

## BOOK REVIEW

**Shaping for Mediocrity: The Cancellation of Critical Thinking at our Universities**, Gibson Burrell, Ronald Hartz, David Harvie, Geoff Lightfoot, Simon Lilley and Friends (2024) Zero Books, London, 256pp. £7 (paperback) ISBN 978-1803417967

This is a difficult book to review, simply because the story it tells is so disturbing. The task is made doubly difficult by the context in which it has been published – full-scale financial crisis throughout the sector in the UK, accompanied by increased redundancies. A key factor is that overseas students, who once came in droves, are now staying away in droves. As I began this review in November 2024, the Office for Students reported that it expected nearly three-quarters of English universities to be in deficit by the academic year 2025–26.

The story told here predates these issues, though they have been long in gestation. It chronicles the fate that befell what was once known as the University of Leicester's School of Management, now rebranded as the University of Leicester School of Business (ULSB). Its website describes this as:

a global academy for leaders, innovators and change-makers ... we are internationally renowned for our courses in accounting and finance, business and management, economics, entrepreneurship and marketing. We conduct pioneering work in partnership with leaders, managers, SMEs and large organisations to develop the knowledge and skills our partners need and to promote responsible business practice.

So far, so familiar. This self-description could apply to any of the country's business schools – world-leading or not. The phrase 'responsible business practice' appears tacked on, subordinate to the 'knowledge and skills' that business leaders consider to be important. It is this overwhelmingly pro-business attitude that has led Martin Parker (2018) to advocate abolishing business schools and replacing them with broader-based schools of organizing, and Peter Fleming (2021) to write a book called *Dark Academia*.

It wasn't always like this. The old School of Management at Leicester was renowned as a key centre for Critical Management Studies (CMS). Its faculty included some of CMS's most prominent names. Yet, in its infinite wisdom, the University's senior management team determined that the institution needed to improve its competitive position against other universities. The way to do this was by doing exactly the same thing as they were all doing, and thus embracing an overtly pro-business research and teaching agenda. This shop-soiled notion of strategy – as one of imitation in order to, at best, be renowned for being more distinctively mediocre than one's already mediocre rivals – has been discredited the world over. At Leicester it meant the dismantling of CMS as a distinct focus within the School, alongside Political Economy, and sacking those involved.

*Shaping for Mediocrity* is an angry book, written by some of those affected. It chronicles this dismal process from its beginning, through failed resistance, to its end in late 2021, and seeks to explain why it matters beyond the University of Leicester. In violation of any notion of academic freedom, staff were targeted for the nature of their research, regardless of its quality. Ultimately, 15 people were made redundant, tossed overboard like so much unwanted ballast. But, as the book's introduction explains, at least 40 academics have now left, many of them unwilling to work in the kind of environment where such things are possible. As the authors argue, the marginalizing of critical inquiry took to extremes a wider process of managerialization throughout academia. University vice-chancellors have become professional CEOs who are always on the lookout for

better opportunities, while any remnant of academic self-governance serves purely decorative purposes, like tinsel on a Christmas tree. You don't have to be a fully fledged adherent of CMS to find this disturbing.

The book does not flinch from naming names – the University Council's chair (Gary Dixon), its VC (Paul Boyle and then Nishan Canagarajah), the school's Dean (first James Devlin and then Dan Ladley) and various senior allies (or should that be henchmen/henchwomen?) without whose active participation the dismal process would not have been possible. The stage is set: growing student numbers in the UK system and the use of numerous metrics to measure, regulate and discipline academic performance. Managerial power has grown. At Leicester, as elsewhere, a cadre of individuals insists 'that *we* – and not them – were/are the university' (p.27). I find it startling to reflect on how unquestioned and pervasive this terminology has become. Long gone are the days when faculty thought of *themselves* as the university, and having at least some responsibility for decision-making. We have become merely paid employees, akin to hired guns, of little value beyond our most recent successful grant application or publication 'hit'.

A new strategic plan, predictably labelled *Shaping for Excellence*, led in early 2021 to 145 staff receiving letters informing them that their jobs were at risk. The shock was immense, and not only at Leicester; I recall incredulity spreading like wildfire throughout the sector. From the beginning, staff concerns were brushed aside as senior managers insisted they knew best and doubled down on their initial decisions – after all, managers must have the right to manage. The academic union, the UCU, reacted by announcing a rare global boycott of Leicester, while its local branch voted to undertake action short of a strike. Senior managers hired an agency to monitor staff accounts on the social media sites Twitter (these, remember, were the old days), Facebook, LinkedIn and Instagram, for dissent that overstepped the boundaries of what senior managers considered acceptable commentary on their actions. Their sensitivity to how others used language was not matched by any duty of care to those targeted for redundancy.

