

CAN WE SAVE THE BUSINESS SCHOOL?

Shut Down the Business School. What's Wrong with Management Education, by Martin Parker, 2018. London: Pluto Press, 198 pages.

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“if [a business] school wants to only teach and research ‘organizing by capitalists in the Global North’, or ‘organizing by the middle classes’, it would need to say so...we would be suspicious of a biology department which only studied animals with fur, or refused to include plants that weren’t green” (121)

Would you want to learn in the specialized academic units Parker describes above? *Shut Down the Business School* with its self-assured subtitle *What's wrong with management education* fits the *AMLE* editorial team's (2018: 400) call for “scholarly writing that allows authors to be opinionated and provocative... [about] important themes”. In his book, Martin Parker iconoclastically and metaphorically calls for us to “bulldoze the business school” (180).

Parker is a member of AoM's Critical Management Studies (CMS) division and former editor of *Organization*. Essentially in *Shut Down the Business School*, he urges us to replace the b-school with a “school for organizing” that teaches more than just ‘market managerialism’. The central argument is that b-schools should teach about “alternative organizations”. For him, this means different organizational types such as social enterprises, cooperatives, “circus, families...sects, matriarchies, mobs, gangs, ... pirates, the mafia” (x). Second, we are asked to think differently about the meaning of “organization”, which the author defines as “how human beings come together to do things” (xii).

We begin this book review with a *caveat*. In recommending *Shut Down the Business School*, we suggest you brace yourself for a wry first-person rant that is well-intended and good humored but designed to cause offense, imbued with a distinctively British sarcasm (although,

of course, not all Britons are equally sarcastic). Parker's role is to act as *agent provocateur*. He does not mince his words or qualify them in the way others express their criticism of b-schools. For example, Parker asserts that "in popular culture, the business school is now shorthand for some combination of greed and stupidity" (13), with its "paint-by-numbers" journals and "breathtaking lack of modesty". He asserts that MBA means "Mediocre But Arrogant" (15) and b-schools produce "moderately intelligent monkeys in suits" (17). The references to stupidity and monkeys are distinctive Parkerisms. Parker's honesty is refreshing. He describes himself as a sociologist *manqué* (presumably no sociologist who valued his/her disciplines would stoop to work in a lowly b-school?) and as "a well-paid professor who teaches students from far away and writes articles that few people ever read" (3). The author is not reticent about "biting the hand that feeds" him (15). Moreover, Parker reassures us that this book will be his last. His own critics will no doubt welcome this news.

The detailed preface helpfully explains the author's key complaint: "the business school only teaches one form of organizing – market managerialism". Parker offers solutions: "My answer is to propose a 'school for organizing', as an academic discipline and political practice that is intended to discover a different world, not merely reproduce the one that we have...No form of organization would be off-limits" (x). Parker retains a degree of utopianism even after years in the barbarian b-school environment. He seems to agree with Plato's republican utopian stricture that leaders need to be educated to avoid becoming tyrants. Parker has a valid point about the quality of management education when top schools claim as their prime mission to be educating future leaders. They have been saying that for years and yet our present crises of leadership do this claim no credit.

Parker argues, therefore, for modesty and an appreciation of knowledge about organizing beyond that currently produced by b-schools in the West. Our immediate response might be a Shakespearean line from *Hamlet* that Parker "doth protest too much" and either that we already teach plurality or that his utopian ideals are too idealistic. Perhaps the author should move to a

department of sociology and write about dystopian workplaces. Parker muses, ‘If it gets noticed at all, this book will be the subject of ridicule... Its failure is already assured.’ Nevertheless, he is hopeful that “it begins to push back the false necessities that tell us that the world just has to be some particular way” (179). This surely is an important point. Many of the supposed scientific verities taught in b-schools, mainly by economists and finance specialists, are clearly more ideological than an accurate representation of how best to manage our organizations if we want to create a better and more sustainable world.

