

The Project meets The Office: Managerialism in UK Plc.

Paul Taylor

I adore certain symbols no less than you do. But it would be absurd to sacrifice to the symbol the reality that it symbolises. Cathedrals are to be adored until the day when, to preserve them, it would be necessary to deny the truths which they teach.

Time Regained, Marcel Proust

The above quotation from Proust relates to a conversation about the threat to French cathedrals posed by the German bombing raids of the First World War. Substituting the word 'Universities' for 'Cathedrals' makes it a particularly vivid description of the way in which Higher Education in Britain is in danger of becoming a pastiche of the disinterested pursuit of knowledge some of us would still like to believe it should be. The university system is now but one area of British institutional life that is rife with a level of one-dimensional thought that makes satire increasingly difficult. When Powerpoint presenters use cabalistic incantations consisting of one part alliteration and one part bullet point you begin to ask 'how do you satirise what is already a self-parody?' It is in such a context that Ricky Gervais has created the squirm-inducing and zeitgeist-capturing character of David Brent in the BBC's cult mocu-drama *The Office*. Unfortunately, amidst the laughter and squirming, teachers, doctors, university lecturers etc. recognise that for every David Brent there are many more equally vapid but ultimately much more dangerous characters I term *managerial operators*. Another recent BBC programme *The Project* has shown how this much more malign form of managerialism has successfully eviscerated traditional Labour Party values and the point of this article is to highlight how it is now committing similar harm upon our universities and the few remaining areas of British life where people are not yet contract workers for UK Plc.

Humboldt's Rift—the Taliban with spreadsheets

The University of Culture, instituted by Humboldt, draws its legitimacy from culture, which names the synthesis of teaching and research, process and product, history and reason, philology and criticism, historical scholarship and aesthetic experience, the institution and the individual.

Readings 1996: 65

The phenomenon I am describing, strictly speaking, neither managerial nor ethical, but a hybrid (and sterile) vampire that draws what strength it has from that most dangerous of combinations, two concealed metaphors—both in themselves relatively harmless—but which together form a deadly compound whose corollaries include not just the crude idea that education should serve the needs of the labour market, but also underlie the whole moral rationale behind the push for accountability and testing. Managerial ethics is not so much a theory as a set of sloppy and unquestioned assumptions.

Prickett 2002: 181

Our modern university system largely derives from the model instituted by Wilhem von Humboldt (1767-1835), a Prussian Minister of Education, at the University of Berlin. It is based upon the German idealist notion of the University of Culture and the concept of *Bildung*—the ennoblement of character. Such concepts were obviously of their time but they nevertheless provide a useful yardstick with which to gauge how far from such ideals British universities have moved. Universities are succumbing to a tsunami of rampant managerialism that has already devastated the morale of previously public sector institutions

such as the BBC and the NHS. The time is fast approaching, if it hasn't already arrived, when we will be telling our children about the times when students weren't 'customers' or 'key-stakeholders' but...well, students.

An interesting by-product of devolution is the way in which Scottish resistance to top-up fees may be one of the last barriers to the whole-scale commercialisation of British universities. This is a danger that has until now largely crept under the radar of a middle-England driven media more concerned with the latest A-Level debacle. If Scottish universities successfully resist top-up fees the fraught situation will arise whereby they will become disproportionately cheap to English students and the likely subsequent invasion will make the Edinburgh Festival's usual quota of coruroys and striped shirts seem small eighty-shilling. Beyond this obvious concern, however, is the even more important issue of where in society is there any space left for thinking beyond the bottom-line mentality of the spreadsheet?

The phrases *managerialism* and *managerial ethics* are used in this piece as shorthand concepts with which to explore the anti-professional, anti-intellectual, and disturbingly uber-Thatcherite values that have all but destroyed Humboldt's vision. Since I am writing as an academic, the majority of my examples are taken from higher education but I would argue that this particular arena of contemporary managerialism is worth paying attention to for a number of reasons:

- Whilst the Ivory Tower may seem divorced from the 'real world' concerns of many people, the very fact that this relatively isolated and protected cultural realm has become infected by the managerial virus bodes ill for the rest of society's chances of resisting it.
- Since universities inevitably train the country's future leaders, administrators, and technocrats, the pervasion of the educational process by managerialist values has potentially profound political implications for the future of Britain.
- The spread of managerialism within higher education provides a particularly vivid example of the 'Emperor's got no clothes' type of collective psychosis that can be achieved by the strategic use of inherently banal but nevertheless extremely destructive concepts. The fact that professional academics, trained to deconstruct and reflect upon the ways in which power is exercised, have failed to call managerialism's bluff is particularly worrying and again cause for concern.

