



Vol.4 No.2 (2021)

Journal of Applied Learning & Teaching

ISSN : 2591-801X

Content Available at : <http://journals.sfu.ca/jalt/index.php/jalt/index>

'Never let a good crisis go to waste'. An interview with Professor Peter Fleming on dark academia, the pandemic and neoliberalism

Peter Fleming ^A	A	<i>Professor, University of Technology Sydney (UTS) Business School</i>
Jürgen Rudolph ^B	B	<i>Head of Research & Senior Lecturer, Kaplan Singapore; Editor-in-chief, Journal of Applied Learning & Teaching</i>
Shannon Tan ^C	C	<i>Research Assistant, Kaplan Singapore; Journal Manager, Journal of Applied Learning & Teaching</i>

Keywords

Coronavirus;
critical theory;
critique of work;
dark academia;
future of universities;
neoliberal university;
pandemic.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37074/jalt.2021.4.2.14>

Abstract

Peter Fleming is a Professor at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) Business School. He previously held positions at Cambridge University, Queen Mary University of London, and Cass Business School. Peter Fleming's research focuses on the future of work and the ethical implications it surfaces. He is also the author of numerous books which more recently include *The mythology of work*, *The death of homo economics*, *The worst is yet to come*, *Sugar daddy capitalism*, and *Dark academia. How universities die*. This interview focuses on Fleming's fairly pessimistic perspectives on the future of universities that are espoused in his most recent book, *Dark academia*. In a devastating critique, he argues that universities were already in crisis prior to the pandemic, but that has been exacerbated by it in the context of neoliberalism and shrinking government budgets, especially in key higher education-exporting countries such as the U.S., the UK and Australia. Apart from our focus on the state of higher education in this interview, we also, amongst other things, discuss Fleming's nuanced critique of work (that forms the bulk of his oeuvre), his love-hate relationship with writing and other biographical snippets, as well his exciting future projects.



Figure 1: Peter Fleming.

Jürgen Rudolph (JR): In your most recent book *Dark academia. How universities die* (Fleming, 2021a), you set out to analyse the hidden psychological injuries endured by students and academics in contemporary universities. There is a passage in *Dark academia* where you provide a historical overview of four shifts that the university has undergone. A first shift was Wilhelm von Humboldt's 19th century ideal of higher education as a holistic combination of research and teaching in an environment of academic freedom in order to transform students into autonomous individuals and global citizens. A second historical shift that occurred starting from around the 1960s was the so-called academic revolution that led to the massification of university admission. The academic revolution eventually led to a counter-revolution and the birth of the neoliberal university from the mid-1980s onwards, exhibiting increasing top-down managerialism and the metrification of academic work. The fourth shift to an edu-factory (and even further removed from Humboldt's ideal) is an acceleration of the neo-corporatised university due to the current pandemic.

While Humboldt's vision of higher education was imperfect due to its elitism and its domination by white male privilege, do you think it is possible to revert to his vision and at the same time get rid of its inherent class, race and gender biases?

Or is the end nigh? To cite you: "Beleaguered by managerial-bloat, business bullshit and a Covid-compromised economic environment, the idea of the modern university may soon come to an end" (Fleming, 2021a, p. 19). Or to cite one of your book titles: *The worst is yet to come?* This is a very convoluted question. Sorry about that.

Peter Fleming (PF): That's okay. It's a good question. And thanks again for the invitation to chat about these things and the book. I guess the answer to that question is kind of the reason why I wrote the book and trying to figure out, to use the phrase I use in the book, whether hope is permissible, reflecting that Kantian question of hope. I don't think going back to the Humboldtian university is the answer, for many reasons. It was a highly problematic institution, operating under conditions that were very much stratified by class and gender, and you could even go on and talk about links to colonialism and so forth. Nostalgia is problematic – I think even going back to the 1960s experiments in higher education harbours dangers and nostalgia is really not helpful in any shape or form in this context. Previous university systems were carriers of class constrictions, and in some ways paved the way for the neoliberalisation of mass education. We have to take the best parts of what we have and move forward in creative ways, and not look back.

