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Critiquing the Vocabularies of the Marketized University

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Abstract

Critique is in crisis. Spaces in the university, where critique once flourished under the banner of academic freedom, have been appropriated and hollowed out of meaning. External pressures from the failed project of privatisation of higher education in the UK result in internal pressures from a marketized model of university management that sees critical thinking as branding content to influence market share, rather than relevance for (social) science. This paper considers how the deeds and vocabularies of neoliberalism and the market operate in academic institutions to shape the context in which critical scholarship takes place – a context in which alternative possibilities of what education should or could be for outside of “growth”, “choice” “value for money” and preparation for work, are becoming increasingly rarely envisioned. Simultaneously, academic institutions have appropriated some of the vocabulary of critique, hollowing it out so that it can be consumed without challenging the business objectives that now structure higher education. The thoroughgoing renaming of institutional practices and their sanctioned practice and operation in the context of the ongoing destruction of the university as a public good are tied to the new institutional practices, in an effort to pressurise those who work in higher education to accept that there is no alternative. We consider the consequences of these practices and argue that, in this context, critical scholarship must also be tied to resistance, both to the vocabularies of the neoliberal university, as well as to its actions. Critique ought to expand our understanding of the possible while demonstrating that existing reality in academia and beyond can be contested in practice.

Keywords

Higher Education, Marketisation, Commodification, Critique

Introduction

Critique is in crisis. Spaces in the university, where critique once flourished under the banner of academic freedom, have been appropriated and hollowed out of meaning. External pressures from the failed project of privatisation of higher education in the UK, with the removal of block teaching grants from the state, replaced by a flawed, student finance system of loans – the vast majority of which are never able to be repaid – result in internal pressures from a marketized model of university management that sees critical thinking as branded content to influence market share, rather than relevance for (social) science. These policies and practices steer us towards a “knowledge economy” that is instrumental by design, and complicit with neoliberalism by purpose. In the past three decades over 50 books and numerous articles have examined and critiqued the violence against the social institutions that we call universities: Freedman and Bailey (2011) *The Assault on Universities*; Bérubé and Nelson (1995) *Higher Education Under Fire*; Giroux (2014) *Neoliberalism’s War on Higher Education*; Evans (2004) *Killing Thinking: The Death of the Universities*; Peter Fleming (2021) *Dark Academia: How Universities Die*; Smyth (2017) *The Toxic University* and many more. If universities have become as toxic and dark as these books claim, is it any wonder that in a recent UCU (2022) survey of almost 7,000 university staff at over 100 institutions, two-thirds said they are considering leaving the sector within five years over cuts to pensions and deteriorating pay and working conditions?

This paper will reflect on the impact of this violence on the sector in the UK and, specifically, the painful processes of these practices in contemporary universities which sell student places on the basis of offering critical and creative pedagogy and which draw on histories of radicalism as a brand, but where the structures and restructuring of the academy and its pedagogy allow anything but; where capital from banks has financialised teaching and administrative infrastructures, where the rhetoric of “social justice” has become an anti-critique and is used to serve the status quo rather than to challenge it. The paper will consider the consequences of these practices. We begin by examining the impact of the marketized university on the structure – or rather restructuring – of universities as part of the logic of marketization and on how these processes are transforming the shape and purpose of higher education – including how this effects staff and students. We consider the way that practices of critique are at odds with that project, by examining the role of critique in the academy and in society;

and we scrutinize the reasons that universities retain the empty words of critique both to support a market “brand” and to invert the purposes of critique, by using hollowed out terminology for neoliberal ends.

