

From Bad Apples to Zombies? Walking Dead Leadership in the Contemporary University

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I put my hand up, I accessed adult sites; mistakes I know... I can't do anything other than plead stupidity.

Richard Higgott (former Vice Chancellor of Murdoch University)

I admit it. I want the world to be different. I want our universities to be different. Throughout my life in higher education, I have walked into rooms filled with empowered men twenty, thirty, and forty years older than me. I felt the Generation Xer anger – the disgust – in not holding any power and yet being a silent conspirator to the bullying, the lies, the injustices, the foolishness, the incompetence, the short-termism, and the thought bubbles that masquerade as vision statements.

I have waited for the generational transformation. But still, after all these decades, I still walk into too many rooms where baby boomers hold the power, title, and purse strings. I now hold a bit more of that power. But I am a woman and a Generation Xer. When I hold power, it is in a succession of 'glass cliff' posts.¹ I had hoped for more. I worked for change. But instead, the suits of those old men have been refitted on the younger. I want leadership to have a story. I want it to have meaning and purpose beyond a Key Performance Indicator, strategic plans, and vision statements. I have failed. I continue to fail. We must be honest: the 'leadership' situated in international higher education is – simply – extraordinary. This article draws the arrow between 'bad apple' leaders and institutionalized zombie leadership. The arrow is then fired, traversing the meaninglessness, incompetence, confusion, and apocalyptic rituals of our universities. I explore what happens when higher education is foreclosed, and we prepare for the university at the end of the world.

Just a Bad Apple?

Sex. Corruption. Lies. Stupidity. The Western Australian Corruption and Crime Commission, after investigating the Vice Chancellorship of Professor Richard Higgott at Murdoch University, a medium sized university based in the southern suburbs of Perth in Western Australia, found an array of irregularities, oddities, and stupidities.² With Higgott's regular visits to adult – but legal – sites, he put the 'vice' into vice chancellor. What is startling about the CCC's findings is that the Commission was surprised by the behavior of senior managers in universities. The investigation of Higgott revealed a pattern of patronage, including jobs bestowed to friends and acquaintances, interventions in shortlists and managerial excesses through entertainment expenses. Higgott needed to acknowledge his mistakes and 'stupidity.' But by investigating one individual and one institution, the rotten apple strategy, of sustaining the power of the powerful by blaming one individual for bad behavior, was perpetuated.

Professor Higgott retaliated on July 6, 2016 with an article in the Higher Education section of *The Australian*. He confirmed that it was and is "standard practice" for Vice Chancellors to

interact with prospective appointees.³ Whenever a phrase is used like ‘standard practice,’ or ‘everyone does this,’ a technique of neutralization⁴ has been activated. This phrase, concept and argument was developed by Sykes and Matza in the *American Sociological Review* in 1957. It describes how poor decisions, illegal behavior, corruption, and deviancy of any kind are justified. ‘Everyone’ does not smoke marihuana, watch pornography, or illegally download music. The point being made by Higgott - that was not lost on higher education journalists - is that he was not a ‘bad apple.’ Indeed, *Campus Watch* confirmed,

As events at Murdoch University clearly show, more oversight rather than less is needed to ensure transparency and due processes are followed. While new VC Eeva Leinonen has promised commitment to “integrity, respect and professional conduct” in the wake of the release of the CCC report, it will take more than aspirational statements to right the Murdoch ship.⁵

Neoliberalism – in its many permutations – maintains two principles: deregulation, removing ‘the state’ from moderation and management of ‘public good,’ and marketization, ensuring that private corporations and businesses compete with as few legal and governance restrictions as possible. In higher education, short term labor contracts, strategic plans and performance-linked financial packages are the most easily revealed of these characteristics.⁶ At Murdoch University, these two forces of deregulation and marketization were channeled through one man: Mr David Flanagan. The Chancellor of Murdoch University who triggered and fuelled the investigations into Higgott was also the Manager Director of Atlas Iron. In 2014, he was awarded the Western Australian of the Year and the Western Australian Business Leader of the Year.⁷ One year later – in 2015 – the profits and fortunes of Atlas Iron declined sharply. In response, Mr. Flanagan resumed the Managing Directorship, increased his own remuneration, and reduced the salaries of all other board members.⁸ This was also a gendered decision. The new chairman, Cheryl Edwardes, had her salary halved. She was one of the few women managing an ASX-listed company, yet she fulfilled those responsibilities on a baseline salary.⁹

Through all the turmoil at Murdoch University during his chancellorship and the problems confronting Atlas Iron, Mr Flanagan was re-instated for another three-year term at Murdoch. It is difficult to imagine a university confronting a more damaging series of events. The Vice Chancellor was reported to the Corruption and Crimes Commission. The Chancellor was renewed for a three-year term. Indeed, it was the Chancellor’s decision – not an institutional decision – that he would not complete a third term.¹⁰

