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# Signs of Dystopia and Demoralization in global academia: Reflections on the precarious and destructive effects of the colonization of the *Lebenswelt*

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**Abstract**

**Purpose** - Our paper has been written in the style of a provocative essay. It starts with the observation that neo-liberalism has become the leading "policy doctrine" in Higher Education (HE) systems across the globe. This has put increasing systemic political and economic pressure on many universities which not only undermine but also "colonize" the *Lebenswelt* or "lifeworld" (Habermas, 1987) of academics.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Our essay draws on concrete empirical examples based on our subjective experiences within the higher educational sector and secondary sources.

**Findings** - We are going to highlight and illustrate how the increasing dominance of "neo-liberal science" principles (Lave et al., 2010) severely damage the quality of knowledge production and working conditions of ordinary academics in both national and international academic communities.

**Practical Implications** - Our essay provides insights into the practical implications of the spread of "neo-liberal science" principles on the work and employment of academics.

**Originality/Value** – We aim to trigger critical discussion concerning how emancipatory principles of teaching and research can be brought back into the *Lebenswelt* of academics in order to reverse some of the destructive effects to which our essay refers to.

**Keywords** Neo-liberalization, Colonization of lifeworld of academia, Precariousness of work and employment in higher education, Destructive leadership in universities
**Paper type** Viewpoint paper

## 1. Introduction: Setting the scene

This provocative essay is based on our experiences of working as social scientists in various countries, departments and universities. The idea for the essay was developed when giving talks to various audiences, first at the 29th EGOS colloquium in Montreal (Canada) in 2013, at Research Seminars at Hertfordshire (UK) in 2014 and at SOAS (UK) in 2016, and at the 6th LAEMOS conference in Vina del Mar (Chile) in 2016. Our key interest is critically reflecting on current trends towards the managing of universities as "faux" businesses and how this approach affects knowledge creation, research, teaching and learning with specific reference to current changes in many UK universities[1]. The essay particularly draws upon subjective experiences and "at-home ethnographic" stories (Alvesson, 2009) of the first author, who is of East German nationality and who is well able to compare the comparative and shifting *Lebenswelt*, or "lifeworld", in the German and UK Higher Education (HE) institutions as he has operated in academic capacities in both national contexts. By relating and comparing our observations in the UK with other national HE systems, we intend to raise greater awareness to the significant impact of the observed and often destructive changes, beyond Great Britain.

The idea of the university as we know it has changed significantly since the early 1960s. First, universities transformed from scholarly organizations dedicated to educate a small and often privileged part of society into institutions of mass representation. Universities have expanded immensely in Western capitalist societies and beyond, with approximately 20% of the relevant age cohort being enrolled in HE worldwide (Frank and Meyer, 2007, p. 288). Second, universities are central to the "knowledge society" in which our "modern globalized knowledge system increasingly extends into the furthest reaches of daily life, spreading universalized understandings of all aspects of nature and every social institution worldwide" (ibid, p. 289). The spread of mass education and global universalized knowledge at our universities is, however, only one part of the story. Some authors argue that these developments have led to the Americanization of HE at universities across the world. This trend could be observed in business schools from as early as the 1950s, "based on marketization and corporatization accompanied by all-permeating commodification of higher education" (Juusola et al, 2015, p. 348). Such developments have been associated with a bankruptcy in the pedagogic repertoire of many business schools, this having been chastised by various critics for the staleness of its discourse (Volkmann and De Cock, 2007, p. 389; Beyes and Michels, 2011). In short, besides economic and technological change, isomorphic institutional pressures are often seen as key drivers of global knowledge creation.

However, the neo-institutionalist fascination with isomorphism and increased social rationality, unfortunately, has led to "blind spots". Accordingly a neglect has occurred of more critical questions concerning the kind of universalistic knowledge that universities actually create and disseminate, how universities are managed, and how current changes of the idea of the university as we know it are undermining the

*Lebenswelt* of academics, including their daily work and independence of teaching and research. The primary national focus of our study is the UK because it has arguably moved furthest down the road of a pervasively market driven HE system, both at the levels of reality and rhetoric, than comparable European nation states. Indeed, a supposedly independent review of British HE chaired by the former CEO of BP, Lord Browne published in 2010 couched its recommendations concerning future developments in unequivocally economic terms. As Marquand (2014, p. 92) asserts, at the heart of the report "lay the assumption that a university education is a private good, enjoyed by individual consumers, like an expensive car or a generous annuity". He further states: "For its authors, the point of university teaching was not to introduce young people to the life of the mind, to foster critical thinking, or to turn out responsible and public spirited citizens. It was to make the taught richer than they would otherwise have been."