The totally administered society

...current higher education culture, the purpose of which...is to make 'balance-sheets sound like Homer and Homer sound like balance-sheets' ...British higher education policy now turns solely on the enforced internalisation of managerial control mechanisms. Their intention is to displace universalising intellectual comportment by task-orientated technocratic procedures through behavioural conditioning; to make the experience of thinking and learning the sterilized aggregate of specified technical norms.

Davies 1996: 23

First voiced in the 1960s Marcuse's fears of a totally regimented and administered society are more and more evident to anyone that has had to deal with a large organisation whether it be a hospital or a bank manager hiding behind a defensive ring of Korean-based call centres. In the field of education, job advertisements vividly illustrate the dominance of managerial values. The text accompanying a call for university administrators



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at a Scottish university, for example, includes educational values only as an after-thought: "You will need strong management skills, particularly an understanding of change management, a commitment to customer-focused service and an empathy for academic objectives."¹ The complete conflation of academic and business values is reflected in another advert's juxtaposition with chief executive positions in the water, gas and development agency fields and its call for a "Vice-Chancellor and Chief Executive." Again, academic values play a minor role in the tenor of the advert but do threaten to be implied (albeit in a heavily commercially qualified sense) in the penultimate phrase of its final sentence: "The successful candidate will possess strategic vision, commercial acumen, and a strong determination to lead a team that has very high ambitions for the future. This is an exciting opportunity to lead a large, distinctive, and dynamic organisation that thrives on developing entrepreneurial learning and encouraging innovation."²

Such examples are now found across the whole range of the educational field. Thus, the Department for Education and Skills (sic) recently launched a national press advertising campaign for 'fast-track Teaching' in secondary schools. Fresh on the heels of various railway debacles, not only the accompanying logo, but also the advertisement's whole ethos, bore more than a passing resemblance to Railtrack with an almost heroic insensitivity to the danger of negative comparisons being drawn. It read: "Fast Track teachers embrace new technology, new business practice, new management skills, and new school policies." Although reminiscent of the Catholic Mass's Apostolic Creed, the Department is at least open in its calling for management apparatchiks, rather than educators with a vocation. Disturbing as they are, to some extent these adverts are just surface phenomenon. Deeper within education, however, structural changes are being instigated that are likely to have much longer term and damaging effects upon the ability of educators to think beyond the spreadsheet. Thus, in a manner the Rev. Sun Myung Moon would doubtless approve of:

Aspiring headteachers are to be required to take a compulsory leadership qualification before they can apply to run schools...The New National College for School Leadership is based in a state-of-the-art £28m headquarters on Nottingham University's Jubilee campus...It will encourage all classroom staff, not just heads and their deputies, to see themselves as leaders and to take up appropriate training.³

The seamless conflation of the managerial and education sectors is further illustrated within the same report by the news that: "Sir Anthony Greener, deputy chairman of BT and chairman of the firm operating the government-sponsored learndirect adult education provider, was appointed interim chairman of the qualifications and cur-

riculum authority.” As Marcuse points out: “Domination is transfigured into administration...the tangible source of exploitation disappears behind the facade of objective rationality.”