To review the story so far. An academic leader of a university was removed from office. He was configured as a ‘bad apple’ in senior executive management within higher education. A chief mining executive who was appointed the chancellor and removed the ‘bad apple’ remained at the University until he decided he would not continue to a third term in the post. The starkness and irrationality of these tumbling decisions “has raised questions on the authenticity of leadership behavior and style.”¹¹ Such behaviors are not only personally damaging, but shred organizational culture, branding, and profile. Instead of confronting how this mess was created, and with the ‘support’ of Chancellor Flanagan and Murdoch’s Senate, the CCC stated that, “If they ever were, universities are no longer leafy and leisurely hubs of academic research and teaching but also businesses to be operated according to modern principles of efficiency, fairness and sound industrial relations.”¹² Universities are funded by public money. While this level of public support is declining, this financial support requires that all dealings – industrial or otherwise – at a university are transparent. Regulation and governance are required. However, universities are much more than a mining company or ‘businesses to be operated according to modern principles of efficiency.’ Teaching and learning are not efficient. Research is loss-leading in most disciplines, most of the time. Universities are markedly different from a bank, a food retailer, or a mine. Their ‘business’ is knowledge, teaching, and learning. Currently, anti-intellectual men (and a few women) occupy the role of chancellor. They lack high-level qualifications, experience, and expertise in teaching and learning. They do not research and hold no research

expertise. One contemporary example is Julie Bishop, the Chancellor at the Australian National University (ANU). A former deputy leader of the Liberal Party, she represented a parliamentary seat in Western Australia and completed a law degree at Adelaide University. Her twenty-year parliamentary career is connoted as the experience and expertise required for this role, while also noting she is the first female Chancellor of ANU since it was founded in 1946. Considering that business and politics are the most common background of Chancellors, what is their function? Is an academic council or its equivalent acting as a board of directors for a publicly-listed company? Without clarity in the Chancellor's function, they are currently imposing a very specific rendering of managerialism through gatekeeping Vice Chancellors. The "STEM-ification of Education" is an attempt to 'reform' universities to slot into the needs of 'business.'¹³ The paradox emerges in and through neoliberalism. Universities require powerful and clear governance protocols to ensure that degrees are not bought and sold. Money cannot buy a qualification. Money cannot buy the entrance to a university if intelligence and academic results are lacking. Therefore, a university can never operate on 'modern principles of efficiency.' Learning, achievement, and excellence are not for sale.

Not surprisingly, the tale does not end here. Under a new Vice Chancellor, Murdoch University soon confronted another scandal. Poor leadership is never a matter of 'bad apples.' It signifies caustic structures, cancerous visions, and zombie appointment protocols. With unfortunate publicity impacting on the enrolments of students, an investigative journalist with the ABC's Four Corner's program discovered that aberrances were emerging in the enrolment of international students with regard to their admission and the marking of their papers throughout their degree programs. One of the informants for the program, Associate Professor Gerd Schroder-Turk, was sued by Murdoch University. The grounds for this legal action was that the University sought compensation for a loss of student numbers after the irregularities were revealed. Schroder-Turk was a member of Murdoch's Senate, and this was used as the foundation for the claim. Instead of confronting the core issue of irregularities in the admissions and progression of international students, legal action was commenced against an individual staff member who was individually blamed and sued for a decline in university enrollments.¹⁴ This publicity resulted an array of high-profile complaints, a visiting professor resigning from Murdoch,¹⁵ and online commentary through social media adding to the pressure and problems. With thousands of signatures, the university finally ceased the financial damages component of the legal proceeding.¹⁶ Murdoch University removed a 'bad apple' Vice Chancellor replacing him – perhaps predictably – with a woman, Professor Eeva Leinonen. Yet the problems, the dissonance, the errors, and confusions at Murdoch continue. There are no bad apples. There are zombie structures.

This article is not a justification of Professor Richard Higgott's behavior. It is not a celebration of the role of the Crime and Corruption Commission in discovering and shaming a wayward vice chancellor. Instead, I remain interested in the clash of cultures between patronage and governance, scholarship and performance management, excellence, and efficiency. I argue that zombie leadership – rather than a series of 'bad apples' - is a lens through which to understand contemporary higher education. When Stephen Hacker published his famous study – "Zombies in the workplace" – he focussed on zombie workers.¹⁷ He described a disconnected, bored, and disenchanted group of employees. In many ways, this analysis was a replaying of Marx's alienated proletariat, but with popular cultural credibility. My interpretation of organizational culture in this article is distinct. I focus – squarely and without flinching – at the zombie leadership in higher education. When seeing titles like Chancellor, Vice Chancellor, Pro Vice Chancellor, Dean, and Professor, there is an expectation of knowledge, authenticity, credibility, skill, and expertise. Yet often, these are now zombie leadership titles, filled with toxicity, brutality, and rudimentary business principles. This textbook, bullet-pointed neoliberalism is not my target in this article. John Smyth's The Toxic University accomplished this task with relish and panache.¹⁸ I affirm Smyth's argument that autonomy in research and teaching has been crushed. Conversely though, I do not celebrate unregulated, anti-statist academia. This patronage model of scholarship was male, white, colonizing, and heteronormative. Anti-statism is not a medication to neoliberalism.

