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The Making of *Bullshit* Leadership and *Toxic* Management in the Neoliberal University

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<https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-50m>.

My over-arching argument in this article is that both academics and students in universities have been afflicted by a set of relations that Lauren Berlant refers to as ‘cruel optimism’ (2011). Cruel optimism according to Berlant, constitutes the holding out of hope for ‘the good life’ (2012), or ‘an improved way of being’ (2011, 1)—which is the optimistic part—but in a context in which ‘the object that you thought would bring you happiness becomes an object that deteriorates the conditions for [that] happiness’ (2012)—the cruel part. In other words, the hopes we have for a longed-for improved set of outcomes, have implicit within the fantasy of their own affective moment, the seeds of their own unattainment.

I want to invoke Berlant’s notion of cruel optimism as a kind of discursive heuristic frame within which to explain how the good life held out as being attainable through the neoliberal university over the past half century, has become corrupted, corroded and degraded through our unwitting and complicit acceptance of a set of notions that I describe as ‘bullshit’ leadership and its associated ‘toxic’ management. My starting point is that after nearly half a century of working in universities all over the world, I have become disenchanted and frustrated to the point where I am no longer prepared to be defined by the bullshit industry that has been allowed to invade universities largely unimpeded.

The paper has three main moves.

First, I want to explain the language that underpins the conceptual structure of the argument I want to present here.

Second, I want to address what Pennycook et al. (2015) call ‘pseudo-profound bullshit’, which they claim comprises ‘seemingly impressive assertions [that] are presented as true and meaningful but are actually vacuous’, for example, ‘bullshit statements consisting of buzzwords’ (549).

And, third having engaged in something of a ‘social meditation’ on what it is that is bugging me, I want to have a brief ‘polemical exchange’ (Cruikshank and Abinnett 2019, 273) with the various contributors to the themed issue of *Social Epistemology* (33 (4): 2019) on ‘Neoliberalism, Technocracy and Higher Education’.

But before I get into this, I need to explain briefly my take on ‘bullshit’.

While the term bullshit has long been part of our idiomatic lexicon as a way of naming something that is rubbish or nonsense, the term took on a more serious inflection with moral philosopher Harry Frankfurt’s essay (1986) and his subsequent book (2005), *On Bullshit*. The central essence of Frankfurt’s argument, stripped down to its core, is that bullshit consists of utterances made, the accuracy or truth value of which the person making them, has total disregard for whether or not they are true. In effect, the bullshitter hides the fact ‘that the truth value of his (sic) statements are of no central interest to him (sic)’ (Frankfurt 2005, 55). Rather, the sole purpose of bullshit thus seems to have to do with what

Pennycook (2015) and his colleagues call ‘receptivity’ (350)—that is to say, the intent of bullshit, especially the ‘pseudo-profound’ variant, whose purpose seems to be ‘designed to impress’, and as such, the more obtuse, vague, lacking in substance, ‘epistemically suspect’, and ‘ontologically confusing’ (351), the better. The sleight of hand that occurs here, according to Sperber (2010), writing on ‘the guru effect’, is that we ‘judge as profound what [we] have failed to grasp’ (583). This is where bullshit can become quite insidious, because we tend to trust statements which we take to be intuitive, which we have been denied the opportunity to consider analytically, or that derive from a source that we have been enculturated to regard as being implicitly trustworthy. Herein lies the reason bullshit works:

...vagueness obscures the meaning of the statement and therefore must undermine or mask “deep meaning” (i.e. profundity) that the statement purports to convey. The concern for “profundity” reveals an important defining characteristic of bullshit (in general): that it attempts to impress rather than to inform: to be engaging rather than instructive (Pennycook et al. 2015, 550).