The Marketized University

As in other public sectors, the processes of marketisation have principally resulted in significant staff reductions – in the UK Higher Education (HE) sector there are job cuts everywhere. Recently, the University of Roehampton pushed ahead its restructuring plans, closing 19 courses and sacking 64 academics, while remaining staff had to reapply for their post under the notorious auspices of “fire and rehire” (Yeomans, 2022). Course closures were concentrated in the classics, history, creative writing, drama, photography, anthropology and philosophy, as the university now intends to concentrate on “career-focused courses” (Lillywhite, 2022). In 2022 the University of Wolverhampton suspended recruitment to 138 courses without any consultation with staff or students. The courses effected are mainly arts and social sciences. As part of their plan, the senior management team suspended all courses at first year undergraduate and masters level in the School of Performing Arts, including Drama and Acting, Dance, Popular Music, Music and Community Practice and Audio Technology (Williams, 2022). At the time of writing, staff at both the Universities of Brighton and East Anglia have been threatened with hundreds of job cuts. These are just some of the most recent examples of significant cuts to Arts, Humanities and Social Science courses and staff that has swept through UK Higher Education. That the target of this latest assault continues to be humanities is not a surprise. As Terry Eagleton (2010) commented sarcastically, “Real men study law and engineering, while ideas and values are for sissies”. The “muscular liberalism” thesis that David Cameron, the former Tory Prime Minister had tabled during his speech at the 47th Munich Security Conference had a specific target: Muslims (Jose, 2015). What is the “muscular liberalism” against “sissy” subjects such as philosophy, creative writing, dance, photography, and anthropology trying to ‘prevent’?

The economic model now governing universities is part of the driver for this assault. In 2010, we saw the trebling of tuition fees and the construction of a rigged market inside higher education (McGettigan, 2013). The incentive for the government was

that tuition fee loans, as opposed to grants, removed its spending on higher education, which would help reduce its deficit (Belfield et al, 2017). This is a decision the Treasury has come to rue, which explains the recent proposal to deal with £140bn in unpaid loans by discouraging universities to recruit to courses through large fines or deregistration where fewer than 60 per cent of graduates find work, set up their own business or go on to further study within 15 months of finishing their degree (Adams, 2022a).

Universities are being primed for a fundamental market correction. Future employment prospects, in roles that are considered economically productive, are the only reasons university degrees should exist. And university bosses are making pre-emptive strikes to a) show willingness to oblige government and so duck out of the firing line; and b) because academic capitalism and technocratic methods are the only way they know and the main way in which they gain credibility in their own circles.

With the removal of the block teaching grant, which sat alongside other measures such as the removal of caps on student numbers at individual institutions, which once helped to guard against over-recruiting and ensure sustainable student numbers across the sector, universities (particularly those that are not part of the so-called “Russell Group” of self-acclaimed prestigious universities) are now predominantly reliant on a frenzied market grab for student fees. The removal of student number controls saw university managers from high-ranking institutions lowering entry tariffs in order to scoop up as many students as possible – particularly in disciplines that are not heavily reliant on expensive equipment and specialised spaces. The result was falling numbers of students in other universities as the Russell Group bloated their intake of humanities students (as well as others) to increase their income – often with little investment in new staff. Other universities saw their student numbers drop and the income that follows. Staff cuts, the age-old solution to falling profits in the private sector, was deemed the solution. Higher education, whose value and purpose were once framed as a public good to extend knowledge, higher learning and intellectual inquiry, is becoming a field driven by making money or breaking even in a rigged market – educational values no longer define what UK universities are about; the bottom line does.

But the restructuring project in academia was never just about ‘mere’ economics. It was always about entrenching the market in all areas of higher education; about institutions “serving the economy” and about the commodification of the learning experience and the diversification of revenue streams. This involved privatising and monetising things such as student accommodation (Hale and Evans, 2019), with the entrance of giant companies like Greystar, Blackstone and Unite into an increasingly lucrative private housing market, and catering, where the likes of Compass and Sodexo replaced in-house catering at inflated prices. “Higher education is big business” (Corver, 2019). This was accompanied by a move into the bond markets. Between 2013 and 2018, nearly £5bn worth of bonds were issued by universities, where there had previously been none (Hale, 2018). University College London (UCL, 2021) issued a £300m bond in 2021, in partnership with NatWest, Barclays, HSBC and KPMG, as did Cardiff University, which added to its earlier bond with a further £100m issue (Cardiff University, 2021).