In particular universities, based in the UK, the USA and Australia, are at the forefront in leading the current disturbances to the academic *Lebenswelt* on a global level. Promoted by their governments these HE institutions have mutated into mass market makers for HE on a global commercial scale (Alvesson, 2013, p. 89). Notably, Business Schools have undertaken various ambitious and lucrative non-equity and equity Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) projects when opening new campuses, especially in Asia, and by selling their undergraduate and postgraduate degrees at home and abroad with Chinese students being a key target. Additionally, the UK HE demography has undoubtedly become one of the most internationalized in the world, with over 400,000 overseas students coming to study in the UK in 2014- 2015. Approximately 90,000 of these were Chinese, constituting the most populous national student contingent in the UK ranks. The largest proportion of the international student body, at around 40%, specialises in Business and Administrative Science (UKCISA, 2016). Despite the attractiveness of UK Higher Educational Institutions as a destination for students from across the globe, the fruits of such internationalization have scarcely been harvested by those directly responsible for, and challenged by, the delivery of appropriate educational and developmental provision. Indeed the structures and systems of UK Higher Education are increasing resembling the neo-liberal archetype. According to recent UCU (2016) statistics, while the average salary of Vice Chancellors in the UK is an impressive £260,000 per annum, the average pay rate of academics has declined by 14.5% since 2009, average non- professorial academic pay standing at approximately £44.000 per annum (THE, 2016). It is estimated that UK Universities possess a surplus in the region of £1.9 billion, yet a diminishing proportion of this sum has been invested in the staff resource, with disproportionate funding being directed towards real estate and investment in the employment of management consultants (UCU, ibid). Such alarming developments are consistent with a climate of unstifled managerialism and the marginalization of employee 'voice'. These developments are clear signs that neo-liberalism has become the leading "policy doctrine" in HE especially in the UK and also other parts of the

English-speaking world. From here, however, neo-liberal science principles (Lave et al., 2010) have spread across the globe.

Academics in leading universities based in traditionally coordinated market economies, such as Denmark, Germany and the Netherlands, and also emerging market economies, including Brazil, China and India, face equivalent systemic pressures when seeking to develop their academic careers as their colleagues in the English-speaking world. Similar changes, such as the dominating role of rankings and individual performance related measures, force them to publish in the same vaunted 'top' academic journals in their fields and respond to arguably spurious and unreliable teaching surveys, in which students in their role of customers, assess the performance of their teachers. However, the implementation of neo-liberal science principles across countries is still societally flavoured, for example 'ranking hierarchies' for teaching and research, are understood to be 'steeper in some nations than others, and more powerfully felt in some places than others, but always exist (Marginson, 2006, cited in Alvesson, 2013). In comparison to the UK, there is evidence in the co-ordinated market economies that room for public and critical debates might serve to soften some of the systemic and harder edged neo-liberal pressures, as is in the case of Germany where the implementation of research rankings have been boycotted by the German Sociological Association (DGS).

In this essay, we are going to highlight how the increasing dominance of "neo-liberal science" principles (Lave et al., 2010) severely damages the quality of knowledge production and working conditions of academics as knowledge workers in the context of Anglo-American HE. We will provide concrete empirical examples based on subjective experience of the HE sector as well as and secondary sources, mainly related to the UK, but also go beyond by pointing to the paradox that neo-liberal science principles in extreme cases feature elements of the Soviet-style totalitarianism.

## 2. The colonization of the *Lebenswelt* of academia in contemporary universities

In the early 1960s Habermas (1962) observed that increased systemic, political and economic pressures significantly influenced democratic debates and ways of communication in Western capitalist societies. He used the phrase 'structural transformation of the public sphere' to capture these processes (Habermas, 1962). Concerns about an increased imbalance of political-economic system and *Lebenswelt* were re-emphasised with an explicit focus on systemic changes in contemporary universities. It is argued that philosophy had lost its historical role as a leading and unifying force of academic discourses after universities increasingly turned into institutions of mass education. Instead, empirical and advanced (natural) sciences assumed the leading role because they are seen as an "important productive force" (Habermas, 1987c, p. 12) by leading technocratic elites in politics and business (Fischer, 1990). These developments have certainly become even stronger and explain why social sciences and humanities, including philosophy, have recently been

described as "junk science" by senior politicians in the US, a country where the marketization of universities and especially of research has become the dominant pattern[2].

