you to undertake research. You should then make more for us over the next however many years. The condition: you stick with us. After our initial investment, you search out your own money and we will administer it for you'. While this appears as a

win-win, I have my reservations. I believe these concerns are relevant to many academics in both research and teaching positions in Australia and elsewhere. I present several issues relevant to the contemporary business of knowledge generation and knowledge movement and its relation to the possibility of a radical environmental humanities and its crossovers with anthropology and in part geography.

It was outside a café a few days after arriving in my new hometown where I met another postdoctoral fellow from my new university (employed on a different scheme to me) that I realised how relaxed this town is and how the university environment is obviously less frantic than in Australian urban centres. I have come from a university where being stressed, wired, and overworked is the status quo; it is almost expected. Our discussion, which was softly interrupted by a beautiful yet cold late winter rain, moved from the politics of research, the role of language and words in our respective research fields, and backyard vegetable gardening in the local environment. Neither of us is from the place where we now live. I consider the mobility and geography of research and researchers, and the(ir) apparently incessant need to go where the cash is just in order to have an apparently insecure, time-restricted, and untenured or non-continuing job. I swore I would never move for work. Here I am. Moving to New South Wales at least got me away from my family of origin in South Australia.

## Modern academix

My new colleague is a self-described multidisciplinary economist. He bore the scars of the modern academic: he had moved several times for work, he told me of his research having suffered as a result of his teaching enterprises, and was now three years into a five-year research position. While I assumed he was right-oriented politically, he claimed his opinions had changed over time. The corporatisation of universities troubled him, and he was obviously fearful of his future in research. He says he did not like how universities had outsourced activities in the way they had. The culture and economics of Australian universities is moving toward an American mode: user pays. No time or space to think, no time get a group of friends together, contemplate, and look at the stars. Heck, maybe one does not even have the time to get a girlfriend at uni anymore. It is all about semesters, tri-semester, summer schools, and getting out quickly into the workforce. We have all heard it – courses cut, pay cuts, casual contracts (at best), and the dawn of online teaching. But what does it all mean for universities as research institutions when the external funding acquired by their academics, already stretched intellectually and time poor, is going to those who simply do not have the time to carry out the proposed research, i.e. to the academics themselves? That is, how can a full time teaching and research academic carry out more research if they are successful in accruing more grant money? My contention: they cannot; at least they cannot do so successfully.

What such a situation creates is one not only of inequity of financial resources but an odd inequity of temporal resources. Succinctly put: those who get the research loot generally have little time to use the loot, and those who do not get the loot do have the time to use it. And one would assume in around 50 per cent of cases, would use it well. But the time-poor still manage to become the cash-rich in the academic world. In addition, those who are established in their field get to push their research in the direction they desire while those who often have more innovative and creative ideas, even if those ideas are less developed, are hindered in their attempts to make a contribution and are restricted from being allowed in the door. Applying for research funding is in itself a radical (cyber) aspect of the environmental humanities and geography involving copious hours of searching (read: often scrounging) not to mention the actual process of grant writing, involving the spending of an inordinate amount of time which can often render the cash amount sought insignificant.

I have experienced the amount of administration associated with small research grants; some are simply not worth the effort. And the large ones are out of the reach of a new postdoctoral applicant. So what to do in such a situation? More specifically, how does such a situation come about? It appears the process of gate keeping research maintained by public and private funding bodies is driven largely by those who are already enjoying positions of status within their given field. Such researchers tend to be the consistent recipients of grant funding from prestigious bodies. It is a case of have and so shall you receive. While it is apparent that such scholars often demonstrate they can produce respectable research outcomes and to a large extent pursue their own research, the systems which develop around such individuals are not necessarily innovative. Innovation requires movement – movement of people, movement of resources, and movement which is meant to remove stagnation. It also requires time and space to think, the two precious commodities of which most (established) academics have little. For a young postdoc in the minefield of Australian academia, I believe innovation is most often the last thing on one's mind. Getting a gig, just getting something, is usually at the forefront. Having now achieved that, and having avoided aspects of the greasy pole, with the old hats greasing it while simultaneously pushing you down and making sure you do not get up anywhere, means I can now sit in relative postdoctoral luxury, guaranteed for at least three years until December 2017, and write up not only my scholarly findings but also pieces like this one. To this anyone could say: 'Hey man, shut up and stop whinging. You actually got a postdoc. What are you complaining about? I have applied for 50 postdocs with no joy. I'm jaded.'

My new colleague reminded me of the success rate of a particular section of research funding in Australia: 20 per cent. Not bad odds really. So maybe I should just be quiet. While I am now a beneficiary of a system, I am also under no illusion that because I am now in, the system is fine. It is not. Like the Australian property market, it is skewed towards those who have. The eight postdocs were selected from a batch of about 75 applicants – around 11 per cent. These are not good odds, and with the increasing number of PhD completions flooding the academic markets of Australia and the world, the odds aren't getting any better (The SIGJ2 Writing Collective, 2012). Is it a play or be played situation? I believe it all depends on what you want.