As Doreen Massey has argued, ideologies go hand in hand with market practices. There has been a persistent denigration of the idea of anything “public” as “good” in order to produce a new neoliberal market fundamentalism in which even the concept of liberty is reworked and restricted to self-interest (Massey, 2013: 10). Market ideologies are naturalised in public institutions through the renaming of institutional practices and by circumscribing acceptable forms of writing and speech – approved vocabularies which combine with institutional practices to set out accepted names and descriptions of what the once-public institution has become.

The vocabularies of neoliberalism and the market that operate in academic institutions are well-known: competition, choice, efficiency, consumers, flexibility, best practice, innovation, enterprise, excellence (in Research Excellence Frameworks and Teaching Excellence Frameworks) are shaping a context in which alternative possibilities of what education should or could be for outside of “growth”, “choice”, “value for money” and preparation for work are becoming increasingly rarely envisioned (Faulkner, 2011). Market vocabulary has become deeply embedded in UK higher education, so that it is now permeated with what Mark Fisher termed ‘business ontology’ (Fisher, 2009). Norman Fairclough points out that this marketized discourse is inevitably tied to the languages and practices of advertising and promotion that have deep

pathological consequences. There has been a significant shift in what is expected of the identities of those inhabiting the university such that we are now expected to promote ourselves as part of our jobs and, as educators, are expected to sell ourselves and our courses to student “customers”. For Fairclough, there has been a ‘colonisation of discourse’ by the language of promotion, which is imposed at all levels of university practice by those with authority, and this has deeply problematic ethical consequences (Fairclough, 1993: 142).

Consider the role of the word “choice” so often linked to the rights of the “consumer”. Across public sector institutions, from health to education, the offer of “choice” has been an important means of undermining a sense of such institutions as part of a wider public good; of insisting that the ideology of individual self-interest should prevail. Needless to say that “choice” of schools, hospitals, doctors’ surgeries and university attendance are very much limited by post code, levels of (inherited) family wealth or poverty and other factors of deprivation and privilege, including questions of race, class and gender – in other words “choice” is an ideological tool rather than a reality. Indeed “choice” in HE can be seen as a factor in furthering inequality with the most selective Russell Group institutions having the lowest access rates for disadvantaged students and the highest labour market success rates (Cullinane, 2021) – so the realities underpinning “choice” at once extend and individualise the harmful impacts of wider cuts in society.

In the context of the university, “choice” is a means of attempting to shift both staff and student understanding of who we are and of our relationship with each other, with students positioned as “consumers” of education that academic staff “deliver”. And, as elsewhere, these changes in descriptions have also occurred in the context of widescale cuts outside of elite institutions to (non-vocational arts, humanities and social sciences) courses, which in reality limit student choice – a case of vocabulary describing its opposite. Of course, cuts are not limited to academic courses, programmes and academic staff – welfare support, disability support, library staff, and departmental professional services have all been cut to inadequate levels (Campbell, 2019), so that students now often encounter academic institutional operations that once supported teaching with specialist staff, as faceless (and often voiceless) entities and where generic web forms are the only means of making contact. Massey’s general

point about vocabulary is equally apt for the university: “the vocabularies which have reclassified roles, identities and relationships – of people, places and institutions and the practices which enact them, embody and enforce the ideology of neoliberalism and thus a new capitalist hegemony” (Massey, 2013: 11).

In parallel with commercialisation, there is a relentless centralisation of power in the hands of a managerial elite, increasingly modelled on for-profit corporate management (van Houtum and van Uden, 2022). There is less and less professional autonomy for staff, less and less academic freedom, and a significant decline in student power (who are supposed to be the main beneficiary of changing their status from student citizens to customers). For instance, in 2022, the British government announced it will temporarily disengage with the National Union of Students (NUS) following recent antisemitism allegations (more on this below) (Adams, 2022b).