Based on his observations, Habermas raised the crucial question as to how we can protect the autonomy of university research and teaching from political and economic interventions (1987c). Accordingly, the notion of academic freedom is, from this perspective, closely linked to, and dependent upon, forms of non-instrumental communication and cooperation in the *Lebenswelt* of academics which lead to production of knowledge and teaching that enable critical discourse and reflection. These questions lead also to the "colonization" thesis which has been outlined in two volumes on the "theory of communicative action". Here Habermas (1987a; 1987b) argues that functional differentiation in Western capitalist societies goes hand in hand with an "uncoupling" of the economic and political systems from the *Lebenswelt* of local communities and citizens. In comparison to the instrumental and rationalized focus of communication in the political and the economic system, the local rationalities of local communities' such as the *Lebenswelt* of academia is based on three mechanisms, which are termed cultural reproduction, social integration and socialization. When the economic and the political systems mainly operate in a rationalist manner, based on instrumental goals and a means-end calculative logic in order to improve the efficiency of each system, the *Lebenswelt* is seen as constituted by a variety of contextual rationalities of local actors. These are in turn, interpersonally enacted, based on collective and solidarity oriented forms of social interaction:

> *Cultural reproduction* ensures that (in the semantic dimension) newly arising situations can be connected up with existing conditions in the world: it secures the continuity of tradition and a coherency of knowledge sufficient for the consensus needs of everyday practice. *Social integration* ensures that newly arising situations (in the dimension of social space) can be connected up with the existing conditions in the world; it takes care of the coordination of action by means of legitimately regulated interpersonal relationships and lends constancy to the identity of groups. Finally, the *socialisation* of members ensures that newly arising situations (in the dimension of historical time) can be connected up with existing world conditions; it secures the acquisition of generalised capacities for action for future generations and takes care of harmonizing individual life histories and collective life forms (Habermas, 1987b, pp 343-344).

In short, the colonization of the *Lebenswelt* thesis stresses that education has become increasingly functionally integrated based on the dominant demands of the economic and political systems which undermine the conditions for emancipatory forms of research and learning based on principles of self-organization, self-realization, and self-reflection. These represent important conditions for the creation of working environments that foster critical thinking based on both, "reflective reasoning and sensitive ethical considerations" (Alvesson, 2013, p. 2). In this essay we will, based on the "colonization thesis", focus and reflect on the 'dark side' of current systemic

changes within *Lebenswelt* of British academia which have come into play through "destructive" forms of leadership and increased precariousness in daily work. These are all issues which potentially point to a growing impact of totalitarian forms of management and employment relations in HE institutions which have traditionally been seen as integral parts of communist regimes like the former Soviet bloc, but not of liberal market economies. We will come back to this matter and discuss it further below.

## 3. The "power- bloc" and "the people" in increasingly commercialised British universities

A profound and disturbing identity crisis currently afflicts HE providers in Britain as they search for legitimacy in a society which apparently increasingly popularises utilitarian, instrumental and individualistic values. While we would concur with Collini (2012) that there has never been a "golden age" for universities, it is not naively nostalgic to recall that their founding and operating principles have reflected relatively collectivistic and cerebral, as opposed to material, values**.** The re-engineering of Universities as market legitimate enterprises is therefore associated with a shifting of regulative power from *within* the educational institution to potent "change agents" extraneous to the social nuclei constituting the academic *Lebenswelt*. It may be asserted that a "power bloc" is in the ascendency in HE circles, which comprises a "set of implicit or acknowledged alliances" (Pritchard and Willmott, 1997, p. 294; Fiske, 1993) and is constituted on the basis of identities, relations, ways of being and doing. What distinguishes the "power- bloc" from "the people" in the HE setting are the imperialist ambitions of the former in contrast with the localized orientations of the latter. As Pritchard and Willmott (1997) state:

> Those who comprise and support the power- bloc are pre-occupied, more or less consciously, with *extending its reach* over how people behave and what they think and feel. To render its sense of social order more solid and "real", the power bloc harbours and mobilizes "imperializing" knowledges, including management knowledges which claim to provide universally efficient or effective ways of improving organizations. In contrast the power sought by "the people" is that which secures control over their immediate social conditions of everyday life'. (Pritchard and Willmott, 1997, p. 294).

For the "power- bloc", which undoubtedly contains senior vested interests in the modern university setting, the attempts to rebrand universities as commercial entities may be read as a serious quest to gain legitimacy and "normalization" in the modern societal setting, commercial posturing also perhaps carrying with it "sexiness" as these reputedly anachronistic institutions are rebranded to join the contemporary materialist order.