State-based regulation can and does offer an intervention in the heteronormative ‘business’ of the university. The ill-focussed neoliberal concepts – market forces, competition, and KPIs – are not functional in a university environment because teaching and learning will always cost more than the delivery of a conventional service. Research, particularly lab-based and clinical research, is incredibly expensive and only reveals results in the long-term, if ever. Decades of research in surface science is required to create effective interventions in additive manufacturing. This article stands for governance, state regulation, and international standards. It walks a different path from Smyth. Yes, universities can be – and frequently are – toxic workplaces. But the recognition that the very definition of university leadership is a zombie concept creates much more damage than toxicity in working conditions. Inelegant andragogical strategies manage the widening participation agenda. Fordist learning management systems, that were obsolete before their installation on the institutional server, are imposed on curricula. Research metrics are deployed that are completely inappropriate to the majority of disciplines.

Neoliberalism is not to blame for the toxic daily rhythms, choices, and expectations. That is the point. Neoliberalism, post the Global Financial Crisis, is also a zombie concept. What is happening in higher education is deeper, more disturbing, and normalized. While located within Critical University Studies, and recognizing “neoliberalism’s stealth revolution,”¹⁹ this article is also situated in an uncomfortable scholarly reality. As Filip Vostal confirmed, “the more critique there is of the neoliberal takeover of the university, the more neoliberal academia gets.”²⁰ Therefore, this article does not offer grand statements of resistance. It offers a targeted theorization of what leadership means in the contemporary university.

To provide a theory of leadership in higher education, I reactivate Ulrich Beck’s zombie concept to diagnose the shambling sickness in our institutions. I enact this process with the goal of reimagining and reimagining of higher education as part of critical university studies. However, I do not value or validate cosmopolitan sociology that was the frame for Beck’s work. One of the key reasons why neoliberalism has survived after the Global Financial Crisis is that intellectual tools have not been appropriate to build an alternative model. This article is part of a much wider and deeper intellectual shift: from cosmopolitan sociology to claustropolitan cultural studies.²¹ This paper moves through a discussion of the zombie, traversing Beck’s zombie categories and concepts,²² and then activating the theorization of zombie leadership within the claustropolitan university.²³ We finish with death (obviously) and summon the university at the end of the world.

Zombies Studies

Zombies have been selected with intent in this article to scaffold a new interpretation of leadership. It is more than a metaphor. Derived from the lowest of low culture – horror films, gaming, and comic books – they are part of a suite of claustropolitan popular culture²⁴ that proclaims the end of the world. Best captured by Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* and updated with a comedic twist through *Shaun of the Dead* and the *Zombieland* franchise, and in the brutalist high popular cultural form via *The Walking Dead*, the white walkers also make key appearances in *Game of Thrones*, and *Breaking Bad*. This is a post-apocalyptic future. The past walks through – and decays in – the present. This decaying past then infiltrates and infects the future. The dead live amongst us and want to kill us. Shawn McIntosh confirmed that,

The unique balancing act that zombies represent between control and enslavement, strength and weakness, us and them, and group versus individual identity offers a window into better understanding why we enjoy the horror genre in particular and how we perceive ourselves and certain aspects of popular culture in general.²⁴

The death of a zombie is brutal, killed through brain trauma. From this violent attack on the already dead, a bite creates another zombie. The contagion is spread through contact. This is a

resonant method of proliferation in our present. This simplicity summons the zombie trope in unusual ways.²⁶ Simon Orpana noted that “the zombie reproduces through consumption, not procreation.”²⁷ Life is consumed and toxicity is perpetuated and enlarged.

Zombie narratives have two endings: all zombies are killed or all humans are killed. This binary is then punctuated by a perpetual displacement of this ending. Every post-apocalypse signals a rebirth.²⁸ Zombie time is cyclical, not linear. This necropower holds an ontological function. Toni Negri and Felix Guattari stated that, “politics today is nothing more than the expression of the domination of dead structures over the entire range of living production.”²⁹ With the increasing scholarly interest in zombies, innovative theorizations are emerging in our understandings of work, family, truth, and power after the Global Financial Crisis. Indeed, as Si Sheppard confirmed, “what can zombies tell us about what we really need to know: how to get by after the total collapse of modern post-industrial civilization?”³⁰ Zombies have not remained satiated in low popular culture. They are shuffling – relentlessly - through metaphors and tropes, infiltrating politics, high theory, and economics. Together a tentative, shambling but fascinating *Zombie Studies*³¹ is emerging. The undead enable thought experiments about bodies, consciousness, and identity. For this article, they provide a mechanism to understand leadership. Therefore, the next stage of this article transforms “zombie” from a noun and into an adjective, to explore Ulrich Beck’s zombie concept, with the imperative to explore how leadership operates within a university sector lacking a vision and purpose.