On top of their large salaries, pensions and extensive expenses, university administration are now even given titles, or give themselves titles, that were once associated solely with private corporations – Chief Executive, Chief Operating Officer, Chief Financial Officer – while proletarianized and often precarious academics now account for a third of all academics in the UK (Burton and Bowman, 2022). Academic precariat, who carry out the bulk of undergraduate teachings, are euphemised as “associate lecturers”, “teaching fellows”, or “adjuncts”. As part of monetising student services, a significant section of non-academic jobs (security, estate, catering, cleaning) are outsourced, and many student-facing professional positions are deleted in favour of the ubiquitous ‘chatbot’, leaving students with ever fewer human staff to help solve issues or problems, while managerial posts are increased with roles that have precious little to do with education and everything to do with ensuring the university brand is slick and the infrastructure lean.

The thoroughgoing renaming of institutional practices and their sanctioned vocabularies, in the context of the ongoing destruction of the university as a public good (Bailey and Freedman, 2011), are tied to these new institutional practices and roles in an effort to pressurise those who work in higher education to accept that there is no alternative – the very epitome of the vocabulary of neoliberalism. But it is important to recognise that this assault on higher education has not gone unchallenged. Since the 1990s, we have seen the emergence of Critical University Studies, which seek

to challenge these new vocabularies and the authoritarian practices that tend to accompany them (Williams, 2012). The approach of this new area of study is to link scholarship to activism in ways that push back on the neoliberal private model of education.

Hollowing out critique

Yet, simultaneously, academic institutions have appropriated some of the vocabulary of critique, draining it of meaning so that it can be consumed without challenging the business objectives that now structure higher education. While Massey (2013), Fisher (2009) and others (Freedman and Bailey, 2011; Fairclough, 1993) outlined the new vocabularies of the neoliberal project over a decade ago, there have been further language developments. In particular, there is a job being done on alternative vocabularies that have long circulated in academia – the vocabularies of critique. Across the HE sector, these vocabularies have been the subject of deliberate efforts to turn them into their opposite, either as a “tick box” exercise, or as a branding practice, or as a means of enforcing “compliance”. The contemporary university cannot initially simply abandon the language that is now so antithetical to its aims, but which has deep roots in many academic subjects – particularly (although not exclusively) in those very subjects that are under attack (the arts, humanities and social sciences). Instead, university managers are engaged in hijacking the words of critique while abandoning the conceptualisations that they were developed to express.

So how do we critique the hollowing out of critique? Redfield (2019: 86) notes that “the university is the home of institutionalised forms of critique” but is also circumscribed by institutional pressures. Fleming (2021) points to the fact that the institutional domain of the university is ‘formidably delimited’ by the state, the market and economic matrix and the corporate industrial complex in that order, which define the macro rules of the game we must play.

After the onslaught of neoliberalism then, we might ask – what is left of critique in our institutions of higher learning? It is worth revisiting the purposes of critique which have a form and practice located in Critical Theory that has changed over time – there is, of course, no singular critical perspective. Fassin (2019: 1) notes how Foucault, in

his famous lecture ‘What is Critique?’, argues that intellectual thinking does not take place in a vacuum and to properly interrogate it requires consideration of the state of the world and of the global public sphere in which it is inscribed, as well as the changing structures of the academy where it originates and their relations with the political domain and the media. That means critique must engage precisely with attempts to incorporate it, winnow it out of meaning, and enforce collective amnesia: we must look at what these practices are doing to us and how we resist.

How we resist has a basis in Critical Theory itself. Kellner (1989: 1) argues that critique is: “Critical Theory [...] informed by a critique of domination and a theory of liberation.” In other words, it has a specific practical purpose to seek human emancipation and can never be reduced to a tick box exercise or cynical forms of rebranding. Horkheimer famously said, as summarised by Bohman (2021), that Critical Theory is adequate only if it meets three criteria: it must be explanatory, practical and normative. Critical analysis must be empirical social enquiry framed by normative philosophical argument, such that it can evaluate and explain what is wrong with current social reality, then identify what is required to bring about social and political transformation. Hence, critique is oppositional and involved in struggles for social change.