Analogies have been bandied about with considerable alacrity in order to conceptualize and caricature the new University setting. While we are in general agreement with Collini (2012) that analogies are potentially treacherous figures of speech, for the purpose of this essay it is worth briefly engaging in some metaphorical

exposition. The analogy of the University as a commercial entity, and the adoption of associated discourses and terminologies has become so commonplace that managerial "speak" and "buzz" is now largely taken for granted, even by the "people". Accordingly, hyperbolic and grandiose (Alvesson, 2013) "mission statements" abound, providing the rhetorical cloaking for a "performative" (Dey and Stayaert, 2007) environment in which the "bottom- line" imperative is to optimise "efficiency", this necessitating increased "output" at reduced cost (Collini, 2012). The commercial metaphor, whilst being assumed at face value within burgeoning and assertive ranks of university managers, has also produced polemical fodder for more critical voices. Parker (2014), refers to "University Ltd" while Alvesson (2013) alludes to the oft used epithet of McUniversities'. Considerably more graphically, UK colleagues stressed that HE institutions are beginning to resemble "chicken farms", and Spelsberg and Burchardt (2015) go even further when referring to UK universities as "brothels" as academics are increasingly asked to provide suitable services to protect their workspaces.

What emerges with considerable realism from each of these metaphors is that HE institutions in the UK are increasingly being driven by the economic imperatives of standardization, routinization and efficiency gaining (Ritzer, 2004). Following from the conceptualization of the University as a commercial enterprise is the objectification of the academic community, whose members' vocation is reduced to the status of a resource for the consumption of "end users". As a corollary, students themselves are being objectified as they are cast in the role of consumers and being institutionally recycled as "factors of production".

## 4. Functional rationalities and pathologies

Of course, in a broader socio-political environment dominated by instrumental and utilitarian thinking, personal or institutional legitimacy within the educational "subsystem" is most likely to be achieved when outputs can be demonstrated as being both tangible and measurable. Following Parker (2014) the "power-bloc" now places exclusive focus on journal article productivity, league table position and profitable products as determinants of success and "value added". In consequence, inordinate bureaucratic resources are invested into performative mechanisms such as formal student assessment of courses and teaching quality, the Research Excellence Framework (REF) and the National Student Survey (NSS) which aims to capture the opinion of an entire student population on individual University "service delivery" quality, this imbuing a sense of competition between HE institutions.

Given that apparently scant attention has been given to the reliability and validity of such methods (this being particularly surprising in a HE environment) it may be surmised that much of their rationale rests upon the need to project the correct organizational symbolism and legitimizing technologies to the broader constituency.

Yet the crunch and crisis is bound to occur when discourses and essentially disciplinary performative technologies are borrowed from a (fictional and idealized) commercial organization environment and transfer attempted in a caricatured and indiscriminate fashion to another in which the underlying ethos is fundamentally different. As Collini (2012) asserts, such an exercise is bound to lead to woeful dysfunctions. According to him, the replication of commercial measurement techniques in the University setting is bound to flounder as the HE institution is concerned with the provision of "intrinsic" as opposed to "instrumental" goods. According to Collini (2012, p. 143):

> After all, two of the most important sources of efficiency in intellectual activity are voluntary cooperation and individual autonomy. But these are precisely the kind of things for which a bureaucratic system leaves little room. We all certainly *report* on ourselves much more fully than we did twenty or thirty years ago, but the unintended by product of that may be that we concentrate our energies a bit more on doing things that are reportable.

Reinforcing such a critique, O'Neill (2002) states:

> In theory again the new culture of accountability and audit makes professionals and institutions more accountable for *good performance*. This is manifest in the rhetoric of improvement and rising standards, of efficiency gains and best practice, of respect for patients and pupils and employees. But beneath this admirable rhetoric the real focus is on performance indicators chosen for ease of measurement and control rather than because they measure the quality of performance accurately. Most people working in the public sector have a reasonable sense not only for the specific clinical, educational, policing or other goals for which they work, but also the central ethical standards that they must meet. They know that these complex sets of goals may have to be relegated if they are required to run in a race to improve performance indicators.

If we take, as an example, the now widespread use of formal student evaluation of programme and teaching quality of specific modules, a practice which may be regarded as analogous with the feedback sheets completed by residents following stays in hotels or ratings provided by customers following a conversation with an advisor in a call centre, even the functional utility of such forms in enhancing teaching quality is open to question. As Alvesson (2013) points out, such assessments may represent more an expression of student satisfaction, as opposed to a reflection on the quality of the education provided. In such circumstances, lecturers under scrutiny may be more orientated towards providing "entertainment" than a challenging academic programme, the 'feel good' factor being enhanced further if assessments of student performances are not excessively punitive (bearing in mind that the students concerned are paying significant sums for this educational experience in the UK). Notwithstanding the questionable reliability of this performative tool, considerable administrative effort and resource is typically devoted to the aggregation of student assessment results for each module, which may then be made available to senior academic management and the wider student cohort.