Marcuse 1968: 32

Flower power & the potted plants brigade

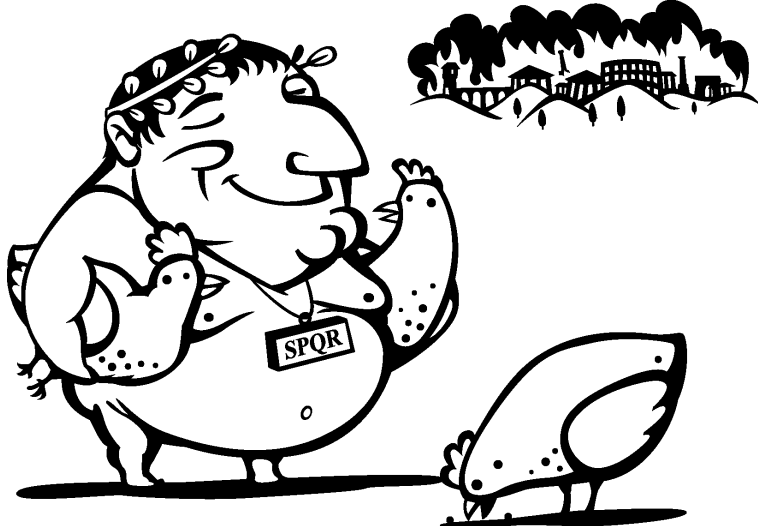
One of Mrs Thatcher's most outstanding gifts was the ability to effect a brilliant interweaving of power and language into a form of communication with which no communication was possible...Thatcherism was distinctive for the originality and effectiveness of its manner of communicating: like an adept schizogene, it gave the impression of participating in a communicative exchange, when in reality the messages were all one-way.

Ryan 2002: 118 & 120

...there are those of us working in the area of education who see the social project underway as destructive of values that are essential to our practices and indeed to the very fabric of our moral and social lives.

Loughlin 2002: 105

On occasion, jaw-dropping ironies such as the sponsorship of a medical ethics centre by a tobacco



the competitive market ethos of managerialism stops at the free & open discussion of competing views of managerial competencies themselves

co company mean that the writing on the wall can not be fully hidden by the latest laminated corporate mission statement. More often, however, the negative effects of the corporate influence are accretional and cumulative and pass without sustained critique. Moral distance from the vandalism of managerial ethics is created by a combination of rhetorical and physical constructions. Thus, although the etymological root of manager is the Latin word for hand (*manus*), potted plants, abstract art, deep carpets, and other managerial paraphernalia act as a semiotic break between managerial units and hands-on 'core businesses' (whether it be teaching, doctoring etc.). In addition to these physical signs, less material but ultimately much more significant barriers are built up by managerial units through the essentially vague and platitudinous language and symbols they use: "...the greasy idiom of the profiteers." (Steiner 2001: 222)

I once witnessed a student hustings where the Labour-sponsored candidate put down the trademark question-without-apparent-end of a Socialist Worker member with the quip: "If I wanted to sell newspapers I'd have joined John Menzies." To this day I regret not having shouted out: "Then if you wanted to sell red roses, why didn't you join Interflora?" New Labour's logoised version of flower power is a good example of the 'greasy idiom'. Allied with suitably banal managerial language about customers and stake-holders, principled opposition ironically becomes difficult

exactly because there are no firmly held principles to engage with and the constant use of catchy sound-bites makes us increasingly insensitive to their inherent crassness. Ultimately unjustifiable and illogical parallels between dissimilar concepts and values are sustained by mere repetition: "...it is a perfectly routine and rather frequent equivalence that implicitly carries...a message."

(Fairclough 2000: 27) 'The power of the platitude' is used as a Trojan Mouse for managerial values that are propagated by the attritional effect euphemism has on more substantive values less amenable to translation into managerialese.

The promiscuous use of euphemisms, neologisms, and the skilful slipping into arguments of questionable, yet generally unquestioned, equivalences are key elements of the managerial approach to engineering change. In the Chinese Cultural Revolution, Chairman Mao undermined traditional values by, amongst other tactics, 'simplifying' a huge swathe of pre-existing Mandarin ideograms. This included, quite poignantly, excising a heart shape from the symbol for 'love'. In the university sector, rather than excision, the linguistic heart of education has become furred up with a corporate Esperanto that has effectively redefined meanings and associations to preclude discussions based upon professional academic values. Despite their acronyms conjuring up unthreatening images of supermarkets and fizzy drinks (for example, The Higher Education Staff Development Agency [HESDA] and the Further Education National Training Organisation [FENTO]), the language used by various education bodies has destructive effects that are intrinsically difficult to engage with.