Zombie Categories and Concepts and the end of Cosmopolitanism

Ulrich Beck’s zombie concept first appeared in interviews with Beck in 2000 and was used interchangeably with zombie categories. An interview between Beck and Jonathan Rutherford, published in 2000, captured the early configurations of this idea.³² Rutherford described this term as a combination of “sociology and horror.”³³ In this interview, Rutherford offered a concise definition of the term.

There is a paradox. Changes are occurring faster in people’s consciousness than in their behaviour and social conditions. This mixture of new consciousness and old conditions has created what he [Beck] describes as *Zombies categories* – social forms such as class, family or neighbourhood, which are dead, yet alive.³⁴

Beck presented his interpretation through examples: “family, class and neighbourhood.”³⁵

JR: Zombies are the living dead. Do you mean that these institutions are simply husks that people have abandoned?

UB: I think people are more aware of the new realities than the institutions are. But at the same time, if you look at the findings of empirical research, family is still extremely valued in a very classical sense. Sure there are huge problems in family life, but each person thinks that he or she will solve all those problems that their parents didn’t get right.³⁶

This selection of examples is important. Zombie concepts like ‘family’ were integral to the cosmopolitan sociology world view. Cosmopolitanism was a way for Beck to overcome what he termed “methodological nationalism,”³⁷ which referred to “internal globalization, globalization from within the national societies.”³⁸ As the concept began being used by other scholars, the nation-state within globalization was the key example.³⁹ The rationale for their use is more complex. While the social purpose of these concepts has been lost, something is gained from their maintenance. They are terms of safety, understanding, and compliance. In moving into a claustropolitan cultural studies, not only are the more predictable ‘family’ and ‘nation’ reconfigured

as zombie concepts, so are ‘universities’ and ‘leadership.’

Through the lightning rod political period of 2001 and 2002, Beck’s concept juttred from his longer-term exploration on “reflexive modernity” as he stressed the plurality of poststructuralism.⁴⁰ He argued that there is a new rendering of modernity, “a new kind of capitalism, a new kind of labour, a new kind of everyday life, and a new kind of state are in the making.”⁴¹ The optimism and hope of cosmopolitan sociology saturate this sentence.

I think we are living in a society, in a world, where our basic sociological concepts are becoming what I call ‘zombie categories.’ Zombie categories are ‘living dead’ categories which govern our thinking but are not really able to capture the contemporary milieu. In this situation I don’t think it’s very helpful only to criticize normal sociology, and to deconstruct it. What we really need is to redefine, reconstruct and restructure our concepts and our view of society.⁴²

Beck recognized the globalizing change, yet he affirmed that a better society was emerging. His analytical error was to enfold this realization into cosmopolitan sociology. He did not see that cosmopolitan sociology was in itself a zombie category, eaten alive by claustropolitanism. The zombie concept, for Beck, is tethered to ‘the state’ and therefore is rigid, dominating, and a problem. Cosmopolitan sociology has a tendency towards anti-statism, through its commitment to community, multiculturalism, and organic and authentic connections between groups. But this rendering is narrow and can bleed into a critique of public health, public education, regulation, and governance. This mode of anti-statism created the political space for neoliberalism. Once the state was removed from regulation and management of public good, the flow and mobility so welcomed by the cosmopolitan sociologists such as Ulrich Beck, John Urry, Scott Lash, and Anthony Giddens was used to move capital without regulation but block the movement of people. The building of walls between nations and Brexit are two of the more visible examples.

If reconfigured in claustropolitanism, rather than cosmopolitanism, then dystopia, catastrophe, and the post-apocalyptic reality of work, health, energy, food, and water can be understood. Claustropolitanism transforms our understanding of beginnings and endings, with a sharp recalibration of globalization. The insolvency of ideas, the reduction in both standards and regulation, creates a space where Key Performance Indicators and stretch targets replace discussions of quality. Outputs, metrics, and leader boards attempt to measure and reify complex discussions of teaching and learning. Therefore, a recalibration of the zombie concept, recognizing how normative terms have been emptied of meaning through the widening participation agenda, September 11, the War on Terror, and the Global Financial Crisis, results in a revisioning of the University. *Zombie Studies* – appropriately – relentlessly attacks the bizarre, the grotesque, the unfathomable, and the frightening to understand higher education at the end of the world.

