Dark Academia: Despair in the Neoliberal Business School

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Although it was supposed to be a faculty 'Away Day', we were crammed into a room only a few hundred metres from the business school. Budgets were tight and departmental austerity was in full bloom.

The Dean took centre stage and gave a talk largely consisting of corporate buzzword phrases: "significant stretch targets"; "get our friends in the tent"; "the aha effect"; "global mindset"; "clean up the box we live in"; "big buckets you then sharpen".

A bewildered colleague beside me leant in and whispered, "these Away Days are so bloody depressing". I nodded in agreement, mirroring the forlorn faces around me.

But worse was to come. Next on the agenda was a team building exercise involving African drumming. As we banged away on our cheap djembes in embarrassment, the Dean was nowhere to be seen.

Exhausted, tyrannised by office email and under pressure to meet performance targets, the Away Day felt like some kind of cruel joke.

Introduction

There is something deeply troubling at the heart of what I dub the *neoliberal business school*. By 'neoliberal' I mean their overt commercialisation so they resemble a private firm, replete with management hierarchies, customers (i.e., students, industry clients, etc.), cut-throat careerism and a myopic focus on 'outputs' and KPIs. While business schools have financially benefited from the marketisation of higher education and enjoy disproportionate influence *vis-à-vis* other schools, there's also a dark side, evidenced by widespread despair and even depression among faculty.

Such despair is not exclusive to the business school, of course. Neoliberalisation has fuelled frustration throughout higher education in the UK, US, Australasia, Canada and elsewhere. Universities now adopt a corporate ethos, with business schools exemplifying the trend, including all-glass facades and dark business attire.

Encountering this milieu at News Corp or Goodyear is to be expected. Employees know what they're getting into. But in a university setting, corporatisation grates with the basic values of academe and many of the reasons why we entered the profession in the first place. This growing disconnect has made higher education a grim place to be. The recent spate of faculty (and student) suicides in the sector is but an extreme manifestation of this pervasive despondency.

As Rosalind Gill (2009) remarks, most academics find it hard to speak out and choose to suffer in silence instead, sometimes for years.

The trouble is that this despair *is* actually difficult to voice, particularly in the neoliberal business school that's meant to embody the ideals of corporate capitalism. Furthermore, since the academic labour process has been so individualised, open discontent is usually framed as 'whinging' or 'biting the hand that feeds you'. Melancholy is deemed a personal failing rather than a byproduct of a needlessly callous environment. So we must analyse this despair from a structural perspective, as an outcome of the neoliberalisation process. Towards this end, I suggest the concept of *alienation* might help.

Alienation has a contested history in the social sciences, so I'll approach it in a fairly conventional manner, as a condition of being estranged from something that you'd rather be consonant or harmonious with. In his famous study, Karl Marx (1844/1988) contended that alienation was integral to capitalism because employees (compared to artisans, for example) are separated from nearly every aspect of their labour: the end product of the work, its management, other workers (who now compete) and finally from themselves, punctuated by a sense of 'this is not who I am or want to be'.

My argument is this. The neoliberal business school causes despair because we are alienated from the values, processes and identities that many believe should define what we do. Among the various kinds of alienation discussed below, three pertain to the neoliberal university at large and one is unique to the business school alone: *self-alienation*.

Before proceeding, however, some caveats are in order. I'm not implying that business schools were once utopian paradises. They weren't, but neither were they quite this abysmal. Moreover, it would be tempting to tell a story of academics being forced against their will to accept the new regime. That's only partially true, however. As Mike Marinetto (2019) avers, we've played our own part in creating this malaise, gaming the system for career advancement and endowing 'top' journals with near quasi-religious powers, which is worth keeping in mind as we explore alternatives.

"Iron Your Shirt!"

Alienation from collegial self-governance is the first type that afflicts neoliberal business school academics. While never unalloyed democracies, a degree of departmental federalism, consultation and shared decision-making within universities used to be commonplace. With

the rampant spread of top-down management hierarchies and edict-issuing technocrats, some of whom were sadly academics in a previous life, this has all but disappeared. Today there're only a handful of countries around the world where senior university posts are elected by staff.

To a certain extent we brought this upon ourselves. Autonomy and independence were foolishly reinterpreted through the prism of individualism (being 'left alone' and detached from organisational responsibilities) rather than collective self-governance. But it's the veneration of the private corporation that really drives these steep power structures. I sometimes wonder whether multinationals actually function like this or if university management is adhering to an oversimplified caricature of what they imagine happens inside Accenture.

The second form of alienation concerns research, which has been hijacked by an array of measures, metrics and rankings. Some bizarre consequences follow. For example, while conversing with a mid-career academic at a conference some years back, I asked what she was working on. A paper for a leading journal I was told. "Oh", I said, "and what's it about?" She ignored the query and proceeded to reel off a number of other 'elite' journals she had submitted manuscripts to. After a while I gave up. It was depressing. Whereas an idea was once worthy of consideration before any desire to publish, today the formula runs in the opposite direction. A classic means-ends inversion has taken place. The measure (be it the UT Dallas list, the CABS list, the ABDC list, etc.) has become the target and the tail is wagging the dog.