Shut Down the Business School comprises two parts. The first part (chapters 1-6) enumerates complaints against the *status quo* to support Parker’s case “to burn the whole thing down”. The second part “offers the alternatives, and brings you back from the darkness” (xii). Chapter one paints a “lurid” picture (xii) of the b-school as “[a] clean machine for turning income from students into alumni and profits, or ‘contributions’” (8). It is an edifice with “well behaved trees”, an “inoffensive logo”, and primed with “hopeful assertions”. In earlier times, we might have accused it of selling snake oil. Now some would argue that b-schools are ideal representative organizations for our post-truth world. Parker mocks the b-school for being “a qualifications dispensary, with an acronym for every need and easy payment options” (2–3). This scene of “smugness and insecurity” in the *Schola Commercica* is juxtaposed with Parker’s much kinder evocation of the Bodleian Library, “[o]ne of the most impressive buildings at Oxford University”.

Chapter two focuses on the b-school curriculum and management disciplines. For example, “[h]uman Resource Management is not particularly interested in what it is like to be a human being... [it] is not on the side of the trade union, the worker” (29). This fits with other criticisms of b-schools as finishing schools for would-be managerial elites who want to manage the world by numbers and for their own self-interest, justifying this by reference to the tenets of Chicago economics and law. Parker claims capitalism dominates and “is assumed to be the end of history, an economic model which has trumped all the others” (35). B-schools generally are

not much interested in history. They are all about disruption and the brave new world of the future. The third chapter enumerates “what’s wrong with management”, providing historical, literary and popular references such as Dilbert’s cartoons, Spiderman, Dickens, with the “corporation” defined using the *Devil’s Dictionary* (54) as “[a]n ingenious device for obtaining individual profit without individual responsibility”. Chapter four focuses on key criticisms based on “greed is good” and the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, with Parker calling out b-school critics for protecting their pensions and not naming the b-school “hidden curriculum” as “a factory for producing employees for capitalist organizations” (81). Chapter five explores the b-school as a parasite, especially in the UK where universities are becoming increasingly marketized. With the b-school operating as a “cuckoo in the nest” (89), “[b]-school knowledge provides a template for how the university can become a global knowledge corporation” (94). Parker reminds us that Cardinal Newman (1852) saw no place for professional education in the university.

B-schools indirectly affect stakeholders far beyond their walls: Bangladeshi sweat shop workers killed when factory buildings collapsed, dispossessed former US homeowners with sub-prime mortgages, individuals who used to work in Northern England high street retailers that have closed, South Pacific islanders whose land is disappearing (87). Chapter six defines management in three ways: as a verb that indicates careful administration and guidance, then as a collective noun for managers as an occupational group, and third as a university department and academic discipline. Parker calls the current b-school a “loudspeaker” for “market managerial capitalism” (97) which perpetuates “a particular form of organizing that relies on hierarchy, inequalities of status and reward, and the reproduction of some remarkably vague forms of knowledge that suggest that management is the answer to every problem”. Parker makes the common sense remark, “[w]e might almost think that no organizing could happen without management” (108).

In the second part of the book, chapter seven explains Parker's manifesto for a school for organizing that is not dominated by finance. The author asserts, "the most important message of this book is...the sheer number of other ways in which organization can also happen" (109). Parker defines organization as a tool to get things done. He provides long lists of alternatives to market capitalism, e.g. co-operatives, pressure groups, trade unions, associations, clubs, partnerships (112, 115). A worker cooperative in Leeds in the UK, Suma Foods, is presented as one case of self-management where everyone picks orders, a core task, and is paid equally (116). Chapter eight considers "the politics of organizing", contending that if the b-school is to be more than "an ideologically driven finishing school", it should acknowledge that "[h]uman beings are organizing animals" (129). B-schools need to acknowledge political and ethical issues raised by modern slavery and other negative forms of organizing. Parker states that "organizations can be seen as a form of politics made durable" (132). Schools for organizing must, therefore, consider logics, principles and values, "autonomy, solidarity and responsibility" (136) beyond self-interest and the Global North. Parker argues for self-respect, civic values, and care for future generations, including the voices of employees and customers. The author advocates "moving away from selling greed and sloganizing about ambition, to instead focusing on sustainable, diverse and responsible business courses" (147). This advocacy is entirely laudable and very timely. It raises pertinent questions about how b-schools might rethink their value proposition beyond individual self-enrichment and shareholder value.