So how do we do that if the university or the higher education system is today pretty much unsalvageable? Again, that's the reason I wrote the book: to figure out where I stand on that. And I'm not too sure where I do stand, especially following the pandemic which has thrown into sharp relief some ugly truths at the heart of higher education. We're in a very difficult situation at the moment. I've talked to lots of friends and colleagues about this and it does provoke some quite extreme views, including just abandoning the university in its present form, because commercialisation, marketisation and financialisation processes have really gone down to its roots and we nearly need a breakaway movement, if that is at all possible. But we're all attached to our careers, and there's mortgages to pay and all of that sort of stuff that is going to make this very difficult. From my own perspective, I do feel that there is still something that we need to be fighting for. Otherwise, I wouldn't have written the book. While I realise that I'm a pretty pessimistic person, this book is deeply pessimistic even by my standards. One reason for this is that emerging Leftist analyses, when it comes to critical university studies, were proffering what I believe was a form of cruel optimism and weren't properly facing up to the fact that academics had been completely vanquished, and have been for some time. The profession has really hit rock bottom.

This optimism in critical commentaries about the university really irked me. The idea of reinstating *The slow professor* (Berg & Seeber, 2018) and that liberalist kind of hope, but also on the left, *The good university* (Connell, 2019) and so forth, I think, is not really confronting this bleak reality, especially for the adjuncts and precariat. Academics have basically lost the battle against neoliberalisation. The task is to figure out what can be done from that position of profound socio-political failure. That's our starting point if we want to grapple with the problem in any profound way. By the way, I don't think what I'm saying here is particularly

new, to be honest. Jeez, when I started working on this book, I was just blown over by how much there is on this topic, and it was pretty hard to say something new, to be honest. I'm not sure if I succeeded - novelty is overrated anyways. But I think there is hope for *study* if nothing else... Can that happen in the university in its present form? Exploring and answering that question is where I think Stefano [Harney] and Fred [Moten]'s work (2013; 2021) comes in really handy. Anyways, I think the first task is to face up to reality which I have tried to do in my new book, which is why it's so bleak.

JR: In my humble opinion, it's an important and excellent book. I sent you my review which also says the same (Rudolph, 2021). I agree, it's a bleak book, but thankfully, you're very humorous. And you have something, I think, which can be referred to as dark humour, since you're writing about *Dark academia* and dark capitalism and all that. I think the dark humour is very suitable and it makes the book bearable, at least in my view, and partially extremely entertaining.

Talking about *Dark academia*, I think you are very mindful of the student debt mountain that is very prevalent in some countries like the UK or the US. But when you talk about *Dark academia*, you're also specifically addressing some of the aspects of the neoliberal university such as despair, depression, chronic stress, anxiety, self-harm, and in extreme cases, suicides amongst students and academics. You observe that universities that made themselves overly dependent on the lucrative international student market found themselves in a world of trouble when the coronavirus and concomitant travel restrictions emerged in 2020. But if we understand your argument correctly, universities were already gravely ill pre-pandemic. And as you were just saying, the privatised, corporatised, marketised, financialised neoliberal universities, in your analysis, are in mortal danger, largely due to "bad management and hostile government budgets" (Fleming, 2021a, p. 157), to cite from your book. Even pre-pandemic, this is an alarming analysis, and the global pandemic has made things worse. Could you please give us an idea about your thoughts on the pandemic, how it has affected higher education and how higher education will evolve as a result of the coronavirus and the responses to it? You just said you're very pessimistic. There's the question whether there's even a future for this kind of university, but maybe you could elaborate more on that?

PF: One point of the book was to say that a lot of attention is being placed on the pandemic and the financial implications it will have – not necessarily the rich universities, the Ivy League's or the Russell Group in the UK – but the thousands of institutions in the mid-range and bottom range if you want to use that kind of terminology. However, the tensions, cracks and frictions were there way before the pandemic, and we are seeing an escalation, an amplification of those pre-existing problems in the university that come about from mass commercialisation among other things.

The cliché of never letting a good crisis go to waste is certainly part of senior management ideology at the moment, even though they don't admit it.