Once again, this was partly our own fault. In the UK context, for instance, promotion and salaries have been singularly pegged to the number of 4* publications you possess. 'Playing the game' is an open secret and has ceded much clout to a small group of 'top' journals (Butler and Spoelstra, 2012). Innovation suffers because these journals concentrate on self-reinforcement (e.g., coercive citation, etc.), with articles converging around a narrow range of derivative subjects *ad nauseam*. Incentives in the neoliberal business school don't help either. Why publish material that truly fascinates me – or god forbid, a book – if it isn't going to advance my career?

The third form of alienation occurs in the classroom. With students recast as customers that deserve value for money, senior officials never tire of reminding staff that student numbers/satisfaction are crucial to our survival. Welcome to the 'Edu-Factory'. A huge amount of scrutiny is placed on lecturers, who're relentlessly evaluated by students in the name of accountability. An assortment of dysfunctions arise. Lecturers must be willing to appease students no matter what, with grade inflation and dumbed down curricula an obvious corollary.

Teaching can become a popularity contest, a theatre of entertainment rather than education. Satisfaction scores are used in performance appraisals akin to those employed by Uber to rate its drivers.

The irony is that most academics aim to be great teachers anyway. The metrics merely add an element of managerial distrust to the mix, transforming 'quality' into a thinly veiled threat. Executive MBA teaching epitomises this type of alienation. Given the exorbitant tuition fees and surfeit of self-importance, it's *they* (rather than the lecturer) who are in the driving seat. Teachers risk a classroom revolt if they don't tow-the-line. This can lead to some demoralising pedagogical moments. Feedback might include criticisms ranging from the tidiness of the lecturer's dress ("he should iron his shirts!") to the cleanliness of the toilet facilities. And only an instructor with a death-wish would give a class without hundreds of inane PowerPoint slides.

Business as *Un*usual

I stand before a large class of Executive MBA students on a Sunday morning, talking through a PowerPoint slide depicting 'Kotter's Change Management Model'. The top button of my shirt digs silently into my throat. "What the hell am I doing here?" I ask myself. Collecting my thoughts, I get on with the job.

Do academics in the neoliberal business school fully identify with the neoliberal business model? Given they work in this environment one might assume scholars enjoy being managed in a corporate fashion. But that's not necessarily so. The fourth form of alienation is unique to the business school alone. Academics are increasingly alienated from *themselves*. Unlike other schools in the university, our institutions formally revere managerialism. Subsequently, business academics are meant to both professionally identify with this ideology (including buzzword phrases like "fans, not students" and the ritual of chronic overwork) and welcome being managed as if we were KPMG contractors. Here the gulf between who we're officially supposed to be and what we genuinely value (collegiality, reading/writing books, questioning society, research for its own sake, etc.) is acute.

It shows when interacting with academics from other parts of the university. Faculty in the humanities and sciences, for example, frequently assume that we're unscholarly corporate wannabes, awash with cash and shouldn't complain. Mention T. W. Adorno and they look at you like a freak.

This self-alienation is exacerbated by the legitimacy crisis that has recently swept the corporate world. The global financial meltdown uncovered the rotten core of the banking and financial services industry. Furthermore, the corporate elite has basically sat on its hands as the natural environment teeters on collapse and wealth inequality spirals out of control. And we shouldn't forget that avatar of 'big business' who entered the White House in 2017. So not only are business school academics institutionally encouraged to identify with an alien stereotype, it's one that many find morally questionable.

The recent authoritarian turn amplifies this self-alienation. One of the worst episodes I can recall was when a new head of department informed everyone that 'strong leadership' was required. Minimal faculty input regarding their teaching was a taste of things to come. The school was soon ruled like a conquered country and all dissent forbidden. It was so miserable I moved to another university. A colleague who stayed told me that the administration area was (electronically) barred from academics. Whereas once you dropped by to chat with a programme officer, a generic email address was now your only contact.

These management techniques wouldn't be out of place in General Electric. But here's the catch. Most business schools are mandated to glorify 'strong leaders' and bold managerialism. Yet few of us identify with this ultra-corporate narrative, even if compelled to endorse ever ridiculous renditions of it. It isn't just 'critical' management scholars who feel this way. This has nothing to do with being pro or anti-business. The despair is shared by colleagues in strategy, accounting and supply-chain management too.

Survival Tactics in the 'Edu-Factory'

How do we cope with this self-alienation? I guess the most obvious way is to abandon the traditional values of academe and embrace the brave new world of the neoliberal university. Witnessing this happen is always disappointing. As Carl Rhodes (2017) points out, it involves squandering our inheritance of academic freedom, which innumerable scholars before us fought tooth and nail for.