The use of student assessments as a significant performative tool in the "brave new world" of HE typifies the contemporary order of organizational management in which subjects (the lecturers) are at a loss as to how they should perform in order to "succeed". As stated above, an exemplary academic performance in the classroom (for example as rated by peers) may be regarded with incomprehension or scorn by students. The feeling of helplessness this engenders in the psyche of the staff member may only be exacerbated by the parallel performative pressure to publish in a limited number of top journals in respect of which, due to the law of numbers, only a small minority can succeed. (Keenoy, 2005; MacDonald and Kam, 2007).

Resonating in this analysis is Gabriel's (2012) persuasive and salutary depiction of organizational darkness and miasma which occurs at a time of rapid organizational transformation and which may be accompanied by feelings of worthlessness and disgust amongst members, corruption and a paralysis of resistance. In the HE setting, the palpable sense of organizational and personal crisis is undoubtedly perpetuated by "the seemingly unanswerable logic of markets, economic necessity and bottom lines". As Stein (2000) argues, the "religion" of the bottom line is sustained by the spreading of the belief that no employee is good enough, no venture is good enough and no action is good enough (Gabriel, 2012; Bunting, 2004).

In seeking to make sense of the profound changes that have impacted British HE over the past few decades, one has to resort to the notion of power. The "power-bloc", or colonizers, now habituating HE institutions have acted as the proselytes for the instigation of the "religion" of market driven logics through far reaching and pervasive bureaucratic intervention, frequently involving modes of external, peer group to student based forms of surveillance to secure academic performativity. In the more traditional *Lebenswelt* in which educational and academic discourses were played out in the past, it may be argued that power tended to be shared in a relatively democratic fashion amongst actors, this being consistent with the principle of freedom of expression and collectivist forms of knowledge sharing. In the new and "neo-liberal" inspired order, power has now shifted to the colonizing "bloc" which is effectively subjugating previous academic articles of faith in pursuit of an all-encompassing, dogmatic and uncompromising market driven logic. As Foucault (1982) asserts, power is *productive,* and therefore serves to order reality, truth, individuals and institutions (Alvesson, 2013). As an unprecedented set of disciplinary technologies emerge in the UK HE sector, even more radical revision in what becomes "right, rational, natural and necessary" in the academic *Lebenswelt* should be anticipated (Alvesson, 2013; Foucault, 1982).

**5. Case scenarios pointing to precarious and destructive effects of colonisation of the *Lebenswelt***
In this section we present a brief collection of extreme stories and cases in order to point to, and reflect upon, how increasing economic and political systemic pressures in the UK threaten the very idea of the university as we know it. We will especially

concentrate on the "dark" and even "toxic" aspects of the colonization of *Lebenswelt* of academics which may be instigated by autocratic leaders injecting precariousness into daily work practices.

*Case scenario 1- Metrics, macho-management and tragedy*
This story, which occurs at a prestigious University of London college in 2013 speaks for itself. We draw directly upon authentic e-mails reported in an article in the Times Higher Education Supplement (Parr, 2014; all quotations/ e-mails from major parties in this case are taken from the original THE article).

A respected Professor of Toxicology of German origin in the Faculty of Medicine was deeply shocked to receive an e-mail from the Professorial Head of the Division containing the following statements: "I am of the opinion that you are struggling to fulfil the metrics of a Professorial post […]which include maintaining established funding in a programme of research with an attributable share of research spend of £200k (per annum) and must now start to give serious consideration as to whether you are performing at the expected level of a Professor[…]". The Head continues that he is "committed to doing what I can to help you succeed and will meet with you monthly to discuss your progression and success in achieving the objective outlined". It is then ominously stated that the e-mail "[…] starts the informal action in relation to your performance […] (and that if you) fail to meet the objective outlined I will need to consider your performance in accordance with the formal College procedure for managing issues of poor performance".

Tragically, the professor took his own life after the receipt of this e-mail in September 2013. However, prior to his death, an e-mail from the account of the late professor had been composed, stating the following: "On May 30th 2013, my boss […] came into my office together with his PA and asked me what grants I had. After I enumerated them I was told that this was not enough and that I had to leave the College within one year "max". as he said. The Head of division then left the office without even having "the courtesy to close the door" and leaving a PhD student bystander "looking at me in utter horror"".

The professor goes on to state that he was never informed of the obligation to win funding of 200k per annum and was not aware that this was part of his contract. He states: "What these guys don't know is that they destroy lives, well they certainly destroyed mine. The reality is that these career scientists up the hierarchy of this organization only look at figures to judge their colleagues, be it impact or grant income. After all, how can you convince your department head that you are working on something exciting if he not even attends the regular Departmental seminars". The professor did also ask himself: "Did I regret coming to this place? I enormously enjoyed interacting with my science colleagues here, but like many of them, I fell into the trap of confusing the reputation of science here with the present reality. This is not a University any more but a business with very few up the hierarchy, like our

formidable duo, profiteering and the rest of us are milked for money, be it professors for their grant income or students who pay pounds just to extend their write-up status". In reference to the assessment of fellow academics he concludes: "One of my colleagues here at the college whom I told my story looked at me, there was a silence, and then said "Yes they treat us like sh*t"".