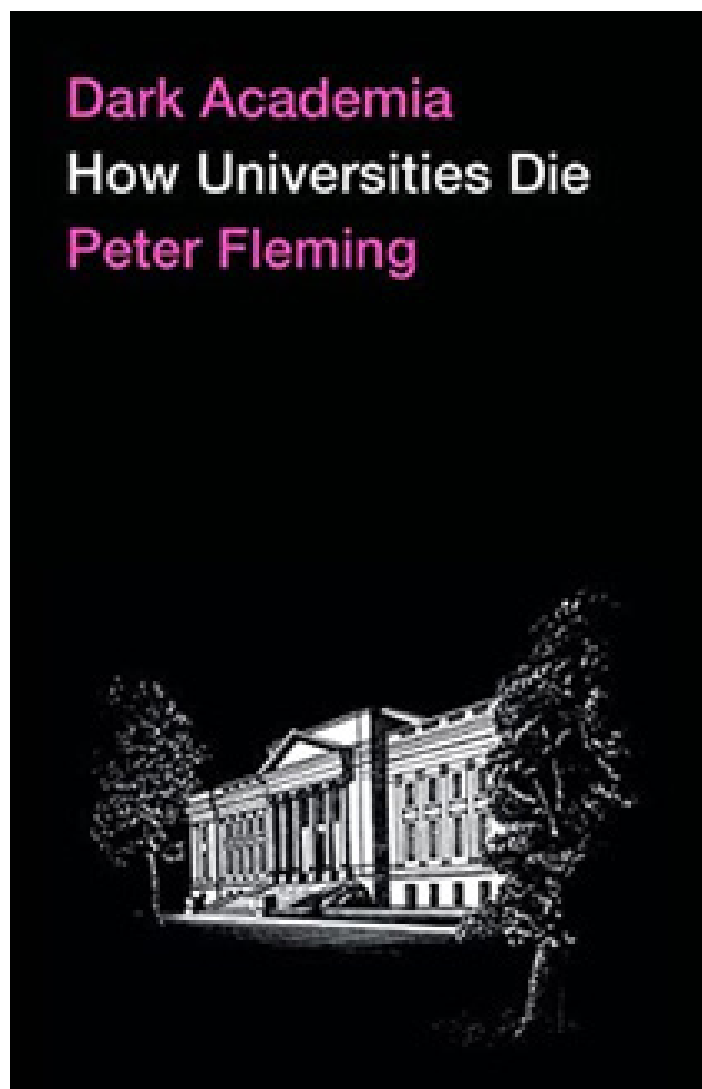


Figure 2: *Dark academia* book cover.

So definitely the cliché of never letting a good crisis go to waste is certainly part of senior management ideology at the moment, even though they don't admit it. I predict that the contradictions of the neoliberal university are just going to be exacerbated over the next few years. By contradictions, I mean having autocratic hierarchical systems in a profession that fundamentally requires the opposite in order to function, including collegiality and so forth. That value clash goes to the heart of the sadness that is now deeply entrenched in our profession. But to answer your question, I think that the pandemic has certainly been a shock to the system no doubt.

By the way, the term 'neoliberal' has limitations at the moment. I don't think it really describes the university in a very accurate way. If I was going to use any terminology, it would be Mark Fisher's (2009) 'market-Stalinism' as a descriptor of how universities function today. Lots of bureaucratic collectivism combined with ruthless market discipline. In terms of the market, the medium future is going to be difficult. You'll see a lot of universities, I predict, go under. Governments in the UK, Australia, and the U.S. (who despise higher education and academics) really hope to see what economists call a market shakeout or a market correction, where the numbers of institutions drastically drop

and I guess, economists are currently modelling this. And from an ordinary academic point of view, this has become difficult to resist or refute. Managerialism has utilised the language or ideology of finance very effectively, and the workforce has internalised this. So the economic rationality – which is biased, political and partisan – for job cuts, bigger workloads and runaway administration is no longer only held by senior executives. It has basically been socialised throughout the institution. Now we have a workforce that says, 'Yes, fire me, because there are no students' – a classic case of capitalist realism at work in the ideological domain. This is going to kind of pave the way for a very troubling time in the profession. I don't particularly feel very positive about what's to come.

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JR: In *Dark academia* you show that in some of the key higher education-exporting countries (like in the U.S. and the UK), many of the teaching staff are part of the gig economy or the precariat, leading to the Uberfication and exploitation of an underclass of adjuncts. You are also quoting Ginsberg's *The fall of the faculty* (2011) that focused on the expansion of non-academic personnel, vis-a-vis academics. Then you also said that the chronically overworked academics don't just have too much 'real work', but also 'sludge work', encompassing activities such as filling in forms and following procedures that are caused by over-bureaucratisation. Could you please share with us your take on this and perhaps give some examples?

PF: One of the rationales for the book was – and this is a segue into answering your question – to counter this very prevalent view of these privileged elite institutions and so-called Ivory Tower universities that are still very much part of everyday parlance of what we might call civilians, non-academics. Obviously, it's nothing like this, universities are at the vanguard of a marketising society. They're no longer places of protection or places of unqualified study. I think that's one of the reasons why I wanted to check that image and raising awareness about the growing precariat in higher education is part of that. Adjuncts also fulfil an ideological function in contemporary universities, creating a bifurcation between secure and insecure staff in addition to the division between students and teaching staff. Both fractures have been a classic neoliberal strategy for dividing and conquering the institution.