Managerialism uses phrases: "from a language which is itself the destruction of thought...This style is not only inadequate, but a kind of virus rendering blank the minds that try to use it." (Maskell & Robinson 2001:62) The danger is more than aesthetic: "such pressures on the incipience of meaning and communication in the individual and collective subconscious, on the means of articulate speech, are gradual." (Steiner 2001: 8) As in the blurring of the pigs and humans in the conclusion of *Animal Farm*, it is only near its end point, and when it is too late to change things that one tends to see how cumulative pressure creates qualitative change.

Chase the indicator & Who will audit the auditors?

The risk of audit is not simply that it does not work and leads to fatal remedies, although one can assemble evidence for this. Rather, it is that, in the process of continuous movement and reform that it generates, it is also impossible to know when it is justified and effective...audit has put itself beyond empirical knowledge about its own effects in favour of a constant programmatic affirmation of its potential.

Powers 1997: 142

The practical consequence of the spread of managerial language is that substantive political discourse based upon ethical judgements and values becomes subordinate to the mestastic growth of league tables and performance indicators as more and more areas of public life join in a game of "chase the indicator."⁴ In a classic case of 'the emperor has no clothes', however, the competitive market ethos of managerialism stops at the free and open discussion of competing views of managerial competencies themselves. Powers (1997) provides a detailed analysis of how much managerial activity becomes self-validating and legitimising. It rarely seems to be pointed out that managerial ethics do not work by any meaningful measures of success. 'Meaningful' is obviously a highly disputable term. I define it as the situation whereby outputs can be judged in terms that have a basis beyond the very system that produced them. This practical criticism of managerial ethics is thus grounded on the fact it has no substantive outputs beyond its own frame of reference. This is the tactical sleight of hand that makes the audit culture within our schools, universities, and hospitals so difficult to refute rationally. The double irony of the success of politically motivated audit-

ing is that it presents itself as apolitical and is premised upon its own lack of accountability. On the third level of the ironic tier, attempts to point out the ironies are met with the claim that one is being 'unrealistic'.

The inability of managerialism to provide demonstrable evidence of its own success leads to an attempt to make everything part of its frame. Its hitherto successful strategy seems to be that if it is in a state of constant movement no one will notice its fatal flaw (as if in a glass-topped carriage the naked emperor hurtles past too quickly for his nudity to be proved). This produces an educational variant of the economic theory known as Gresham's law which states that bad money drives out good. Thus, the number of First Class degrees awarded by universities is used as a performance measurement in university league tables, yet politicians disingenuously express indignation if anyone has the temerity to highlight the subsequently perfectly logical market-driven tendency of universities to increase their number of Firsts to improve their marketability. As A-Level students have recently found out to their cost, 'quality' becomes an actuarial category to be manipulated rather than actually achieved.

The meta-irony of managerialism is that, like politicians criticising firefighters as completely unrealistic when they are only claiming pay increases of the same percentage as the politicians have awarded themselves (and in absolute terms much, much, less), the proponents of managerialism are seemingly immune to measurement themselves. This can be seen by the following examples of managerial expansion without concomitant results:

The NHS—in the first 5 years of NHS reforms (1989-1994): administrative staff increased by 18,000 whilst nursing staff fell by 27,000.

The BBC—seven years of Lord Birt's reforms led to a doubling of management with 26% of staff being managers.

The National Audit Office—a ten-fold increase in expenditure on 'management consultancy services' between 1987-8 and 1995-6.

(see Protherough & Pick 2002: 16-17)

As Charlton (2002) points out, in the private sector the need for profitability works as a natural brake upon the managerial function, within non-commercial environments such as the universities, however, the only limit to managerial expansion appears to be the depth of academics' gullibility.

The myths of managerialism and the great transferable skills swindle

...the mechanical abstractions of managerialism do not merely distort, but actually come to replace the evidence of the senses within the managerial world.

Protherough & Pick 2002: 45

Any skills...are so called just because they can't be transferred. Learn how to mend your car engine and you will also learn how to work out the difference between stress and beat in English sixteenth-century metrics. As one trying to do both I assure you that neither gives any assistance at all with the other.

