



**RESEARCH SEMINAR SERIES – 2012/2013
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION
COLLEGE OF SOCIAL SCIENCES AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES**

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Professor Valerie Hey is Professor of Education at the University of Sussex. She is co-director of the Centre for Higher Education Studies located in the School of Education & Social Work. Her research interests have been inspired by her social and intellectual biography and are transdisciplinary in ambition working across the fields and approaches of: feminist theory; cultural studies and sociology. She is well-known for her work on girlhood cultures of friendship and gender and education. She was the principal applicant for an ESRC seminar series convened to discuss the 'disqualified discourses' of higher education entitled 'Imagining the University of the Future' and along with Professor Louise Morley, has focussed on devising with colleagues in CHEER and beyond, a cultural sociology of higher education as a means to infuse our understanding of the Academy as producing both social divisions as well as positive generative possibilities. The webpage <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/education/cheer> has more information about Professor Hey's research interests and achievements.

Seminar Title: The Paradoxical Academy: Between the Difficulties of the Devil and Democracy

Abstract

In what Zizek, rather portentously calls 'a state of permanent economic emergency' (2010), higher education at least in the UK, and particularly in England, has been subject to rapid disinvestment in both financial and in terms of an ideology linked to social democratic terms. Ironically in the recession, the market is now the sole or major arbiter of 'choice'. I want to reflect on what this decoupling has done or is doing to the condition of my own production and to those I teach. Is it that the intimidations of austerity are intensifying the trend to supplant the pleasures of vocation, creativity and curiosity in those who work in the university as academics and students? Does there seem to be a default to the mundane, the obvious and the instrumental dominating desires for success – so, that academic vocabularies mimic rather than interrogate the problematics of funders – blue skies for grey skies (?) and students entailed in investing in their future under the 'consumer pays' mandate, seek the impossible guarantee that the challenges of knowledge and learning engaged with their teachers, may all 'pay off'? I draw upon some emergent evidence about this trend and what it presages.

I wonder how the Academy as a place of risky endeavour associated with the difficult demands of learning, teaching, writing and researching, might prevail, and for whom? Previously notions of equity and access have been invoked and confounded in disrespectful discourses of 'dumbing down' and 'Mickey Mouse subjects'. If this pejorative turn confused rather than clarified matters of the purposes of higher education in optimistic times, now that austerity is here, what is higher education for and who benefits? This is a presentation devised from: philosophical speculation, personal reflections and the vocabulary of resistance staged latterly by academics in 'defence of the public university'. I am aware of the trap of nostalgic reminiscence about the alleged 'good old days' performed by talking down to the present ones. I might not entirely escape this temptation but will take the risk.