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For casual staff, it's a grim picture at the moment. Their predicament is the product of universities functioning like large businesses. Managers want to economise and

create efficiencies, and in terms of labour costs, adjuncts serve that purpose. It's been quite a major transformation of higher education and I think for the worst. We need to have new laws around making staff permanent if they've been a casual for a certain period of time, as they do in Scandinavia, for instance. Uberisation of higher education has been something that's been really creeping along in the background for some time. Not enough has been said about this in arguments regarding the 'fall of the faculty', which focuses mainly on tenured staff. The professoriat's viewpoint tends to omit this dark undercurrent in higher education, and it's an important part of the story.

When it comes to the second part of your question regarding the burgeoning role of non-academic staff in universities, that's been incredible. I have a theory to explain this. In terms of power, which is something I've been studying for years, this happens in other industries as well: as soon as you get a diametrically opposed power relationship between managers and the managed, you're going to get a growth of administration because that division needs to be managed, policed, economised and all that. Management bloat is the outcome. But also, bureaucracies have a tendency just to proliferate on their own accord anyways. That's something that industrial sociologists have known for many years. You hire a manager. Then another manager to supervise that manager. And so on. But it's not only middle management where you see this. The growth of senior managers is another extraordinary characteristic of universities. They have become very top-heavy, all drawing gargantuan pay packets. Anyways, this middle and senior management explosion was born out of huge cash flows – a windfall we might say – when education became a major export industry. This was especially so in countries like the United States and the UK. So it will be interesting to see what happens after the pandemic and the financial fallout. Adjuncts will be fired first. Then academics. Then middle managers. Perhaps only this cadre of well paid senior executives at the top will be the only ones left! They will have to deliver all the Zoom lectures and tutorials!

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On your final question about sludge work, this concerns paperwork created by this swarm of middle managers. They have to do something after all, and usually that consists of creating forms and other hoop-jumping exercises. You get this sludge work in most large organisations, where the administration falls back on itself, the means become the ends. I thought it was just an interesting way to distinguish between admin work and real work, not only in terms of writing an article, but real work in terms of teaching and

managing undergrad programmes, and other value-adding stuff. This real work in universities has increased for sure, but alongside it has been this growth of sludge work. The term comes from a couple of US economists looking at public administration, and they kept referring to bureaucratic sludge and I thought that's a cool term, because we get stuck in it. You can't escape it, even if it is superfluous to proper, value-adding work. Having said that, administration is an important part of any large organisation, you can't do without it. But I think when it gets out of hand, there's a tipping point and it becomes its own goal – to reproduce itself and grow if possible. That would be fine if it left us alone, but the opposite occurs of course.

Examples of sludge work in universities are mandatory health and safety tutorials. Forms to get travel approval. Forms to move furniture in an office. Forms to certify exams. Forms to access a new form regarding teaching. Emails upon emails. Have you noticed that only about 5% of the emails we receive say, 'here is a gift for you, Peter. [laughter] You don't have to do anything. This is for you.' All the rest, 95%, it is 'do this now for me, I want this, get me this before the close of business yesterday!' But the boxes have to be ticked. Returning to power and hierarchy, though, Weber had it right. He said, the golden rule of bureaucracy is that the apex of the organisation is never bureaucratized, that's the only place where it stops. It always flows downwards like a waterfall, getting heavier and thicker the lower it gets. In one of my books I call this the 'organizational shit chain', but that's another story. I'm making light of it because I think there are worse problems at the university than sludge work.

JR: [Laughs.] I also think that email has turned out to be a terrible invention. And more so our mobile phones, because now we really carry the work everywhere. And it's impossible to escape it. So it seemed like a good thing at the time, but it turned out to be an instrument of control. In *Dark academia*, you describe the "metric-mania" – the short-termist metric-fixation – and its adverse effects on higher ed. A veritable tyranny of metrics – student evaluation scores; journal quality rankings, discipline-level tables, and journal impact factors; research grants; Google citation ratings, H- and i10-indices – is used for appraisals and promotions. As you write, the "measure has become the target and the tail is wagging the dog" (Fleming, 2021a, p. 49). This metrification is subject to Goodhart's law of perverse incentives. Could you please elaborate?