If we keep at the forefront of our minds that the languages of critique are in essence the languages of liberation – of our attempts to understand oppression, inequality and the absence of many forms of freedom – then we can begin to interrogate what they have become. As an important example of the appropriation of the language of liberation, consider the movements for ‘decolonising the university’ and how the senior managers at higher education institutions have turned decolonisation into an action point. Some academics, for example Tuck and Yang (2012), had already warned about decolonisation turning into a superficial buzzword and a metaphor. Rather than tinkering at the edges of the curriculum or compiling a list of action points as a concession to pluralism, decolonisation should be an ongoing process which recognises the multiple impacts of colonisation, and which should, as Priyamvada Gopal argues, be conceived of “as fundamentally reparative on the institution and its constituent fields of enquiry” (2021: 881). In the context of the neoliberal university and its attendant vocabularies, this thoroughgoing interrogation of colonial knowledge

and practices is hampered by the very power structures that impose neoliberal vocabularies and practices and which co-opt radical vocabularies while emptying them of their deeper significance. In this particular example we can see how co-option is used to hide oppressive or repressive interests and practices, as well as demonstrating how symbolic forms do not mirror social structure.

And while university administrators deploy a jargonistic version of “decolonisation” (in which the concept of liberation or even equality is absent – replaced with notions such as “diversity” and “inclusion”), the British government is pushing through the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill, which aims to limit academic freedom and silence progressive voices on campus. The Bill must be understood in the wider context of the Conservative government’s “culture wars”, their attack on “woke” students and “cultural Marxists”, that have taken place in a context in which a Conservative MP called for the sacking of Dr Goldie Osuri for mild criticism of Israel; and the conservative newspaper *the Daily Mail* published accusations in 2020 that Cambridge Professor, Priyamvada Gopal, incited racism when the paper wrongly attributed inflammatory tweets to her. The new Bill would seriously curb free speech in the university under the guise of protecting it. All lectures, seminars and invited speakers’ comments would be the subject of possible legal action by any group or member of the public. Men’s groups could sue universities celebrating International Women’s Day, while racist groups could sue over discussion of Critical Race Theory. The British government’s commitment to free speech on campuses can be illustrated by a number of recent comments by various ministers: that teachers who use Critical Race Theory, or concepts such as ‘white privilege’, could face action for breaking the law (Murray, 2020); that the decolonisation of British history – which is compared to Soviet-style censorship – has no place in universities (Stubley, 2021); that teachers could be prevented from using material from campaign groups including Black Lives Matter and Extinction Rebellion, thereby limiting anti-racist or environmental teaching on crucial social matters (Busby, 2020). The Bill’s real intention is to protect right-wing speech and campaigns, the protagonists of which will demand their right to “free speech” on campus while at the same time claiming they are subject to ‘sexism’ or ‘racism’ from anti-racist and feminist students and scholars using Critical Theory. As Cammaerts notes, “freedom of speech and the right to offend are too often weaponised to protect racist and discriminatory language and to position these ideas

as valid opinions worthy of democratic debate” (Cammaerts, 2022: 730), when in fact they are simply enablers of social injustice that support and sustain the interests of hegemonic power and capital.

In addition, the Bill proposes to increase the power of the Office for Students (OfS) to enforce “free speech” through a newly created “Free Speech Champion” (a neoliberal turn of phrase if ever there was one), called by the Orwellian title “Director for Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom”. If the Bill is to become law, University administrations will put pressure on academic staff to self-police the content of their courses to avoid litigation, during which the OfS will play a significant role in ensuring that while Critical Theory is dampened down, right-wing ideas and groups are protected.