Zombie Leadership in Claustropolis

The key application and transformation of Beck’s concept that I summon in this paper is zombie leadership. When the word ‘leadership’ is used, it still carries familiarity – like the zombie’s body – yet when investigating the contents, they are not only surprising but toxic, dangerous, and contagious. Moving from a cosmopolitan to a claustropolitan frame, this is leadership that forecloses alternatives, shrinks the spaces for critique, and activates a precariat workforce. My argument is framed and shaped by ultra-realist criminology and deviant leisure paradigms. As Thomas Raymen and Oliver Smith have confirmed, our time is punctuated by “meta-crises of liberal capitalism,” “harmful subjectivities,” and “normalised harm.”⁴³ Instead of deviant leisure, I twist these theories to the deviant university. Researchers, teachers, and professional staff believe we know what happens in ‘a university.’ The terms ‘professor,’ ‘dean’ and ‘vice chancellor’ appear to convey meaning. But this form has been taken over, destroyed, killed, and reinhabited by deadly content. The patterns, practices, and behaviors in higher education

summon harmful subjective leadership, commodifying learning, teaching, and research while crushing freedom, choices, and education beyond the imperatives of the market. In the last twenty years, the institution has been transformed by non-researchers and non-teachers. This group actively choose to not research and teach, and enter a third stream: “academic managers.” In this absence – in this ambiguity⁴⁴ – leadership organizes, shapes, and resurrects dead ideas – like ‘quality,’ ‘employability,’ and ‘rigor’ – to summon the presence of life and movement in the institution.

Zombies crush binarized models of thought. They challenge the parameters of life and living. Most importantly, they play with the clock. Linear time is no longer a guide through the zombie apocalypse. The past, present, and future all live, breathe, walk, eat, and kill. There will not be a happy ending. There is always another Key Performance Indicator, change management initiative, and restructure. Similarly, there is always a zombie moment when the non-zombie has to choose to kill the mother, father, husband, wife, or child that has become infected or join them in zombieland. This is the decision we must make in a university. We sit through the meetings. We nod. We allow phrases like “efficiency dividends” to wash over us. Yet when sitting through these meetings, are we becoming zombies, infected by the bite of banality, mediocrity, and compliance? Leadership in universities is part of the wider institutional bureaucratization. The minutia of processes and procedures are intentionally alienating the workforce. It eats brains. It works from the assumption that the valuable is measurable. The Vice Chancellors and Academic Councils foreclose alternatives, options, and distributed leadership. This is top-down execution of power. It is a critique of regulation and governance through atomized, marketized, individualized neoliberalism. This individual scholar, research, learner, or student is supposedly free and autonomous. Yet this freedom is framed by the toxic market environment configured by post-industrial economic structures. The fetishization of employability, graduate attributes, and industry partnerships – as a mantra, objective, and outcome – perpetuates the future-fuelled narrative that university has a purpose, meaning, history, and future. Actually, it is dead. It is still moving and led by leadership that invests – deeply – in a utopic and futuristic tale of growth, efficiency, and outcomes, assessed by metrics without a history of disciplinary context.

Deindustrialization, alongside casualized and temporary jobs that were later enfolded into the term precariat,⁴⁵ resulted in cultures of bullying, humiliation, and vulnerability. Fear was and is palpable. Stanley Aronowitz wrote *The Knowledge Factory* in the year 2000.⁴⁶ His argument was that a management class, group, tier or stream had emerged in universities. These were the men and women who had failed or underperformed in teaching and research and entered management, ruling over those who had success in the spheres in which they had failed. This under-performing, anti-intellectual leadership group introduced terms, phrases and practices like key performance indicators, strategic plans, and performance management. John Smyth et al. refer to such leadership practices as a “zombie approach,”⁴⁷ moving through a script with a pre-determined outcome. Higher education leadership has been infected and replaced with processes and practices that operate in a bank or corporation. Such a process has been enabled because, as Wolfgang Streeck confirmed, there has been a “splitting of democracy from capitalism through the splitting of the economy from democracy.”⁴⁸ This “de-democratization of capitalism” has created the de-democratization of education. Leadership becomes aloof, frightening, and disturbing.

Leadership is not a series of characteristics or a checklist. It is the development and management of relationships⁴⁹ and communication systems. Indeed, zombie films like *Day of the Dead* have been used as a way to research leadership in extreme environments.⁵⁰ Institutional risk and responsibility are cascaded to a departmental level and the “manager-academic.”⁵¹ Power is maintained by the powerful. Alternatives are crushed. The consequences of this process are that disempowered groups like women ‘lead’ against their best interests. However, as Tanya Fitzgerald has argued, this process “co-opts women into neo-liberal and managerial discourses that run counter to the security of equitable outcomes.”⁵² Line management is based on the presumption that employees are in a line and managed in a linear fashion. While this configuration may operate

in banking and retail industries, higher education is based on an excellent model for teaching and research. The irrationality of line management means that individual “manager-academics” are line managing people who are better teachers and researchers than they are. What possible authority – except claustropolitanism fuelling the end of the world – could an under-performing academic hold in a managerial role? He or she is summoning a dead concept, assuming power and authority that they do not deserve and perpetuating it through fear. The power that they hold is brittle and tenuous, granted on the basis of a title, rather than ability.⁵³

Jeff Hearn, the great scholar of masculinity, marinated gender through this discussion of power.