When I recently met yet another academic in the discipline in which I am now located, he stated the three

important aspects which currently comprise any academic career (such an abstract expression): research, teaching, and administration. I have been involved in research now for decades. Having done a PhD and been employed as a research associate post-PhD, I should know about research. I have a postdoctoral position with no teaching component, I repeat, no teaching. That is, at least as it stands on my contract. If then, I have no teaching, what would my administration work be, other than that associated with my own research? I shudder to think I might become the discipline's occupational health and safety officer. So then, how will teaching and administration possibly become a part of my newly found existence as a postdoc? Only if I want such a career, right? If and only if I choose a career in academia and indeed a career at this institution, no? And what if I don't want either? Should I even be questioning or complaining considering I am guaranteed a salary of \$75,000 plus per year for the next three years, possibly with some potential to continue? I'm in a good position, right?

### The project

I *am* in a good position. I have time and space to think, an opportunity to travel to Pitcairn Island, a South Pacific island where no professional linguist has ever travelled, to conduct linguistic and ethnographic research on the language of the descendants of the *Bounty* mutineers and their Polynesian counterparts. The research completes a loop: I have worked on Norfolk Island, an external territory of Australia, where the Pitcairn Islanders were relocated in 1856. Pitcairn is a last frontier of sorts. While a few families re-migrated to Pitcairn in 1861 taking back with them what has become known as the Pitcairn-Norfolk language, the looming threat of Pitcairn's closure makes my research and eventual publications not only of relevance to linguistics but also to geography, people movement, and the state of islands in a late modernity under the pressure of global economic, social, and environmental forces. 'It's worth it,' I remind myself. 'This will be a challenge but it's going to be fun.' It seems being the first linguist ever to travel to Pitcairn will be a feather I can wear in my hat forever.

Behind these facts is the idea of a future; are my skills saleable or transferrable? I have just arrived in this town but where to next? Why am I already projecting so far into what lies ahead? Isn't three years forever? Is there

actually anything worthwhile in studying and writing about linguistics? Within this academic and intellectual comfort, why is it that the fear and likelihood of teaching and admin looms large? Where has that artist in me gone, the one who used to talk about 'research for research's sake' or 'art for art's sake'? 'I didn't go to uni to get a job', I used to tell people, 'I went to uni to learn how to think.' Isn't it enough to have a research project funded by my university reason enough to continue in a research-only position? Why, like so many others, am I forced to move from research writing to becoming a professional grant writer?

Having been out in the academic wilderness for some time prior to signing my current contract, I realised there is much to be said for carrying out one's own research based on one's own financial and intellectual strengths. Institutions are most obviously required; they provide varying levels of support which one cannot find elsewhere – they contribute credence, status, and reliability to one's work, at the same time as reaping the benefits of research conducted with their name

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on it. However, with what I believe are the admin paupers having taken over the research palace, it is often the case that a university email address, a visiting research fellow position, and a strong desire to do research is enough to do what research is required. If anything, one avoids the admin headache of research, and one is not answerable to as many people. I know that in the case of Pitcairn Island, several linguists could have already gone. Why didn't they? They didn't get any funding, despite applying several times. This baffles me. If you really wanted to go, you would have paid your own way. For whatever reason, researchers, and generally established researchers, rarely pay their own way in research.

Maybe a reasonable analogy is that of purchasing a house (having a full time tenured position) or renting (having casual or short term contracts): house buying is meant to be a low risk option and should lead to financial security and wealth accumulation and provide the possibility for innovation, but it can in some instances in parallel reduce mobility and movement. (This reminds me of what my former PhD supervisor once intimated to me: you can't do revolutionary science when you've got a revolutionary home life.) Renting is portrayed as unstable and risky but is most definitely a great option if

one is looking for flexibility in their life, hopefully some innovation, and possibly some excitement. (For the record, I am not a believer in the chimera of job security, nor is it necessarily the case that money is as safe as houses and that real estate will always go up in value. The current property market in Australia is definitely evidence of this.)

### The outcome

So it is here I suggest that maybe it is not such a bad thing to have three years of well-paid research funding without it necessarily leading to a tenured position. The mirage of tenure may be there but it does not have to be a dangling carrot. I believe it is under such conditions that real radical research in the environmental humanities, linguistics, and anthropology can be done. Such research often does get rejected, but it is work, which when coupled with tenacity, perseverance, and resolution, will eventually get published. Despite how naïve the following statement appears in our current neoliberal yardsticks of research quality, it is our creativity in research which counts not the number of articles, citations, and publications in highly ranked journals. In the end, the only question one must ask oneself as a researcher is: How do I want to live my life? Or as applied to research: How do I want to conduct my research?

Which brings me back to my earlier point. If those, who because of time poverty, cannot conduct the research they propose while being successful at accruing funds, then what is the future of research? I believe the answer to this question lies in individual self-reflection on one's role in the neoliberal world of research, whether we are applying for research funding which could be better left to others, and whether or not we as researchers are making the greasy pole greasier or not. Regardless of how greasy the pole is, in the new geography where my family and I find ourselves, I promise to enjoy and make the most of my time at this rural university in this small non-urban city. Our garden is slowly coming along. Please come visit.

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### Reference

SIGJ2 Writing Collective. (2012). What Can We Do? The Challenge of Being New Academics in Neoliberal Universities, *Antipode*, 44(4), 1055–1058.