In addition, under pressure and threat of losing their funding streams, so far 111 out of 133 Higher Education Institutions in Britain have formally adopted the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance’s working definition of antisemitism. This definition has come under attack by many, including over 180 Israeli academics and 40 Jewish organizations that have “strongly opposed” the IHRA definition, precisely because its focus on Israel gives the definition a “strong potential for misuse” (Gordon and LeVine, 2021; Deckers and Coulter, 2022). We need to ask what commitment to decolonisation can remain silent about one of the last bastions of colonialism and what kind of concern with free speech makes advocating for the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement a crime?

We can see in many countries how language and symbolism are involved in the emergence of specific forms of universities as reproductions of the dominant social order and contribute to the imaginary (*mis*)recognition and (*mis*)representation of class (and other social) interests. The idea that everything works through the market is so accepted that it has become part of the social and mental scaffolding of our daily lives. As noted by David Harvey almost two decades ago (2005: 2-3), official policies of most states everywhere automatically accepted without question that human wellbeing could best be advanced by unbridled free markets and that governments should provide the institutional framework to achieve this. After the economic crisis of 2008, it was predicted, with some justification, that the bursting of the market bubble would force

neoliberalism into retreat. But neoliberalism bounced back with increased vigour and a more authoritarian face, albeit with greater contradictions as the dire consequences of such approaches have left us with rampant and extensive inequality, increased in-work poverty and global biospheric climate calamity.

While it appears that we are descending further into a space of no hope and the F-word (Fascism) is haunting the world and its imagination, we should not forget that since the turn of the millennium social critique has enjoyed a remarkable renaissance, in different shapes and forms: the World Social Forum, the anti-war movement in 2003, Arab revolutions, and Black Lives Matter, are just a few examples. Now, widescale strikes across the public sector and its recently privatised counterparts in the UK bring a fresh tide of opposition. In the process, many leading figures and commentators in and on these movements have found mass readerships. And yet, in many universities we see how radical concepts are inverted and stripped of any political substance and emancipatory potential. In this context, it is worthwhile remembering how Marx argued that, for the proletariat to advance its revolutionary interests, it must develop its own political language rather than draw, as did earlier revolutions, on the ‘poetry of the past’ (2000). In the current context, while the far right is seizing upon myths and “heritage” (and the poetry of the past), the languages developed by new movements and subaltern classes have become floating signifiers that are open to political or economic manipulation – they are floating to the right. How can critique be rescued from these pressures? This is a struggle that has been waged across higher education institutions over the past decade.

Rescuing critique at the neoliberal university

2021/22 saw an increase in industrial disputes between senior administrations and University and College Union (UCU) members across UK Higher Education. At Goldsmiths, for example, UCU members recently took 40 days of strike action (Lakha, 2021) in opposition to a recovery plan (Fazackerley, 2021) based on compulsory redundancies of both academic and professional services staff – and the hollowing out of departmentally-based administration. Part of the action coincided with national walkouts (Gibney, 2022) at dozens of universities in protest against massive pension

cuts, entrenched casualisation, deteriorating working conditions and falling pay (Grady, 2022).

In the context of restructures, staff cuts and deteriorating working conditions (and where staff are expected to have internalised the language of academic advertising and promotions and to have accepted the hollowing out of radical critique as “realistic”), doing critical work is fraught with difficulties. Exhaustion and overwork always accompany restructuring and staff cuts, as those left behind have the work of absent colleagues to add to their own. The psychological toll of these pressures cannot be underestimated.

What’s happening at any individual institution is the logical consequence of a series of developments around marketisation and financialisation in the higher education sector, which has been going on for more than a decade. This rush to embrace marketisation explains the arrival of accounting firms, audit companies and banks to advise and oversee restructures. Many institutions employ costly consultants to plan their restructuring and look to banks to provide credit facilities with International Monetary Fund-style obligations to cut spending and programmes and to reduce staffing ([Fazackerley, 2020a](#)). Such auditors recommend cuts they deem necessary to secure financial support from banks, and quantify every single academic programme at a university, while advocating centralised administrations (Sen, 2023).