Why Neoliberalism Constitutes ‘Pseudo-Profound Bullshit’ in Universities

My starting point here, to borrow and adapt some colourful phrases from Adorno (1994 [1974]), is that the underlying tenets of neoliberalism—markets, choice, competitive individualism, and *homo economicus* generally, and all of the militaristic/managerial/industrial complex performativity apparatus and discourse that have come to accompany it—are ‘interloper’, ‘arrogant’, ‘alien’ and ‘improper’ ideas (23) that have no legitimate place in universities.

The reason the neoliberal way of thinking is inapplicable to universities, and that the version of leadership it spawns is bullshit, is that the whole edifice upon which it rests is based on a set of ‘zombie ideas’ (Barer et al, 1998), mostly of an economic kind—hence the appropriation of the term ‘zombie economics’ by Quiggin (2010) and Krugman (2012). The term ‘zombie ideas’ was coined by Barer, Evans, Hertzman and Johri (1998) in their attempt to puncture and dispel the myths that had come to surround the Canadian health care system in the 1990s.

Barer et al. (1998) indicated that zombie ideas have no foundation to them and they live on despite being continually refuted and debunked by the evidence, because they resonate with common sense and ‘are consistent with the agendas of powerful interest groups’ (72). For example, the notion of the ‘patient as consumer’ in the health sector, or the ‘student as consumer’ in education, resonate with the idea that both health care and education are ‘just another commodity’, and by invoking the notion of ‘the consumer knows best’, this bullshit idea ‘side-steps embarrassing questions about the effectiveness [of health care and education] and the powerful role of providers’ (72). As Barer et al. (1998) argue, questions of ‘context’ are conveniently made invisible when everything is rendered down to an aggregation of choice by individual consumers.

Economist John Maynard Keynes (1961[1935]) in his seminal work *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* spoke eloquently of the way we have become trapped within zombie ideas and habituated ways of thinking and acting, when he said:

... the ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed the world is ruled by little else. Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist. Madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribble of a few years back (383).

It is indolent, lazy and slothful thinking, along with the power of vested interests that sustain and maintain the current market version of economics that is no longer an accurate portrayal of the reality of our economic lives, let alone our educational lives within universities. As Quiggin (2010) argues, bullshit or zombie ideas, ‘are hard to kill’, because ‘Even after the evidence seems to have killed them [as was the case with the global financial crisis], they keep coming on back. These ideas are neither alive nor dead...they are undead, or zombie ideas’ (1).

Borrowing from Francis Bacon in his 1620 philosophical tract *Novum Organum*, I have come up with my own six *idols of bullshit leadership* in universities (acknowledgment to Teo 2019, for the helpful organizing category of ‘idols of bullshit’, 39).

All of these idols are closely aligned with the unreflexive mantras of the industrial/military/business complex that have come to dominate universities, while being used to give a supposed gloss of respectability to the latest buzz words that derive from the diseased version of economics referred to earlier.

Among these unproblematic insertions into the daily lexicon of universities, and around which all manner of leadership variants gyrate, are

- performance pay
- standards
- benchmarks
- value added
- outcome approaches
- league tables
- world’s best practice
- accountability
- audits
- mission statements
- strategic reviews
- profiles
- delivery systems

- targeted groups
- operational procedures
- performance management
- performance indicators
- performance appraisal (Smyth 2017, 88-89).

Over two decades ago I colourfully, (but accurately) described these, and many others, as ‘aerosol’ or ‘weasel’ words that were being sprayed around our educational institutions to cover up the stench of decay as the state retreated rather unceremoniously from its fiscal responsibility for properly funding education (Smyth 1998), thus allowing the corporate sector to engage in what has since eventuated to be a full frontal invasion.

My six idols of bullshit leadership in universities encompass the following:

1. Undeliverability of Outcomes

There are several possible points of entry into discussing this bullshit idol, so I will restrict myself to what is arguably the most egregious one. It has become so commonplace these days that the notion of ‘student-as-consumer’ is rarely challenged or even questioned in the wider public imagination. We do not have to probe very deeply into the accepted view that students are consumers of higher education, to reveal that this cavalier and deep-seated policy proclamation is far from straightforward—and indeed, its pursuit without regard to its truthfulness or inherent complexity makes it a standout case of a bullshit idea.