The second response is to live a schizophrenic existence, displaying the trappings of a corporate persona while inwardly cherishing the 'old' values. Before class with Executive MBA students, I'd sit down and read some abstruse critical theory, hoping to immunise myself from what was about to come. The end result was a dim feeling of absurdity.

The third response is to hide and hope to be left alone. However, in an era of high-technocracy and its avalanche of bureaucratic sludge, that's increasingly difficult.

A fourth coping mechanism is exit, perhaps relocating to a school where other likeminded scholars have gathered. But as neoliberal isomorphism spreads through higher education, this becomes a cat-and-mouse game. League tables and accreditation systems, for example, are impossible to evade. Early retirement is another form of exit, but doesn't exactly help those left behind.

I want to explore a fifth option, of which this essay is a modest contribution. Namely, to 'call it out' and collectively confront all four forms of alienation. This would be no mean feat given the implacable power imbalance that has evolved.

Nevertheless, I saw glimmers of this in the 2018 UK pensions dispute (following the announcement by university leaders that superannuation was being cut). Colleagues nearing retirement – whose pensions would be safe – joined the street marches realising what was at stake. And it's telling that so many business school academics – who some might presume would support the neoliberal pension reforms – also went on strike and picketed their workplaces.

If alienation is a systemic dysfunction rather than a personal one, then we might return to Marx for a solution. He maintained that estrangement from the means of production was the culprit and repossessing them the answer. So perhaps we ought to do the same and together reclaim the means of academic production.

But what would that look like?

De-Alienating the Business School

A major characteristic of the neoliberal business school is a kind of faux consensus. For example, faculty meetings are usually nothing more than conduits for disseminating information about decisions already made. What looks like 'agreement' from the outside is brought about when dissenting views are met with either scornful silence or punitive retaliation. This has permitted the emergence of institutions we no longer see ourselves in. The cultivation of dissensus, therefore, is central to a non-alienating business school, where diverse views are welcomed as opposed to the intolerant monocultures of the US-inspired model we have now.

In practical terms, dissensus would entail initiatives like participatory budgeting; collective deliberation on new appointments; staff electing academics to senior positions, with candidates outlining their plans in advance; the school's mission being extensively debated, and only then carried to the university level; students having more input than simply rating the popularity of lecturers; and most importantly, fostering a culture that actively resists blind technocracy and its fetishisation of efficiency.

For this to happen, of course, top-down management hierarchies need to be drastically pared back. It's important to see this as a *structural* problem. As Dacher Keltner (2016) found in a number of fascinating experiments, it makes no difference how 'nice' someone is, formal power changes how they relate to subordinates, almost always for the worse. The reason why is simple: the power-holder isn't obliged to check their own behaviour as they would with equals. The inbuilt psychological distance increases one's sense of self-importance compared to those below. And if a manager isn't so 'nice' to begin with, authoritarianism can easily creep in.

Stern management hierarchies stem from a suspicion that workers will shirk their duties whenever possible and take advantage of employers. Look, I'm not going to romanticise the situation. Some academics do misbehave and require a firm hand. Senior managers become visibly jaded dealing with them. But it is an entirely different matter to oversee a system that preemptively treats *all* faculty as if they're self-seeking opportunists a la principal/agency theory. That's a self-fulling prophesy in the making and engenders a climate of deadening control. The gratuitous auditing of academic labour is symptomatic of this mistrust, often morphing into *disdain*, as anyone who gets on the wrong side of HR will discover.

Here's the crux of the matter. A de-alienated business school would be one where academics felt professionally in sync with the objectives of the institution, growing with it rather than against it. Let's face it, few of us look to the business world for inspiration regarding our vocation. Who on earth wants to be the Jeff Bezos of academia or managed by one? Business schools shouldn't try to be symbolic replicas of private corporations, but communities of free inquiry, exploring the socio-economic and ethical impact of enterprise in its various manifestations.

It might be objected that this wouldn't equip students with employable skills. But come on. I doubt that teaching students 'Level-5 Leadership' imparts them with superior management abilities. The hardnosed practitioner approach often doesn't add up even by its own standards.

However, a curriculum investigating the elusive qualities of moral reason *in situ*, the benefits of worker co-operatives and non-growth theories of wellbeing … now those competencies might actually make a difference in the real world!

Too utopian? Probably. We'd also have to contend with directives from the wider university ('keep that cow mooing'), not to mention government funders who have embraced corporatisation with alacrity.

Ultimately, self-alienation in the business school is indicative of a *transition* between the fading values of academia and those of the private enterprise. The dissonance tells us that the neoliberalisation process is far from complete. But if current trends continue there's a good chance that in the future - one or two generations from now - business school academics will experience *no* estrangement whatsoever, having completely internalised the doxa of managerialism. Little will distinguish their jobs from those in a multinational enterprise or tyre factory. If that happens, this essay will be read as a curious relic from an alien and bygone age.

Acknowledgements

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