*Case scenario 2 – a "pushy" dean, destructive leadership and collective resistance*
In the case of a "Welsh business school" the Dean developed "an overly aggressive style of management" from the beginning (Jump, 2015b), when implementing centrally set performance management measures at school level. He also brought in close friends (his partner) and family (his son) in order to support him running the school.

Severe conflicts started already shortly after the Dean's appointment. He threatened to move all members of staff that did not submit papers at the 3* level for the REF into teaching only positions (Jump, 2015b). Based on a student satisfaction survey he claimed that 20-30 out of 70 members of staff "are not standard in the classroom" and offered "large-scale severance, redundancy or early retirement" (Jump, 2015b) as a solution. The staff, however, organised an anonymous survey which revealed "management disrespect, a lack of consultation and low morale" (Jump, 2015b). The conflicts escalated when the Dean decided to brush off the findings of this survey by stressing that "it contains the feedback of a relatively small number of staff" (Jump, 2015b). He also directly attacked their *Lebenswelt* and legal right to be consulted properly, when he openly declared that 'there were a few hippy-dippy comments about collegiality and letting "people" make the decisions' (Jump, 2015b). Furthermore he declared: "I'm sorry. This is not a commune. This is a managed institution pursuing goals that are closely aligned with the university's. It is not a rest home for refugees from the 1960s with their ponytails and tie-dyed T-shirts." (Jump, 2015a).

The neo-liberal underpinnings of the Dean's leadership approach are made clear. Critical thinking, academic self-organization and participation in decision-making are de-legitimised as outdated in the drive for a new public management regime that he intended to install. Members of staff openly criticized the working environment as being "toxic" (Jump, 2015b) and the onset of a "dictatorship" (Morgan, 2015). Thus, in this case the Dean had to step down in the end. An investigation by the Welsh assembly is under way, after massive interventions of staff, the university union as well as local and national media (Jump, 2015b). This particular case demonstrates how an offensive and patronizing management approach was subject to collective opposition by the university "rank and file". However, such instances of collective resistance are rather rare.

Through our cases we have shown evidence that systemic economic and political pressures that transform the *Lebenswelt* of UK universities can have precarious and

even "harmful" effects on employees' wellbeing. Thus, it is not surprising that especially business schools that employ 'pushy deans' experience very high degrees of "voluntary" termination, mainly by academics but also administrators. Many academics often regard the exit option as the only option then. In a climate which has become highly market- driven and commodified, it might be expected that "human resources" which are in demand will "jump ship" with little sense of loyalty or good-will, while the future of those pushed into retirement, severance or precariousness appears far less rosy.

## 6. Effects of the colonization of the *Lebenswelt*: Back in the GDR?

A closer look at some of the stories we referred to in the previous section indicates that they mirror forms of the colonization of the *Lebenswelt* which have been experienced by citizens (including academics) of communist regimes, such as the former GDR, where the first author -commenced his academic career. Indeed, in a recent article published in the British Times Higher Education Supplement, Brandist (2015) draws stark parallels between the reforms of UK universities and those which occurred in Soviet-era Russia, salient factors including the imposition of performance management regimes, competition between institutions and the erosion of autonomous research. Within such an environment, according to Brandist (2015) deep contradictions are in evidence. Accordingly, the requirement to uphold the University's corporate brand runs in tension with strong traditions of outspoken critical thinking, which nevertheless remain integral to the brand.

Thus, we see typical features which are central for colonization of the *Lebenswelt* in totalitarian regimes such as, firstly, the presentation of proposed change measures as "inevitable" and "simply good and nostalgia is bad" (Parker, 2014, p. 288); secondly, an "us" and "them" divide between supporters of the regime and supporters of the former *Lebenswelt* centred regime, based on academic self-organization and participation in central decisions about teaching, learning and research (Parker, 2014, p. 287); thirdly, "total" disconnection of the top administration and management level from the *Lebenswelt* and daily work of ordinary academics and administrators (Parker, 2014, p. 286); fourthly, communist propaganda-like campaigns, for example in universities that increasingly start displaying ranking results on huge posters across the campus and on the university's website, over-emphasizing the positive news and hiding any information or ranking results which did not fit into the "grandiose image" (Alvesson, 2013); fifth, increased "cynicism" of academics who are "playing the game" (Alvesson and Spicer, 2016) which many do not believe in, an approach which can be seen as alternative to "voice" and active resistance which in many cases leads to tribunal like meetings and pressure to leave, and finally, "exit" as the only option for academics who disagree and openly question the rules even when it means that they might not find a new or similar position elsewhere (Hirschman, 1970)[3].

