

Institutional Discourse and the Cult(ure) of Managerialism

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Some months ago, the Times Higher enlivened a dull summer marking period with one of its occasional competitions for followers on Twitter. This one invited contributors to tweet fragments of managerial communications at #HEjargon. I have a large collection of horrors from several institutions. The extract I offered was top-of-the-range indecipherable. It read: “The SMT initiative on Employability is providing OOB with an opportunity to consider enhanced management in the School through use of JOW resource and will therefore extend beyond that specific role to a proposal relating to all transversal management roles in the School” (some initials changed).

Sadly, I never saw the flashy pen nor basked in the glory of a retweet. They probably thought I had made it up but it was, certifiably, horribly, genuine.

My academic background is in linguistics and I collect and analyse data to support my argument that managerialism, as practised in UK universities, is a cult which is having a malign effect on the character of British higher education institutions.

In universities, the conflict between managerial and academic values is primarily a struggle over discourse and the symbolic. It works by forcing the academic to cite discourse which redefines their subjectivity in terms of managerial values. The project of neoliberal governmentality is for the institution to produce its ideal employee (Morrisey 2013). The new subject formation works through a destabilization of established academic practices, and a superseding of existing values of cooperation, collective governance and democracy.

Whereas, once the university was conceived of as a refuge from market values in its tolerance of risk and failure, they now reward only entrepreneurial, self-governing and competitive subjects, who are happy to function within the limits and discourse set for them by the managerial project.

A culture of the ‘corporate boast’ is adopted by ‘managers’ with markets and competition as priorities, and it is staged via the university mission statement. The following terms, taken from a corpus analysis of all the mission statements in UK universities, reflect neoliberal anxieties: sector-leading; benchmark; performance indicators; sustainable excellence (sustex); business (meaning a university); company spin-outs; customer focus; talent management ; student-facing; universities as “business-facing, motors for economic development” (Sauntson and Morrish 2010).

Of course there are local variants as well. There is a current management fashion for every spreadsheet, algorithm or even just a list, to be dignified as a ‘tool’. This has led to a popular game called ‘Pimp my Tool!’ We have: a Managing Academic Workloads tool (renders ‘workloads’ auditable but makes a lot of actual work invisible); a Change Management tool; a Research Development tool; an Auditing tool; a Benchmarking tool; a Competency Development tool (customer focus, team working, leading and ‘coaching’); and a Smart Working tool.

If universities seriously think this kind of language constitutes effective communication, then I offer another example. I was searching university web pages for details of procedures for validating new courses. Frustrated that I could not find these, I emailed an employee in 'Quality' and received the reply that I should have looked under 'New Business Cases'. My fruitless search for information transpired because I am an academic who believes new developments in a field may merit a new course proposal, not that the university is a 'business'.

My colleagues often ask me, "Why do they do this?" My answer is that those who pursue management roles are in the grip of a cult. Their identification with others in that tier, and their search for community, demands that they police the borders of the in-group while compelling subordinates to cite their norms. If not a cult, then we can at least offer an appropriately business-inspired comparison - that university management is like a Ponzi Scheme. These schemes fraudulently endow investors with riches, not on the basis of enhancing productivity; instead the flow of money is only guaranteed when you can persuade new investors to join the scheme. Charles Ponzi, after whom the scheme was named, realised that all new investors need to have a relationship with the central figure, not with underlings. **The parallels with university management should be obvious** [<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/mar/03/new-breed-fat-cats-university-boss-vice-chancellors>], and the analogy goes a long way to explaining the rapid expansion of university training programs, and Human Resources hiring, designed to bring new postulants to the cult of managerialism.

As a researcher, I have felt fortunate to be able to embed myself in the rich environment of managerial apprenticeship now offered by most universities. I can pursue my research as an outsider on the inside, rather like a resistance operative in an underground cell. I have my pick of programs such as: Leading High Performance Teams, Succession Planning, coaching, managing change, motivation, leading and managing and Supporting Gold Standard Customer Service.

Succession Planning is one of the most recent initiatives in universities as they remodel themselves as simulacra of businesses. **What these programs** [<http://www.lfhe.ac.uk/en/research-resources/resources/case-studies.cfm>] have in common is that they claim to identify and cultivate 'talent' in universities. By implication, the only talent worth 'hothousing' is that interpellated by managerial discourse. Some of these programs rely on **individuals being identified by a 'line manager'** [<http://www.lfhe.ac.uk/en/research-resources/resources/case-studies.cfm/ICL>], while others **enforce a dragnet approach** via the creation of "a full talent matrix" [<http://www.lfhe.ac.uk/en/research-resources/resources/case-studies.cfm/NottTrent>]. In the latter, all senior academics are obliged to participate in a kind of managerial DNA test, which may include psychometric testing. This process purports to determine who may be elevated to an institutional 'benchstrength' of potential Academic Team Leaders and Deans.