Maskell & Robinson 2001: 79

As we have already seen with the potted-plants syndrome, one of the ironies of the business world is that despite its hard-nosed 'real-world' rhetoric it frequently tends to be much more divorced from reality than the tallest ivory tower. Managerialism suffers from the same type of institutionalised irrationality that has historically accompanied the market system. From the tulip fever of 1630s Amsterdam⁵ and the South Sea bubble of the 1720s to the dot.com collapse of more recent times, myths, rhetoric, and plain wishful thinking dominate the managerialist mind-set to produce inefficient, counter-productive and at times surreal results. Thus, despite the rhetoric of the knowledge economy as a key rationale for the expansion of higher education, the majority of managerial policies serve to undermine the very qualities of ingenuity and creativity one would think are necessary to be internationally competitive in the new global economic order. This much-vaunted

concept actually serves to disguise the fact that, despite its nominal 'real-world' focus, it actually squeezes out useful knowledge. A true understanding of real, complex situations is neglected in favour of the abstract information it has prepared in large quantities to fit its pre-existing and ultimately stultifying models, business plans, and spreadsheets.

The negative consequences of this displacement of knowledge by managerial information are reflected in the misguided strategies it produces. Ryan (2002) cogently describes how, since Margaret Thatcher, successive British governments have engaged in a project of pressuring the university sector to train future employees rather than generally creative and well-rounded citizens. He points out that this has been informed by the mentality of a Taylorist manufacturing-based outlook just when there has been a paradigm shift towards a postindustrial world that will require those generally well-educated students rather than trained workers whose specific skills become quickly dated. At one point in this process he describes how: "The dawning realisation that epochal transformations in the constitutional fabric were being made by people who were assertively ignorant of the absolute basics of what they were dealing with was, to this writer, cause for great perplexity." (Ryan 2002: 129) Put more bluntly, even within the narrowly utilitarian appreciation of education the managerial approach has missed UK Plc.'s urgently needed strategic targets with an amnesiac's sense of timing and the marksmanship of Mr Magoo.

The recent history of UK Plc. provides a particular cautionary tale for those eager to promote the mythical concept of transferable skills throughout Higher Education. Managers have indeed succeeded in transferring their skills across a range of industrial and public sector organisations with great alacrity and corresponding financial reward but without the corollary of easily identifiable gains. Gerald Corbett of Railtrack was formerly the head of a hotel group before he attempted to transfer his managerial 'skills' to the railways and despite the ensuing debacle walked away from the Railtrack with a golden handshake worth more than one million pounds. Continuing the trend Lord Birt, formerly of the BBC, has also managed to use his experience of a large media organisation to become an advisor on transport policy...need I elaborate?

This myth of transferable skills lies behind the rise of managers as the new Jacobins. They promote the basic category error of conflating such fundamentally different activities as education and training and seek to reduce the status of the former to the latter. If any readers do doubt their innate difference then think about the different parental responses that would accompany a child's announcement upon returning home to announce that they had received either sex education or sex training at school. Training is undoubtedly an important part of any advanced economy, but the overwhelming supremacy of its terms in education today is steadily eroding away any basis from which the managerial approach can be criticised. If we all accept that we're trainees rather than educated people then the path to power of the managerial cadres is unobstructed. Academics and the rest of the population interested in the values of education shoot themselves in the foot when they allow the managerial terminology of training to enter education: "Education, in proportion as it becomes particular, ceases to be education." Maskell & Robinson 2001: 29)

If you tell a lie ...make sure it's a big one

...the selling of audit has not taken place modestly: audit is a practice which in every sphere where it operates must necessarily talk up expectations at the very same time as it may suffer from so doing...the 'expectations gap' is not so much a problem for auditing as its constitutive principle. More generally, the audit explosion has actually closed off avenues of official scepticism and modesty...

Power 1997: 144

The ability of managerialism to prevent the vari-

ous internal contradictions identified above from being scrutinised more forcefully is based upon a combination of two closely related factors that draw upon the rhetorical ploys delineated earlier: The strategic use of banal platitudes.

The deliberate over-extension of metaphorical constructions—metaphor fatigue.

