

# Welcome to Zombie U

## ***The Toxic University: Zombie leadership, academic rock stars, and neoliberal ideology* by John Smyth**

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Reviewed by Barry Down



Sometimes a book comes along that demands to be read. John Smyth's defiantly entitled book *The Toxic University: Zombie leadership, academic rock stars, and neoliberal ideology* is one of them. John Smyth who has spent the best part of forty years working inside universities is a critical sociologist of education, prolific author and academic dissident. Ironically, it has been in academic 'retirement' that Smyth has found the time to write this carefully crafted critique of what's happening to modern universities and those who inhabit them.

Smyth sets himself the ambitious task of addressing three essential questions: Why have academics been so compliant in acquiescing to the construction of universities as marketplaces? When universities are conceived in econometric terms, what is the effect, and what kind of consequences flow? And have universities become toxic places in which to work? (p. 2).

This is certainly a book for its time as Australian universities face an increasingly precarious future both financially and intellectually. The recent Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee's Report into the Higher Education Support Legislation Amendment (A More Sustainable, Responsible, Responsive and Transparent Higher Education System) Bill 2017 provides a pertinent backdrop to Smyth's book.

The Senate report recommends further funding cuts and fee increases for students in order to create a more sustainable and transparent university sector. In response, the NTEU released a statement arguing that the report should be given 'a big fail' because it not only lacks any critical analysis of the crucial issues confronting universities but disregards evidence from staff, students and universities about the impact on student services, staffing levels, job security and class sizes.

In this context, Smyth's book provides a well-timed intervention by undertaking the kind of critical analysis that appears to be beyond the political elite, university managers and many academics. The central contention of this well-argued provocation is that neoliberalism has come to shape all aspects of social life including

universities. As a consequence, universities are being construed like any other private company as they are absorbed into neoliberalism's orbit of commodification, competition, commercialisation and vocationalisation.

What concerns Smyth most is the manner in which this failed neoliberal experiment is viewed as the primary arbiter of decisions about the ways in which social life should be organised and, by extension how universities should be run. In short, neoliberalism has successfully sold the view that there is no alternative and resistance is futile. Even the International Monetary Fund (IMF), one of the chief cheerleaders of neoliberalism, has recently admitted that this forty-year experiment has been oversold even on its own economic terms of promoting growth.

The paradox, according to Smyth, is that cuts to university funding advocated by neoliberalism and its functionaries in universities, create the crisis to begin with and then presents itself as the only possible solution. This means more cuts couched in the contemporary jargon of greater efficiencies, accountability, transparency, productivity and flexibility. In the real world, however, this usually means restructuring and redundancies; campus closures; bullying and other forms of intimidation; deteriorating staff morale and wellbeing; intensification of workloads; metrification of academic labour; a growing divide between management and academics; rising levels of casualisation; and excessive administrative burdens.

In addition, we also have some universities pursuing unprecedented union busting (anti-collective) tactics with a view to terminating Enterprise Bargaining Agreements (e.g., conditions, rights, protections, and academic freedom), litigating against union officials, banning on campus protests, inhibiting collective meetings and creating a culture of fear.

Smyth contends that these neoliberal remedies come from the playbook of the Chicago Boys, a group of University of Chicago-trained economists opposed to socialist ideas and governments. They were instrumental in laying the groundwork for the overthrow of the Allende government in Chile which was replaced by the Pinochet

regime and its prescription of punitive austerity programs that quickly resonated with governments around the western world.

Smyth argues that these toxic policies provided the foundation for governments to withdraw funding from public institutions like universities. This means less money for teaching and research, more efficiency dividends, increased costs for students and less time for scholarly pursuits. He argues that these cost-cutting policies have profoundly damaged the social fabric of universities because they erode traditional forms of collegiality, critical inquiry, academic freedom, dissent, social criticism and democratic governance and instead, are usurped by pathological and unethical forms of corporate managerialism and Zombie leadership.

He adopts the discomfiting metaphor of Zombies – people who appear to be alive but are actually dead – to describe the ways in which university leaders deploy managerial practices borrowed from the corporate world to manage scholarly endeavour. The danger, according to Smyth, is that university leaders have acquiesced to a set of management practices which have no credibility or legitimacy because they 'derive from mystical econobabble (Denniss, 2016) that have no foundation to them in any efficacious reality' (p. 86). Nonetheless, there is a certain rational irrationality about the ways in which university leaders (and staff) buy into these practices which simply serve to reinforce command and control approaches derived from the scientific management principles of Taylorism. This has been ably abetted by a flourishing human resource industry and growing cadre of managers who increasingly depend on strategic and costly advice from legal and accounting conglomerates.

In this context, Smyth argues that academic identities are being refashioned by a set of alien buzz words (e.g., best practices, efficiency, quality, benchmarking, outputs, markets, customers, operational plans, accountability, flexibility and so on) which mean everything and yet nothing but provide university leaders with 'a ring of credibility and a reality and legitimacy that they would not otherwise have' (p.86). It is in this context, that Smyth provides a potent critique of a host of managerial practices related to target setting, rankings, outputs, excellence, quality and impact all of which are justified on the basis of enhancing the university's brand and reputation in the market place.

Whilst there is a growing awareness among many academics that something is seriously awry with our universities, there is far less understanding of the causes and consequences. Smyth's analysis adds a significant new dimension to these debates by bringing a critical sensibility to the problem. Especially compelling is his description of the effects on academic labour as evidenced through a detailed account of the tragic death of Professor Stefan Grimm, a professor of toxicology in the Department of Medicine, Imperial College London, who took his own life on 25 September 2014 after being threatened with performance management procedures because he was deemed not to have brought in sufficient 'prestigious' grant money to the university. Based on this sad event, Smyth identifies a set of key lessons by invoking Paul Taylor's critique of 'rampant managerialism' to confront the proliferation of 'petty bureaucracy and anti-professional controls that are rife within higher education' (p. 166).

Finally, Smyth provides a comprehensive review of a mounting body of literature (over 100 books) which critiques the contemporary university. Under the umbrella of the 'toxic university', he organises this annotated analysis around four emergent themes: (i) 'damage, despair, violence and sense of loss'; (ii) the rise of the marketised, corporate, managed, administrative, neoliberal university'; (iii) 'rampant confusion and loss of way'; and lastly (iv) 'attempts at reclamation, re-invention, re-imagination and recovery from this ill-conceived experiment'.

Smyth's major contribution lies in his powerful critique of current policy trajectories and based on this set of understandings how we might begin the thoughtful work of reclaiming an alternative social imagery of the university based on the principles of democracy, social justice, respect, and critical engagement.

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## Reference

Denniss, R. (2016). *Econobabble: How to decode political spin and economic nonsense*. Collingwood, VIC: Black Inc.