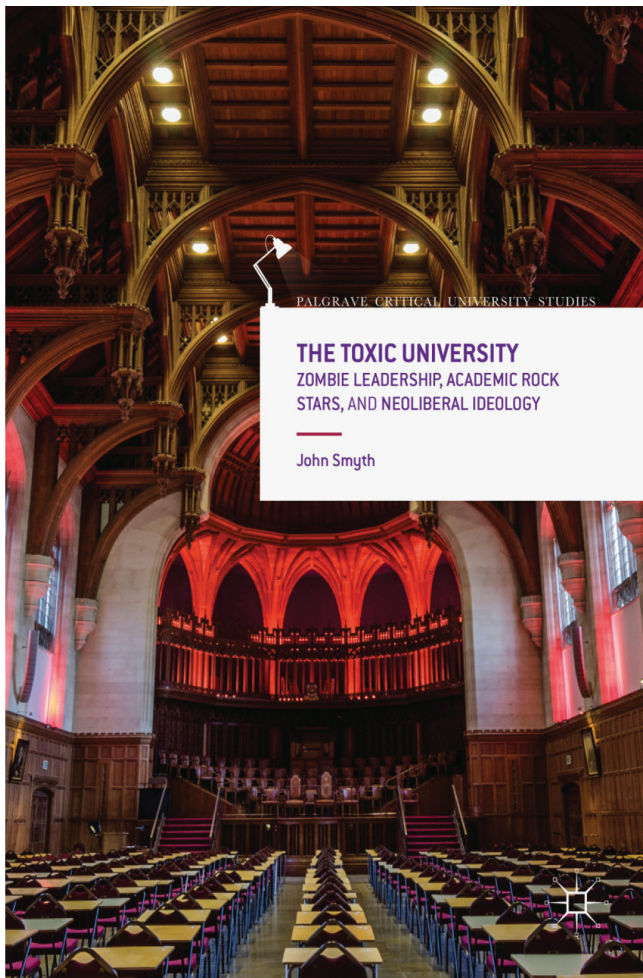


Book review

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

London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, 235 pp., ISBN: 978-1-137-54976-1 (hbk)



This book is the first in an intended series, *Critical University Studies*, to be edited by the author of the present work. The purpose of the series is to 'provide a much-needed forum for the intensive and extensive discussion of ... inappropriate university reforms ... with particular emphasis on those perspectives and groups whose views have hitherto been ignored, disparaged or silenced' (p. v). The author then goes on, with no apparent sense of irony, to provide a 12-page annotated bibliography of critical perspectives on the modern university. The academics making these critiques may indeed find that they are ignored or disparaged, but they certainly do not seem to have been silenced.

The book's title gives rather more than a hint about its thesis: that the Western university is in a dreadful condition, it is getting worse and we know who to blame. So far, so bad. When presented with this type of argument, I usually do two things: turn to the final chapter to see what the proposed solution is and search the text to identify the golden age of the university, from which there has been a falling-off, resulting in the present mess. After all, saying things are dreadful now implies that things were better once.

Let us first revisit the golden age. Smyth does not tell us when this was, but as he is 'looking back over more than 40 years as a university academic' (p. 3), we may perhaps infer that his formative professional years were in UK higher education in the 1970s. The charge sheet of trends that he considers most damaging – marketization, managerialism, performativity, rankings and (perhaps above all) neoliberalism – can be traced back in their present forms mostly to the 1990s, so perhaps the golden age of UK universities was to be found in the 1970s and 1980s. In 1970, about 50,000 students graduated from UK higher education institutions; in 2015, the number was nearing 400,000. Yet there is little or no recognition in this book that a system that has been transformed in scale needs some different approaches to what may have worked in the smaller, highly selective system that Smyth encountered at the start of his academic career. Nor, as far as I can see, is any credit given to the achievements of the UK's present expanded system, so disliked by Smyth: through the efforts of all those working in universities, the life chances of millions of people who would necessarily have been excluded from higher education in the 1970s and earlier have been transformed.

What, then, is Smyth's solution to the problems he lists? It is, primarily, to initiate 'a dialogue with those who hold diminished ... views of what constitutes the university [with the aim of] re-educating them about the grander and more expansive purpose that is being expunged' (p. 216). Well, I am all in favour of dialogue and of promoting the university's grander purpose, and Smyth's questions to comprise this dialogue look sensible at first sight: 'Why are we doing it this way?' and 'How might we do things differently?' (p. 217) – and so on. There are, though, a few problems here. For one, it is not clear who his proposed interlocutors might be: the Education Minister? Vice-chancellors? Opinion formers in general? Another problem is with the 'it': if higher education in general is the 'it', any dialogue is either doomed to founder in a mass of detail or be left stranded amid a set of vague platitudes. There is an uncomfortable sense here of the author leaving himself open to the frequent criticism of academic studies: good at analysing the problem, poor at coming up with workable solutions to it.

Some of Smyth's critiques do hit their intended targets. The chapter on 'Zombie leadership' – 'zombie' because the supposed importance of leadership in universities is a belief that will not die, despite the evidence – quotes a number of scholars arguing that the complex nature of knowledge production in universities makes it impossible to see a clear linkage between what the person at the top does and the outputs of the organization. Despite this, 'better leadership' continues to be presented as the solution to all manner of organizational difficulties. It is surprising that Smyth does not bring the inflated salaries of university vice-chancellors into his argument: it is largely because the 'great person' theory of leadership has become uncritically accepted that excessive salaries have been thought justifiable. One benefit of the current level of criticism of chief executives' pay – in universities and elsewhere – may be to question the ideas about leadership that have supported these pay levels.

Many, perhaps most, academics will nod in rueful agreement with some of Smyth's criticisms. But staring regretfully in the rear-view mirror is not a good way to decide on a future direction.