Women were excluded from universities for much of their history. Men still dominate the highest positions in universities in most disciplines. The higher the status of the university, the more male dominated it is.⁵⁴

This gap between competency and credibility could be masked when financial conditions were buoyant. Now, misogyny is revealed with stark brutality in the zombie university. The heroic narrative of “individualism, self-governance, and patriarchal leadership”⁵⁵ is perpetuated through catastrophic restructures, change management, and relentless claims of ‘efficiency.’ The Global Financial Crisis and the cascading economic, social, health and educational traumas through COVID, confirmed that the inflated imaginings of finance capitalism, real estate capitalism, and higher education capitalism were not real or sustainable. It is no surprise that the research literature on the political economy is filled with metaphors, tropes, and theories of zombies. The literature on the university also became infected. Andrew Whelan, Ruth Walker, and Christopher Moore’s *Zombies in the Academy*⁵⁶ showed the consequences of automating and dumbing down teaching through templated learning management systems. They also reveal the pretensions of journal publishers asking universities to pay for access to publications that scholars have provided for free.

There were profound problems with the patronage model in the older universities. The solution to those problems is increased regulation and transparent governance, rather than neoliberal ideologies of deregulation and anti-statism that have been proven – time and again – to fail. The excuse to not hire women, indigenous scholars, scholars of color, and researchers and teachers with impairments during the patronage model of the university was that they lacked the qualifications and experience. Now that these groups have gained this experience and expertise, the institutions have to summon new excuses – beyond merit - to continue to hire men and the occasional woman that concur with their political perspective. Intriguingly, to enhance and enable this ideology, competition, and the market are removed from the selection process. The proliferation of executive search firms, pretending universities are hiring a CEO, and direct appointments to posts without any tethered advertisement, means that transparency of the procedure is usurped. Universities have always been institutions of patronage. White men hired other white men who went to Cambridge or Yale or Sydney or British Columbia. But this mode of patronage has changed. There is intent and will in the hiring of underqualified people with experiences so far outside of high-level scholarship that there is no connection between their professional lives and teaching and learning in a university.

The patronage model of universities cracked with fatigue. It could no longer be patched to ‘manage’ feminism, postcolonialism, anti-racism, the decline in public funding for higher education, industry ‘partnerships’, and widening participation. Universities remain a site of struggle, and the outcome of that struggle matters to the intelligence and future of our societies. So many of the stories of personal and professional attacks, ontological violence, bullying, silence and resignations are erased by and through zombie leadership. Yet some of these stories survived the apocalypse and are now being published.⁵⁷

What these emerging stories reveal is that thousands of people are infected by the incompetence of a zombie leader. The management literature has raised some key questions about the scandals and catastrophes that emerge from such decisions. As Mehta and Maheshwari

have suggested, “such occurrences have raised questions on the intentions and objectives of leaders and whether these failures were deliberate or due to the incompetence in these arrogant and impulsive leaders.”⁵⁸ When unchallenged, their behavior escalates. However, in universities, zombie leadership emerges because it is difficult to determine or locate ‘the purpose’ of the institution. Is it to ‘train workers’? Is it to be the outsourced research and development department for international corporations? Is it to mask the labour surplus? In such a gap – where the objective of a university is ambiguous – zombie leadership enters the institution, inventing mission statements, key performance indicators, and strategic plans. The speed of change⁵⁹ – through digitization, disintermediation, and deterritorialization – creates a culture of disruption, confusion and disappointment. Such ruptures result in putting “the lifeless in charge of training the life-inspired.”⁶⁰ This is a deadly metaphor, troubling and frightening in equal measure. Students arrive at a university to change their lives and improve their communities. University academics read, write, experiment, and think to enlarge the parameters of knowledge. The notions that universities have the right and the responsibility to be institutions of higher learning, sites of aspiration where the best minds of one generation instruct the next, have been lost here. This is what Guy Standing described as “the spectre of teacherless universities backed by panopticon techniques.”⁶¹ If zombie leadership continues without critique, our universities will implode. But as with the discovery of the first zombie, it is already too late. The future has been foreclosed. The content and commitment housed in a university have been killed. We live, work, learn, and research in a deadly husk with no hope. Therefore, it is appropriate to conclude this theorization of leadership in the university at the end of the world with one of these silent stories of death, silence, and Baudrillian disappearance.