The sleight of hand behind this bullshit idol of neoliberalism is the ‘user pays principle’, that would have us believe that if only we construct students as consumers of higher education, then these are sufficient grounds for massive cost shifting. This is legitimation for students being required to pay university fees, and furthermore, it follows that students will demand ‘value for money’ for what is being offered as a purely vocational ‘product’, and universities will improve their game as a consequence of the market response of students. The evidence from places as varied as Portugal (Tavares and Cardoso 2013), Finland (Nielsen 2011), and the UK (Tomlinson 2017; Brooks 2018; Nixon, Scullion and Hearn 2018), reveals that student subjectivity is a much more complex phenomenon than this bullshit marketized perception would have us believe, even when taking into account the much vaunted ‘value-for-money’ (VfM) outrageous policy nonsense (Jones, Vigurs and Harris 2019). This kind of ‘consumerist framing’ has led to the situation whereby:

In England’s higher education landscape, so embedded is the language of VfM that it is difficult to imagine policy discourse without it. Despite it being a dominant conceptual lens for mediating policy, VfM remains ill-defined and its assumptions largely uncontested. The fundamental question of whether VfM is something that can be ‘delivered’ by universities and ‘ensured’ by regulators is rarely directly addressed (2).

2. Invisibility of Wider Social Purposes

The obvious attendant to the student as consumer policy proclamation is that university education is a ‘private good, and that as such it has little or no role in producing anything of ‘public value’ (Moore 1995; Benington 2009) other than what is seen in the occasional symbolic genuflection through ‘impact effects’ in research performance audit exercises like the REF (Research Excellence Framework) in the UK and its equivalents other places. In other words, in the neoliberal play sheet, there is a disavowal of any contribution of universities to the wider good of society beyond that which occurs through the aggregated vocational contribution of individual students. Where did this unsubstantiated idea come from—is it yet another bullshit idea deriving from the Thatcher notion that ‘there is no such thing as society’?

3. Fictive Persona of a Heroic Cadre of Detached Efficiency Management Experts

Possibly the most pervasive and destructive bullshit shibboleth myth is that universities are being led by a detached class of politically disinterested benign administrators interested only in the pursuit of ‘quality’, ‘excellence’ and ‘increased competition’. The reality of this ‘misconceived economic salvation’ (Haffman and Radder 2015, 165) is vastly different. Instead, academia has been ‘colonised’ by a ‘wolf’ in the persona of a:

... mercenary army of professional administrators, armed with spreadsheets, output indicators and audit procedures, loudly accompanied by the Efficiency and Excellence March (165-166).

According to Haffman and Radder (2015) the ‘wolf pops champagne corks after each new score in the Shanghai Competition, while the university sheep desperately work until they drop’ (166). Of particular significance is that, while ‘the occupation may have a different shape and intensity in different places...[there is a] pervasive pattern that applies in varying degrees to many universities in many countries’ (p. 166). As I have indicated in my book (2017) *The Toxic University: Zombie Leadership, Academic Rock Stars, and Neoliberalism* this ludicrous charade, is held in place by the kind of pervasive fictions discussed by Haffman and Radder (2015):

i. *Measurability for accountability*—the supposition being that the complex work of the university can be rendered down to a bunch of digits on a spreadsheet, and by this means the university is seen to be accountable to outsiders. The perversity of this unproven bullshit idea is the complete reverse of what it is supposing. Instead of substance or quality, what is perpetrated is ‘performance...cleverly buffed-up [as an] *illusion* of excellence’, propped up by nothing more than ‘a regime of indicator fetishism’ (167, emphases in original).

ii. *Permanent competition under the pretext of ‘quality’*—competition is endlessly portrayed as if it is a virtuous and healthy activity, engaged in solely to ensure