Applying auditing's own penchant for measurement to managerial practices highlights blatant anomalies that threaten to test the elastic properties of managerial euphemisms to snapping point. The inherent contradiction of the audit principle that Power highlights above is that despite being an activity premised upon accurate measurement, it nevertheless has an inherent need to exaggerate its ability to make such measurements so that its own performance is immune from such assessment. This is part of the process we have previously seen identified as audit's need for constant movement and it tends to take the form of assertions of its potential rather than actual evidence of its efficacy. This ruse to distract from closer scrutiny seems based upon a combination of two parallel strategies:

The expansion of auditing into more and more inappropriate areas of society's activities.

Building upon this ubiquity of audit and a large number of people's complicity in it to make claims so large that the stakes are raised for anyone who wishes to point out the sheer irrationality of the situation (the silence of the crowd in the face of the emperor's nudity).

The result within education of this strategy of distraction from auditing's self-examination is the creation of bad faith and double standards of which Estelle Morris was an unfortunate embodiment. Under the Government's political slogan of 'Education, Education, Education' this former Secretary of State for Education took more than one attempt to gain seven O-Levels and then failed all her A-Levels including the largely preparation-free multiple choice test of General Studies.⁶ More than just a gibe at a Minister's intellectual ability this goes straight to the issue of the way in which managerial ethics depends upon an uneven application of the 'quality' it promotes. An unwillingness to question fundamentally the intellectual credibility of both the dogma and its proponents lies behind the ability of managerialism to superimpose itself over the professional standards of not just academics, but also such groups as over-managed doctors (see Loughlin 2002) and creative sectors of the BBC. Professional practices are supplanted by the values of intellectually inferior, parasitical, but strategically more adept operators. Managerial ideas need to be opposed on not only intellectual grounds but within their own terms where the internal contradictions identified above are blatant and therefore of most embarrassment to these operators.

Conclusion

...the total mobilization of all media for the defense of the established reality has coordinated the means of expression to the point where communication of transcending contents becomes technically impossible. The spectre that has haunted the artistic consciousness since Mallarme—the impossibility of speaking a non-reified language, of communicating the negative—has ceased to be a spectre. It has materialized.

Marcuse 1968: 68

That *The Office* does in fact accurately describe a real social phenomenon was neatly illustrated in a surreal recent Whitehall event where the pop music impresario Pete Waterman lectured top Civil Service Mandarins on how to identify and nurture new talent. In an incident much can be learnt from: "One bewildered civil servant is alleged to have asked aloud: 'Mr Waterman, why are you here?'"⁷ Managerial ethics are irredeemably vapid and tautologous but, by both sins of omission and commission, workers, voters and citizens across UK Plc. greatly enhance the managerial vandals' destructive power. We need to imitate the anonymous civil servant and show a similar level of basic incredulity, and a subsequent willingness to challenge the managerial Emperor's

nudity. It is perhaps our last thin defence against all becoming like characters from either *The Office* or *The Project*. Mind you, in *The Office* David Brent got sacked, in UK Plc. he'll probably end up designing our transport policy...

Notes

1. University of Edinburgh job advert for 3 School Administrators, THES 20.9.02 pg47.
2. Advert in the *Sunday Times' Appointments* section, 20.10.2002, pg1.
3. "Teachers wanting to be head face leadership course", Rebecca Smithers and Lucy Ward, *The Guardian*, 24.10.2002, p7.
4. A phrase used in a THES letter by Roderick Martin and cited in Ryan (2002:128)
5. For a fictional portrayal of this period see Deborah Moggach's *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (Vintage Books)
6. A journalistic critique of this situation is provided in "Do A-Levels matter? Not in politics" Catherine Bennett *Guardian G2 Section* 29.11.01 pg 5—with a similar sentiment evident in an under graduate student's perspective on Ms Morris's reaction to the A-Level fixing scandal of Sept 2002: "The expression on Estelle Morris's face on the front page of yesterday's *Daily Telegraph* looked hauntingly familiar. It is exactly the same expression as I wore last year, when, on opening my last A-Level French exam paper, I realised that it was beyond my limited capabilities. (*The Daily Telegraph* letters page 21.09.02)
7. 'Fool Britannia' Alexis Petridis Thursday August 1, 2002 *The Guardian* <<http://www.guardian.co.uk>>

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