A Deadly Conclusion

8am. A zombie dean summoned two tenured professors to see her. I know about this event because I was one of those professors. My companion was also known to me: my late husband, Professor Steve Redhead. Importantly, death follows us into this conclusion. The meeting request was delivered the afternoon before the 8 am meeting, with no details about its rationale or purpose. The message simply confirmed that an HR representative would also be present at the appointed time. Within a minute of our arrival, the function of the meeting became clear: to humiliate, attack, create fear, and damage our international profile. She had two agenda items for the meeting. Firstly, she wished to discuss my teaching evaluation of a first-year course that had just been released at the end of the semester. This student survey confirmed my position as the best teacher in the university. Within a minute of the meeting starting, she threw a printed copy of the review in my direction and shouted, “You are not as good as you think you are” and “Everybody gets results like this.” When I smiled at both the Dean and the HR representative, I made the obvious statement that the institutional mean delivered with my results confirmed that she was factually incorrect. The shouting continued, and she threatened me with disciplinary action for questioning her views. The HR staff member remained as quiet as Yoko Ono at the Let it Be sessions. That metaphor operates at multiple levels.

I was merely the entrée to the meat of the meeting. The zombie dean then turned to Steve Redhead and stated that she was refusing his request to attend his father’s funeral. The staff leave guidelines had rendered “compassionate leave” at the discretion of the line manager. She deployed her discretion with aplomb and concluded with a pained and pointed flourish: “all of us have personal problems, Steve.” Again, the representative from Human Resources remained silent. There was nothing to say. We filed out of the meeting with shock, horror, and confusion. When humanity and civility are ripped from the skin of our universities, the zombie leadership structure is revealed in its revulsion, repulsion, and disgust. To change metaphors, we only have to lift the lid on the Tupperware to see the rotting flesh decaying in the container. David McNally described these moments best: “the genuinely traumatic (monstrous) experiences of subjugation

and exploitation that occur when people find themselves subordinated to the market-economy.”⁶² The consequence of this meeting was profound. Steve did not attend his father’s funeral. He made peace with this decision in public. But I was sleeping with him. I remember the nightmares. The sad yelps in the night. The tired and tragic eyes in the morning. Closure is a cliché. But regret, disillusionment, and disappointment are real and acidic in their application.

As I left the Dean’s office on that cold morning – in temperament as much as temperature – I made a decision that if we ever escaped this Hotel California of a university, then I would move into academic leadership. No one in my care would have to confront the arbitrariness, the ambiguity, the fear, and the threat. But could I move from academic to academic manager? As a female academic, it is assumed I am in deficit. The white man trained in the lab-based sciences is the trusted container for leadership. They breathe gravitas. All other models and modes of leadership must be tested, trialed and questioned, assuming that they will be found wanting. I started my academic management career at one of the most lowly-ranked universities in the United Kingdom, moving to a leadership role in a regional Australian university, and I am currently a dean of graduate research. Part of the argument of this article is that I ask colleagues to consider the importance of leadership in their own lives and institutions. I want to believe that a leader can change the experience and career trajectory of students and academics. The consequences of bullying staff or sitting and doing nothing, as exhibited by that HR representative in the story that commenced this conclusion, are vast. The scale of the suicide rates – triggered by management bullying – of academics is now being revealed.⁶³

But... But... Do these individual commitments and statements matter? Those of us still – temporarily – uninfected can occupy leadership. We can – temporarily – stop the abuse, bullying, and ridicule. But this is a zombie higher education sector. The structures are sick. The learning outcomes are purulent. The strategic plans are septic. Professional development reviews are weeping wounds of irrational expectations. The KPIs are contagions. The visions are diseased.

The answer is clear. We cannot stop the toxicity. This is the insight granted through the contextualization of the zombie concept in claustropolitanism, rather than Beck’s cosmopolitanism. A better day is not coming. The future is not promised. The future is foreclosed and the present is infecting today and tomorrow. The slither of difference – the spark of hope – that is possible through a different model of educational leadership provides transitory safety. For a few academics and administrators, in a few small organizational units and for a short time, survival is possible. Hope is possible. But this is a temporary respite. The zombie apocalypse of restructures, zero-hour contracts, the precariat workforce, 360-degree reviews, amalgamations, ‘fake news,’ ‘post-truth,’ and ‘self-plagiarism’ emerge to cower workers and compress robust, independent and expansive scholarly work. Wellbeing and corporate fitness challenges are the claustropolitan replacement for social justice and inclusivity. Indeed, as the zombie dean confirmed, we all have personal problems. But we are also – concurrently - walking through the collapse of a scholarly institution with pockets of respite and perhaps a stitch of resistance.