It is, however, worth stressing that our narrative of "back in the GDR" sheds light particularly on the dark, totalitarian, side of the story. The reasons as to why and how

the colonization of *Lebenswelt* of British academia has remained largely uncontested, and apparently triggers mainly passive forms of resistance are more complex. The UK is a proto-type liberal market economy (Hall and Soskice, 2001) and arguably the spread of the neo-liberal ideology across the HE sector manifests autocratic tendencies in its mode of interpretation and implementation. Alvesson and Spicer (2016), in reflecting upon the triumph of the colonizers, point to selective recruitment of high performers based on "material selfishness/money"; the seductiveness of championing "excellence" in competition with peers; increased legitimacy of "performance measures", effectiveness of technological "surveillance systems" which increase the visibility of individual performance, together with the material rewards that top business schools can cream off when they score high in rankings. A key contention, however, is captured in their metaphor "playing the game". Here it is asserted that a cadre of "high performers" tend to dilute possibilities for thoroughgoing resistance to imperializing agendas through engaging in tactical game playing at a micro-political level, grasping research and teaching advantage in an opportunistic fashion, and distancing themselves from immanent systemic pressures. Accordingly, it is stressed: "they are cynical and can thus avoid the pain and costs of following any urge to resistance" (ibid). In keeping with the notion that fault lines are growing within academic communities, precluding possibilities for collective resistance, Sennett (2012) points to a "social triangle" of adverse forces which serve to trigger systemic imbalances and threaten established forms of "togetherness" within the *Lebenswelt*. These are: weak cooperation, erosion of trust through envious comparisons and destruction of well-deserved authority. In the context of British universities, we have observed that the cult of individualism has perhaps gone too far. The weakening of cooperation isolates high-performers from low performers, top from lower level university managers, teaching- from research-active academics, researchers from administrators, and so on. Sennett refers to this phenomenon as the "silo effect" through which performative devices and coercive comparisons instigated by the "power-bloc", invariably comprising ambitious Deans, high performing academics and senior administrators, serve to drive wedges between academic communities both within and across institutions, thus undermining collective consciousness and identity.

## 7. Concluding remarks

The provocative illustrative vignettes offered in this essay reflect the critique of Habermas in his *Theory of Communicative Action (*1987a), that, communicative relationships based upon the shared social life within "structural nuclei" are increasingly being put at risk through the extent of their distortion by functional rationalities imposed from extraneous political- legal and economic systems (Kemmis, 1998). To utilise a term provided by Habermas, it may be observed that HE in the UK and beyond is now subject to a powerful process of *juridification*, through which political/ administrative rationalities imposed through bureaucratic procedures, or economic rationalities asserted through an inexorable logic of financial accountability and measurement, are fundamentally impacting the work and world of

academic communities. Again following Habermas (1987a, p. 323), principles of socialisation in education which have adhered to the principles of communicative rationality, notably mutual understanding and unforced consensus, are being subverted by steering mechanisms which may be regarded as highly dysfunctional. In the more exaggerated examples, a suspension of the principles of mutual understanding, consensus and relationship-building in pursuit of overriding functional and purposive/rational objectives may obviously culminate in serious cultural, societal and personality disorders (Habermas, 1987b; Kemmis, 1998), some manifestations of which are recorded in the above essay. In order to reverse such dysfunctional elements, Habermas, advocates the reassertion of the principle of "self- organisation" at grassroots level, where "micro-domains of everyday practice can develop into autonomous public spheres and consolidate as self- supporting higher level intersubjectivities only to the degree that the *Lebenswelt* potential for self-organisation and for the self-organised means of communication are utilised" (Habermas, 1987d, pp. 364- 365).

The national focus for our essay has been the UK, where we would stress that not all HE institutions within the UK and especially abroad, by any means, are trapped in a state of "organizational darkness". However, it should also be noted that universities across international boundaries are now following the route towards market liberalisation and commodification of educational "production". Yet, in the UK, while it has to be accepted that the context for HE institutions has changed dramatically over the past few decades, notably as universities now cater for mass student markets, are forced to operate within rigid financial constraints and gain funding in an independent fashion, as well as being increasingly accountable to a range of external stakeholders, it is perhaps self-evident that the current anomic state which appears to pervade much organizational life can only be ultimately dysfunctional. As mentioned above, high levels of trust, the provision of services on the basis of goodwill rather than pecuniary reward, and institutional advancement through collegiate collaboration as opposed to cut throat competition between individuals has constituted the lifeblood of the system in the past. While such values are retained by many occupying the *Lebenswelt* of academia, our essay has pointed to the alarming phenomenon of their erosion through draconian managerial interventions predicated upon idealized conceptions of rationalist organization in which market- driven and "performative" imperatives are transcendent and regarded by the power elite as sacrosanct.