Higher education is now a major area of growth for consultancy firms such as KPMG, best expressed in its 2020 report, *The Future of Higher Education in a Disruptive World* (Parker, 2020), which refers to “customer-centric strategies”. KPMG’s priority, however, is not to better educate students, but to win consultancy contracts to help universities drive down costs.

KPMG’s argument is that what it describes as the ‘golden age’ of higher education is drawing to a close because of high participation rates and the devaluing of a university degree (Freedman, 2022). Think of the logic here: something that should be a right for all citizens is now devalued because more people have access to it – a sad indictment of what happens when you treat education like a commodity and not a public good.

Citing research from the Institute for Fiscal Studies (Belfield et al., 2017), the KPMG report suggests that 20% of degrees “are not worth the money in terms of future earnings; these students would have been financially better off if they had not gone to university” (Parker, 2020: 4). KPMG’s conclusion is that universities have to drive down costs through more effective use of technology and, of course, staff cuts and efficiency savings. A different conclusion might be one based on the inherent societal value of increased participation rates. Indeed, if tuition fees are now such a disincentive to study, why not just scrap them, as Jeremy Corbyn (Mason, 2017) and Bernie Sanders (Sanders, 2019) have proposed in recent years?

For auditing firms like KPMG, however, the problem isn’t about student participation per se, or about rising tuition fees or spiralling debt. It’s about falling productivity or, as the report puts it, that institutions are “running out of productivity gains under their current operating model” (Parker, 2020: 5). This is its central concern: to advise institutions how best to increase productivity.

Interestingly, the KPMG report (*ibid.*) concludes that resistance is likely to come from those who present the most ‘risk’ to its vision of a more streamlined and efficient model of higher education. Universities have, according to KPMG, “reached the point where having more students in a class, reducing the number of small groups and limiting subject choice are meeting consumer resistance”. The report is referring here to people like UCU strikers and to those students who support them. But this isn’t really about ‘consumer resistance’ so much as the struggle by a range of stakeholders for a completely different vision of the university: one that privileges the innate value of a creative and critical education and that seeks to protect both jobs and students’ learning conditions. “Disruption is on the way,” warns the KPMG report. With more than 100 UK universities currently engaged in joint industrial action against the cuts and neoliberal restructuring, it looks as though KPMG has managed to make one accurate prediction.

Conclusion

The consequences of a thoroughly marketized higher education system have been long since documented as noted above. What this short article points to is the next stage of

this attack on formerly public institutions to evacuate them of meaning. This is not just about the marketisation and commodification of higher education, it is an ideological and cultural project to ‘cleanse education’ ([Fazackerley, 2020b](#)) of left critique and to protect capitalism (and elite interests).

In the UK, we are seeing the persistent hollowing out of institutions in which publics have traditionally sought to engage in political activities, and the backlash by very powerful actors against principles of solidarity and support that have often been used to pursue political objectives and to knit struggles together. The discourse of “culture wars” and “cancel culture” are reproduced in our mainstream media, influencing the reframing of political debates and driving negative perceptions of progressive issues, while a regulatory framework employs the rhetoric of freedom of speech in universities to deliver its opposite and stymie critique.

What are the consequences of these practices:

1. That critique is hollowed out of all meaning so we must leave academia. How can we be critical scholars while remaining at institutions that are openly authoritarian and against all forms of social justice bar the phrase as a branding exercise?
2. That we remain but opt out of critique, embrace academic capitalism and play the game as best we can: a miserable and soul-less academic existence.
3. That we continue to instil the values of critique to create social networks amongst leftist thinkers, build friendships and alliances, resist bureaucratic incorporation, tilling the soil, preparing the ground, doing the very thing they want to erase (what Harney and Moten (2013) call the work of the ‘undercommons’). Keeping the flame alive. It is much harder to stay and fight for education as a public good, in which critique and social justice are genuinely valued, than to go.

Our preference for now is for the third – solidarity forms where we can come together to keep the flame of critique alive, deepen its meaning and improve its praxis.

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