This is a story – this is an article – of death and despair. The word story has been used intentionally. The story I have told about the zombie dean and my father-in-law’s funeral is real. But it bubbles through Baudrillard’s simulacrum, signifiers hooking and unhooking through my life. Such stories are invisible, forgotten, displaced, and silenced. In this case, the Dean’s term was not extended, and she slithered into a minor management role in a minor college after her destruction of a faculty and the lives and careers of colleagues. The Vice Chancellor who oversaw such behavior was a one-term president. The Provost at the time simply disappeared from the university one night and never returned to academia. Perhaps these endings – of walking away, silence, disappearance, humiliation, and mediocrity – are appropriate. But eight tenured professors left that university during the period of her deanship. That sentence is easy to compose on a screen. Consider the consequences on eight families, selling houses, moving schools, partners changing jobs, partners separating, and unstable finances through the stressful period of both finding and arriving at a new post. These stories are also silent. They are stories of suffering, fear, and trauma caused by one Dean who was empowered by zombie structures within a university.

But where do these stories live? Where do they fit in leadership theory or higher education studies? Surveys reveal the scale of the mental health crisis in universities. Such articles make a splash in the specialist higher education publications.⁶⁴ On a daily basis, horror stories are revealed through gossip and whispers in corridors. These stories survive in shared nods between former colleagues as they meet in airports, conferences, or carparks. LinkedIn connections continue relationships severed by destructive management practices. Significantly, the Dean, in this case, had to move countries, and from a minor university to an even more marginal college. She is still in a leadership position, albeit invisible in international higher education. As to the rest of the participants in that early morning meeting, the outcomes have not been as benevolent. Steve Redhead died of pancreatic cancer in 2018, having attained leadership posts and professorships in Australia after this incident. Unlike his father, he did not want a funeral and kept his illness a secret until I announced his death. His voice and views about zombie leadership are silenced. His story has died, with some provocative digital firesticks remaining through podcasts, videos and publishing.

What is left? What residue do such contexts and stories leave? Is this stain erased by time? The human resources staff member is still working at that university. Her views, feelings, and interpretations of this event remain unclear. But she attempted to contact us – with some urgency – after our resignations. Perhaps this was risk management. Perhaps to offer an apology. Yet she remains in work, managing the life and career of academics and professional staff, normalizing the aberrant, brutalizing, nasty and pointless. Silence is powerful.

And – at least currently – I am alive and in a position of leadership. I make an individual decision each day to behave delicately, compassionately, and carefully. People do matter. Individuals do matter. But I am part of a small band of scholars that will succumb to the zombie hoard. The weak – the compassionate – will be infected. If they are not, then they will be removed from the organization at the conclusion of their glass cliff contract, which is death of a different kind – through disappearance. And silence.

Zombies are intellectually productive. As an agent in social science fiction, they teach us about power, work, class, consumerism, gender, race, waste, and death. They show what happens when traditional authority structures corrode and collapse. Popular culture remains andragogical. It teaches, shapes, shares, and frames meaning. Zombies are not a proxy for everyday life. They are exceptional, extreme, and disturbing. They remind us that we are being watched. We are in danger. This is why the paradigmatic shift from cosmopolitanism to claustropolitanism is required.⁶⁵ September 11 and the Global Financial Crisis created the framework for Trump, Brexit and a series of wars on ‘terror’ without an enemy, focus, or exit strategy. This is politics conducted by tweets. This is diplomacy conducted through bullying and bitchiness. There is no happy ending. No light at the end of the tunnel. No resistance or the good fight. This is survival in a university at the end of the world. Each day matters. And today – now – this moment – is all that is left. We are, as Redhead described, “jacking into the trajectories of the catastrophic.”⁶⁶

Talking Heads were wrong. We are not on the road to nowhere. We are on the road to the university at the end of the world. We require a new lexicon: a language for the death of the university. Deans, Vice Chancellors, and Professors used to be nouns with meaning. Now, the assumed content in these words have been sucked out, leaving hollow roles, positions, and functions. Concurrently, Higher Education Studies has become stuck in a Ground Hog Day of recurrent crises. Instead, the crisis has happened. It is over. The post-crisis institution is now staffed and lead by the living dead. This is the point about zombie leadership, arching beyond Beck’s original conceptualization, and reminds us about the role of zombies in popular culture. Zombies kill, destroy, frighten and provoke. But there are always those few remarkable survivors that take the twisted, broken and beaten shards of life after the apocalypse and go again, keep walking, and build something new. Those of us who work and survive in universities and remain uninfected have some choices to make. We can pretend we are zombie academics to protect our short-term future. Or we can become visible – be heard – and ensure that the knowledge we gain is mobile, active, agitated, and relevant. Universities will always be so much more than a business.

We are the brain of the culture. Occasionally we have the chance to be the memory of a culture as well.

Endnotes

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