It is not enough, clearly, for academics to harbour a sense of themselves as scholars collectively shaping the future of their discipline; the only legitimate goal at Neoliberal U is to embrace the aspiration to manage. This exceeds mere audit culture; it is the forcible citation of a discourse which inaugurates a new kind of subject. The exertion of this type of

biopower requires the academic to undergo what Davies and Bendix-Petersen (2010) describe as “a kind of dressage; shaping the individualised, vulnerable, competitive, useful subjects into the generic workers who will facilitate the flow of capital”.

What academics find offensive is that there can be no rejection of the new subjectivity. Our professional lives are dominated by the need to provide discursive evidence that we are compliant with the managerial regime in the form of performance management reviews, teaching evaluations, student satisfactions surveys, research excellence frameworks. Failure to enter into the discourse results in illocutionary silencing, since one has become literally unintelligible to the managerial mind. By locating critique outside the range of the sayable, neoliberal discourse forestalls resistance (Davies and Bendix-Petersen 2005: 85). For example, it is impossible within the limits prescribed by the ‘workload tool’ to complain that you are overloaded. An analysis of workplace stress is refused by your ‘failure to manage workload’, and justifies your surrender to the ‘Smart Working tool’.

Another answer to ‘why do they do it?’ draws on the logic that it is precisely because a fiction has been constituted, that management has to work so hard to maintain it by discourse. A similar situation is documented by Carlen (2008) in which a new prison had recently modified the goals that staff were being asked to attain. Staff knew these goals were unachievable, but all understood they were required to act as if they were unproblematic. Furthermore, there was a requirement to provide auditable evidence that the goals were being achieved. Despite widespread knowledge that “everybody knows” and recognises the unreality, the demands of the imaginary were allowed to displace any possibility of managing the reality effectively. I imagine most of us labouring in academia are fully able to empathize with this situation. We have learned to defer to what economist **Paul Krugman** calls **Zombie ideas**: [<http://krugman.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/11/03/the-ultimate-zombie-idea/>] “policy ideas that keep being killed by evidence, but nonetheless shamble relentlessly forward, essentially because they suit a political agenda”.

Our situation recalls Baudrillard and his thesis of a postmodern boundary warping of reality and unreality which he terms ‘hyperreality’. However, our frustration lies in the fact that we have no difficulty in recognising where the boundary between the real and the simulation is. **As Thomas Docherty argues** [<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/418076.article>], academics are very aware that the official university culture of transparency and access to information is a perverse parody. Nevertheless, we largely placate the gods of audit culture, and in any remaining time, retreat to what Docherty has called the ‘clandestine university’ within.

There are small, meagre signs that the cult of managerial autocracy may be waning. In a **2012 speech** [<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/world-university-rankings/news/a-return-of-the-academy-to-its-roots>], Jon Baldwin, the Deputy Vice Chancellor of Murdoch University, WA, noted that decision making at top-ranked universities was overseen by a self-governing community of scholars. By contrast, at Murdoch, the academy as a collective had been marginalised, and that “the embrace of corporate culture was almost total and the very idea of the university was threatened. In leadership and governance terms, the academic voice had to be rediscovered”. There may be cause for optimism at one

commendable university, but here in the UK, we must wait for more substantive ideological shifts before we hear university managers using language which is truly 'fit for purpose'.

Embedded hyperlinks

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Extras

Please provide keywords or #tags that will be used for searches

Managerialism; neoliberalism; discourse; corporate culture; governmentality; biopower; Ponzi scheme; hyperreality; succession planning.

Please provide an illustrative picture that is copyright enabled, with details of attribution.



Charles Ponzi: available at Google images.

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Liz Morrish [http://www.ntu.ac.uk/apps/staff_profiles/school_staff_directory/125929-0/22/liz_morrish.aspx?text=Morrish&r=1] is Principal Lecturer in Linguistics at Nottingham Trent University. Her research explores the discursive construction of sexual identity, and the growing area of critical university studies. With Helen Sauntson, she is co-author of *New Perspectives on Language and Sexual Identity*, Palgrave 2007. Her recent research has interrogated the kinds of academic subjectivity constructed by managerial discourse in British universities. Liz tweets @lizmorrish .

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