‘market share’ of students and funding. Reality is that it destroys trust, and corrupts and corrodes the co-operation that is the ‘social fabric of the university’ (168). Competition is a very convenient means for cleansing the university of disloyal critics who deserve to be disposed of so the university can better use the funding for image management activities—glossy advertising, football teams, and flashy sporting facilities—to attract more students. The skeleton of staff who are not made precarious or disposed of, are thus kept in a permanent state of fear that they may be next. What a good idea...whoever said all of this was bullshit?

iii. *The promise of greater ‘efficiency’*—efficiency is depicted as being quite simple, really! Academic staff just have to work harder with less, and the university will play its part by creating large advertising and marketing divisions to better produce ‘high priced newspaper advertisements’, a ‘new corporate image’ and ‘sparkling websites’ (169) to lure students from competitor institutions. Meanwhile, the exorbitant cost of these overheads will be kept hidden, while academic staff are continually reminded that ‘efficiency’ and ‘quality’ really mean nothing more than they should continue to work of an evening and at weekends! Another fabulous idea from the corporate sector.

iv. *The adoration of excellence: everyone at the top!*—the culture of the ‘managerial university’ is one of ‘winners’ at all costs. The managerial university has lost the capacity to any longer judge the substance of what it does, and as a result it has to resort to the sporting proxy indicator of academic stars. All effort and resources is thrown at these ‘stars’ to sustain the fiction, but the perversity is that in the end, ‘being on “top” is mainly a matter of successfully managing a self-fulfilling prophecy and disguising the costs’ (170).

v. *Contentless process management*—at the centre of all of this is a ‘factory logic’ that says, universities are no different from ‘biscuit factories’ or breweries—it is all about the process not the substance, and all that is required is a set of neutral generic management skills implemented by a cadre of lavishly rewarded administrators. Everything is portrayed as if it is neutral and disinterested, and academics who persist with quaint ideas like professionalism and academic judgement, need to go the way of the dinosaurs. Such actions are evidence of gross disloyalty, and ‘doubt is for losers’ (172).

vii. *The promise of economic salvation*—underpinning all of this is the incredibly naïve belief that if only universities can be convinced to market themselves and their products, then this will magically lead to economic gain for everyone. The difficulties and complexities are merely the dying cries of the doubters, and parts of universities that are not marketable are merely indications of parts that need to excised.

4. Deeply Exploitative Instrumental Interests

The level of presumption about what a university is for, is truly mind boggling in its audacity, none of this kind of thinking has any evidentiary basis to it—it is yet another gross instance of a bullshit utterance, which serves deeply entrenched extractive corporate interests.

5. Absence of Internal Ethics

While there is much posturing about neutrality and detachment, the removal and closing down of spaces for internal reflexivity and debate about the dominant neoliberal motif that has colonised universities, means that the narrow instrumental ends that gyrate around an econometric world view are sustained, and discussion is constrained to how better to pursue matters of auditing, measurement and commodification.

6. Unshakeable Belief That Everything is for Sale

The whole notion of what a university ought to be seems to have become unstuck around a distorted one-dimensional view of what it means to aspire to having ‘a university more involved with society’ (Haffman and Radder 2015, 173)—a fine ideal in theory, but it has been hijacked by a form of colonisation that we all allowed to happen in which involvement of society has been allowed to mean subservience to ‘business’ (p. 173). Furthermore, by acquiescing to the idea that the accountability tools of business could be used ‘to call dozing professors and burnt-out colleagues to order’ (p. 173), we also allowed in a system that is now used to tightly control all academics. By being complicit in allowing the accountability wolf of business in through the cracks, we have unwittingly allowed him to sell off the whole kit and caboodle.

A Brief ‘Polemical Exchange’ with Contributors to the Special Issue of *Social Epistemology*

As Cruickshank and Abbinnett (2019) aptly put it, the question to be addressed is how neoliberalism with ‘its individualist rhetoric about liberating individuals from bureaucracy’ has been allowed to morph into a project of engineering market forces, with its technocracy in universities, in the interests of a punitive and ‘oppressive use of state power’ (275)—and the contributors cast even more light on this.