Chapter 3 explores the wider process of marketization that has been imposed on universities over recent decades. The growth in management numbers and power has been much more striking than any resistance mounted to it (Alvesson and Spicer, 2016). In this case, senior managers had decided – don't forget, they are 'the university' – that research excellence and teaching now meant 'practical relevance for business' and 'executive education' (p.75). There was, of course, a hurried process of 'consultation'. This brief exercise resembles a firing squad asking the victim whether they would care for a blindfold to improve the experience of execution. CMS was depicted as an 'anti-management' body whose elimination would implausibly fail to disrupt the spirit of critical inquiry that was verbally recognized as indispensable for academic research. ULSB, it was claimed, would become a 'sector leader' and 'world class' – claims that anyone with the slightest sense of criticality would surely dismiss as a tautology. Yet it transpired that publication in critically oriented journals, such as *Organization*, *Ephemera* and *Critical Perspectives on Accounting*, would become a criterion for redundancy. Opposition was dismissed as 'resistance to change'.

The role of critical thinking in business schools is replete with paradoxes. Mainstream research paradigms avoid being discomfited by these issues since they have no qualms about prioritizing the interests of shareholders. Despite this, as chapter 4 shows, many scholars have migrated to business schools from other disciplines, where they have until recently been more or less free to pursue a critical agenda. I found this chapter's discussion of what it means to be critical in such a context quite fascinating. How can we fail to discuss power imbalances in organizations without betraying the pursuit of truth? How can we contemplate climate change without imagining better and more sustainable futures? How can we do any of this and still view existing ways of doing business as beyond criticism? Criticality allows the study *of* management rather than study *for* management, a distinction made clear in the behaviour of those now discredited researchers who were once 'for' the tobacco industry and who lobbied on its behalf. It is this sensibility that scholars

brought to the University of Leicester's School of Management, and these are the scholars 'the university' decided should be terminated.

Chapter 5 considers how the 'streamlining' and 'modernization' of university governance has enabled the rise of the kind of top-down management that led to the events chronicled in this book. It illustrates this with a detailed account of Leicester's appointment of deputy vice-chancellors on mind-boggling salaries of £200,000. In their daily operations, universities have grown closer to businesses. The example is given of how growing demand for student accommodation has led to opaque 'partnerships' with the private sector that may endanger the long-term financial security of universities. This creeping corporatization undermines traditional notions of universities as like-minded communities devoted solely to the pursuit of knowledge. Creeping corporatization is conducive to the rise of managerialism.

What, then, is left of academic freedom? The book's authors discuss the tension between the right of individual academics to determine their own research trajectory, flagrantly violated by the redundancies at Leicester, and the oversight that research and teaching activities now attract from university managers. As the book notes, quoting various definitions of what academic freedom entails:

the Leicester case highlights the way in which the freedom of scholars 'to question and test received wisdom, and to put forward new ideas and controversial or unpopular opinions' stands counterposed to the freedom of university managers to structure the institution in a way they consider to be 'efficient' and 'economical'. (p.160)

When research is 'governed' so that it must be consistent with a largely pro-business agenda, it becomes little more than the accomplice of vested interests. Free thinking cannot survive in shackles such as these.

The final chapter in this engrossing, passionate and well-written book asks, in its title, this vital question: Could the university be ours? Put differently, do things have to be this way? The chapter points out the fallacy of believing that 'the university' is currently *ours*. Rather, universities are now dominated by vice-chancellors and their business-minded colleagues. A neoliberal agenda is firmly in place. In this environment, critical inquiry is often regarded as a naïve affectation, to be, at best, recycled as something like 'responsible business practice'. As a result, academics often feel isolated, fearful and powerless. In the end, the struggle to protect jobs and CMS at Leicester was defeated. This chapter discusses reasons why, including a loss of belief by many academics in their ability to win and different opinions among staff about the path resistance should take.

Where to from here? For some, this isn't an issue. A short postscript shows that many of the senior *dramatis personae* named and shamed in the book have gone on to greater things, as is only to be expected. They leave carnage in their wake. A new university model is needed, but it seems to me that it is unlikely to arise when marketization, New Public Management and neoliberalism still exercise such a baleful influence on business practice and imprison the minds of our political class. I don't see the early stages of the new Labour Government in the UK as particularly encouraging. It isn't the job of this book to discuss in detail what a viable future university system would look like, but I think that we now need to give that issue serious attention.

I began this review by highlighting the current parlous state of universities in England and Wales. The redundancies imposed at Leicester were an explicit assault on academic freedom and the notion that universities should be a welcoming harbour for critical inquiry of all kinds. Without critical inquiry they become nothing more than the docile servants of power. This is hardly what is now needed in a world of wars, genocide in Gaza, climate chaos, growing inequality and the looming threat of trade wars. *Shaping for Mediocrity* challenges us to think differently about what is possible and, in the immortal words of Dylan Thomas, 'to rage, rage, against the dying of the light'.

## References

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