The penultimate chapter asks how a school for organizing might appeal to students as an antidote to the current rhetoric of a "utopia for the wealthy and powerful" that indirectly causes "environmental catastrophe, resource wars and forced migration, inequality within and between countries, the encouragement of hyper-consumption as well as persistently anti-democratic practices" (158). Parker reframes b-school education as potentially a social good which shapes all our futures. He highlights four main stakeholders who may drive the kinds of

paradigm shifts he advocates: regulators, politicians and policy-makers; professional associations; academics; and critical management scholars.

The concluding chapter looks to the future, re-imagining the ambiance, new disciplines, and “encouraging organizational experiments” (178) in the university. Importantly, chapter 10 considers politics: “Organizational arrangements are always politics congealed into rules and routines, the entrenchment of assumptions about who decides and who benefits” (179). Finally, Parker ends on an upbeat, “let’s celebrate and explore multiplicity, and imagine the fantastic worlds we might create together” (180) in his alternative type of b-school.

So, what’s new? Parker’s text is part of a long tradition of critiques of b-schools. For example, Pfeffer & Fong (2002) asked whether it was “the end of business schools?” Gioia & Corley (2002) were concerned about b-schools “looking good”, prioritizing form over substance and losing corporate confidence (Gioia, 2002). More recently, McDonald (2017) highlighted “the limits of capitalism, and the moral failure of the MBA” at Harvard Business School and Denning (2018) has asked why b-schools teach an outmoded curriculum. While Bennis & O’Toole (2005) explained “how business schools lost their way”, possible solutions included broadening the curriculum (Godfrey, Illes, & Berry, 2005), moral imagination (Patriotta & Starkey, 2008), moral humility (Nohria, 2011), “curricular relevance” and “building a better MBA” (Rubin & Dierdorff, 2011, 2013). In *AMLE*, Pettigrew & Starkey (2016) called for b-schools to demonstrate greater impact and legitimacy and Currie, Ferlie & Davies (2016) recommended b-schools demonstrate their social value. We suggest that Parker’s text contributes to these debates by highlighting the rich diversity of organizational forms as alternatives to a narrow focus on firms that are only based on market capitalism. Furthermore, the author advocates a more pluralistic and inclusive approach to which we must all to varying degrees subscribe in a civilized society in a world of fault-lines, growing inequalities, populism, and social injustice.

As British academics, we can tolerate Parker's sense of humor and from our experiences we agree that whole sections of the b-school curriculum, except entrepreneurship, appear to ignore SMEs as one organizational form where most people are employed. Traditional university-based b-schools, indeed universities, are typically conservative professional bureaucracies where students are still required to hand write exam papers and timetabling is determined by the seasons. Of course, the system is ripe for reform. Management consulting, media and publishing firms create synergies with b-schools (Engwall, Üsdiken, & Kipping, 2016) but they, along with tech firms, can now bring management education firmly into the 21st century with wicked challenges of "degrowth, the beauty of small, worker decision making and the circular economy" (Parker & Starkey, 2018).

If what we are encouraging on management programs is critical thinking, then managers might be invited to respond robustly to the criticisms and opportunities presented in *Shut Down the Business School*. Despite accreditation and regulation constraints, we believe that management and b-school lecturers can include case studies of organizational alternatives in their teaching and research. At Bristol University, Parker currently leads the Inclusive Economy Institute and so it will be interesting to see how he enacts his dream in practice.

While we recognize that Martin has pushed his case too far, exaggerating for effect, we appreciate creative destruction and the inevitable rise of new business models in the b-school sector. So, grab yourself a drink, find a comfortable couch, and enjoy Martin Parker's "beef" and a spot of "bulldozing". One question it left us pondering is about the design of b-schools. Have they become too big? Do the disparate disciplines all belong in their walls? Those who share Parker's interest in organizing are speaking a different language from those teaching economics, finance and accounting and it might be that we would be better served if they went their separate ways as they are unlikely to ever arrive at a shared view of how b-schools need to develop for the future.

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