Elio Di Muccio (2019) shows how the domestication of universities has occurred through HR technologies of systems management data collection that regards employees in instrumental terms as ‘business assets’, and thus the legitimate object of ‘redundancy targets’, ‘efficiency-driven savings’, and ‘elimination of wastage’ (321).

Liz Morrish (2019) continues with the data and metric regulation theme, by showing how universities in the UK are being required to address ‘a series of imagined faults’ (357), through adherence to a teaching framework designed to produce a particular kind of

neoliberal student subjectivity—the student-as-consumer. As Morrish (2019) aptly summarised the unsubstantiated bullshit idea behind it: ‘The whole assemblage of data has been invested with credibility, not by its effect on teaching improvement or student outcomes, but by discursive choices which align with neoliberal principles, such as competition and choice’ (364).

Richard Hall (2019) argues that the deeper meaning behind these moves resides in the failure of international capitalism and the concomitant need to ‘recalibrate’ education as the site for a new anti-democratic technocratically-imposed authoritarian form of governance around ‘discourses of entrepreneurship, employability, excellence and impact’ (298). This crisis of capitalism, which has required the proletarianisation of academic labour, Hall argues, has also required ‘a new, abstracted common sense or social epistemology’ that has cast universities in a new epistemic role of skewing knowledge production in a way that is ‘mediated inhumanely by the market’ (303).

Another bullshit idea is revealed by John Holmwood and Chaime Servós (2019), that the existing university system somehow constitutes ‘a form of cartel that embodies the interests of knowledge “producers” against those of “consumers”, or the wider publics that fund it’ (309). They show how this alleged cartel is being disrupted by a disembodiment of university functions and the imposition of a three-pronged ‘technical solution’ in the form of ‘digitalisation, commodification and precarity’ (309). By this means, they argue, a new kind of stratified privileged precariat pyramid is being created, ‘of favourable working conditions concentrated at elite institutions that are already dominated by individuals from socially restricted backgrounds’ (317).

Justin Cruickshank (2019), pushes this idea further in showing how higher education policy in England is being used to ‘re-engineer’ more complicit, compliant, passive and adaptive students and academics, who will be more subservient to the external authority of the market.

Robert Antonio (2019), speaking of the US scene and the rise of Trumpism, suggests that at least in some quarters in the US, that the ‘era of unchallenged neoliberal hegemony may be winding down’ (280), and is being countenanced by Trump’s brand of rightwing populism with its ‘ethnoracial politics’ of ‘fear, loathing and lying’ (281). While other parts of the world have certainly not escaped this new form of authoritarian populism, it remains to be seen how this new version will impact higher education and whether it will have any effect on the current dominant neoliberal project.

In confronting the colonisation of universities by the neoliberal tendencies just alluded to by the writers of the special issue, Jana Bacevic (2019) reminds us of the fact that in any critique we need to be mindful of the fact that any opposition needs to be attentive ‘to the social context in which [modes of knowing] are produced’, as well as the ‘social tenets of the production of one’s knowledge’ (381)—a sobering reminder that we are all complicit, and that any critique must be mindful of this lack of innocence.

Conclusion

I started out this meditation by invoking Berlant's (2011) notion of 'cruel optimism' as way of capturing what is happening in higher education. While being offered a route to an improved life, the whole university agenda has been hijacked by an industry bent on perpetrating nonsense—and we have allowed this capture of thought and action to go on largely unimpeded. The notion of 'bullshit', therefore, seems to most aptly describe the raft of neoliberal policies and procedures that have no foundation to them and that are the last dying vestiges of zombie or voodoo economics that has been thoroughly discredited in recent times. The bullshit leadership manta in universities has taken hold because, like much of the fear-mongering bullshit that has come to surround the serious medical issue of the corona virus, truth becomes irrelevant and all that counts is sustaining the propagation of a damaging mantra.

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