If universities are to find their place with greater equanimity in modern society, the question poignantly raised by Collini (2012) "What are Universities for?" needs to be given serious and far- reaching consideration. What would become abundantly clear from a more sensitive and empirically informed analysis of their activities and operations is that they are very much in the "business" of producing intangibles such as knowledge, ideas and even relationships. In such circumstances it is surely opportune to revisit and recast the highly asymmetrical relationship which is now evident between "power-bloc" and " the people" to permit a higher degree of self-

regulation on the part of the latter. The democratization of the life world of the university would be consistent with the adoption of more finely tuned measures and systems to calibrate and encapsulate the realities of academic labour, to 'micro-manage' in a benign sense the complex dynamics of teaching, learning and knowledge creation and, highly significantly, to bolster the self-esteem of an academic community which seems to remain perpetually tarnished and down-at-heel.

A key question for future research could be how emancipatory principles of teaching and research can be brought back into the *Lebenswelt* of academics in order to reverse some of the destructive effects which led to dystopia and demoralization of parts of British academia and beyond. Thus, historic and social studies about the failure of socialist regimes have demonstrated why totalitarian institutions and organizations in the former Soviet bloc did collapse in the end. Accordingly, we would like to stress that systemic pressures of neo-liberalist science principles can by no means be seen as all-encompassing because even the most restrictive constraints always tend to create 'recursive contingencies' at the micro-level, which have successively hollowed out totalitarian forms of organizing in Soviet-style 'closed societies' (Deroy and Clegg, 2015). Thus, there are glimpses of hope that *Lebenswelt* principles in academia can never be fully colonized as a product of destruction and precariousness, especially in 'open societies' where forms of active agency such as freedom of speech and open discourse persist, and are still supported by tradition and law.

Habermas has pointed out that there has been a concern since the foundations of modern universities were laid more than two centuries ago, that "modern science, freed from supervision of religion and church, can be institutionalized without endangering its autonomy, through authority of government which secures the external existence of science, or through pressures from the side of the occupational and economic system, with its interest in the useful application of scientific work" (1987c, p. 9). Accordingly, for the readership and authors of this journal, including critical management and IB scholars, very concrete questions need to be asked, for example: where critical debates are supposed to take place in future when neo-liberal science principles further discourage alternative theorising and empirical studies based on critical and non-traditional concepts and methods in favour of mainstream (systemic) theories in IB such as agency theory, transaction cost economics, the 'eclectic paradigm' or the 'evolutionary model' of the multinational firms. Such concerns are triggered by the growing influence of journal ranking lists, and particularly the UK's ABS list, which is increasingly applied beyond its country of origin. Accordingly, journals in the vein of *Critical Perspectives on International Business*, are well advised to keep 'playing the game' of improving their journal ranking position without compromising their alternative and critical focus, even when this can be a challenge, and is often a potential impediment to reputation (Roberts and Dörrenbächer, 2014). Additionally, it may be observed that increasing political influence is now exerted on research inputs- and outputs. Research which obtains governmental funding now needs to demonstrate 'practical impact' for business and

society. This turns out to be problematic when the criteria are pre-set by administrators employed and/or instructed by economic and political elites, a state of affairs which clearly threatens open and independent academic discourse. In such a socio-economic climate, it is not only crucial that journals, like this one, exist but that their influence is expanded. This is especially important in the field of IB, where critical questions, beyond what is best for FDI, 'big business' or efficient management of international operations, are subject to neglect in mainstream publications. This leads to the paradox that the established – and often restrictive, manipulative and exploitative - circuits of power in contemporary multinational firms are legitimised through mainstream academic conduits, rather than being subjected to rigorous critique (see e.g. Geppert et al. 2016). In short, even if critical IB scholars remain a rather rare breed in academia, their voice and critique can become ever more potent as a contradiction to the orthodoxy within a globalizing HE market.

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[2] US politicians Tom Coburn and Jeff Flake have attacked the Social Sciences, arguing that research monies would be better spent on subjects that "matter" (citing cancer research as an obvious example). Coburn is quoted as saying that the majority of social science research is "junk science", and drastic funding cuts have been proposed.

[3] This happened to one of the authors who was forced out of his studies in law because of critical questions and behaviour in public and had difficulties to find work in the former GDR, a country which officially had no unemployment.