PF: Yes, sure. This foray is a product of managerialism, the purpose of basic managerialism or Taylorism is to quantify, to give superiors a feeling of control. But that's a very simplistic way of seeing the organisation, given all of the sociality that is missed out from this quantified picture of an institution. Nevertheless, it's really taken off, rankings and so forth. That quantification is a symptom of that managerialisation but it's also a symptom – this is another part of the story I wanted to tell in the book – of the emergence of the neoliberal academic. There is a lot of academic complicity in the neoliberal university, scholars who adore all the quants because it allows them to compete in the academic marketplace. That is very depressing given what this metric-fixation does to the community, but it has not only been a top-down process.

I think that particular part of the puzzle has been missing in a lot of critical university studies, where the complicity and compromise of academics have helped bring about this dark situation – including myself, so I place myself in that camp as well. If we are unhappy with the neoliberal university, then we need to own up to careerism in the academy. What's happened with the quantification of academic work is that you're going to inevitably get perverse incentives for sure, all of the citations and trying to get better rankings and all of that sort of stuff. But you also have an evacuation of the academic ethos. In the book, I discuss academics who have very little interest in what they're writing about. If it gets them into a top journal, this is all that matters. I found that really surprising and disheartening. But I shouldn't be surprised since most universities have stoked this deep instrumental careerism, but I find it a little bit frightening.

But those perverse incentives are really tricky. I don't think it's just the career psychopaths who single-mindedly follow them and become anti-social, aggressive people as a result. The idea has been integrated into ordinary academic life too, where we begin to think the numbers are everything. And, they're not. Pegging career progression to those numbers was initially done in the name of transparency, but it's become something punitive. This punitive element is an important undercurrent of dark academia that we're all trying to grapple with. It's difficult to escape because we all want to be promoted, and it would be unusual to find someone who didn't want to be the best in their career or best in their profession. But it's clearly been hijacked by this narrative of metrics – with our own complicity. We really need to rethink this element of what it means to be an academic if we want to move forward.

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I try not to be romantic about academia as a way of life. But it certainly isn't about producing widgets and ticking boxes. I see it as a way of living, it's an ethos. That's a very old-fashioned way of thinking about ideas and what it means to be an academic worker, especially now with the arrival of the so-called academic entrepreneur – an awful creature I must say. But that evacuation of an ethos from teaching and study is just really sad. It leads into a place where institutions are in danger of becoming factories and workers just can't wait until five o'clock to clock off. And only then do I start to do stuff that is really important for me and that animates me, rather than doing it as part of being an academic. I think we still need to hold on to that ethos, even if it's unrealistic under present conditions.

JR: In the meantime, for academics, it is often publish or perish. Highly-ranked journals are fetishised and endowed "with near quasi-religious powers" (Fleming, 2021a, p. 31) – to again cite from *Dark academia* – and the multinational journal publishers have thus been placed in a position where they can extort universities to access their own outputs with outlandish subscription fees. Ironically, universities pay their

academics salaries, but nonetheless must then purchase their output from multinational journal and book publishers for their libraries, thus paying twice. Another irony, especially in the case of public universities, is that taxpayers do not have access to the academic output that they funded as it is hidden behind firewalls and prohibitively expensive. In *The death of homo economicus* (Fleming, 2017), you narrate the tragic story of Aaron Swartz. What are your views on Open Access publishing, author processing charges and other such fees, as well as Creative Commons licenses?

PF: I think open access is the way forward, it's returning control to the discipline, to the profession, without the middleman tactics of these large parasitical corporations. I think it's changing a little bit now on this front. Most institutions ask academics to place our stuff in a depository that is free to the public. But it was about time. These large multinational publishing companies have sponged off universities and public money for years. It's unbelievable. They probably can't believe their luck either because their profit margins are just incredible. It's almost like the perfect business model. Be gifted academic products from an institution free of charge. No labour costs. Very few overheads given all the work is done by academics. And then briefly repackage those products and sell them back to those same institutions with a huge markup. They are swimming in cash. But now universities are finally waking up to the fact that it's a pretty bad deal. But I still remember when this corporate takeover started to happen. Around 20 years ago, most journals were run by either universities or academics, where editorial duties were passed between a network of universities, and the universities paid for the printing and so forth. Over a handful of multinationals came along and sucked them all up, and I guess they just offered these journals a deal they could not refuse. So this corporate centralisation process was quite extreme and swift. By the way, I doubt very much whether these large firms give a shit about academics, and they really couldn't care less about universities beyond the profit margins. As soon as that grip is loosened, the better for everyone involved, definitely. They're like parasitic real estate agents, like ruthless property developers [chuckles].

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JR: Good comparison. So switching the focus to the student for a moment: you write in *The death of homo economicus* that Faiz Siddiqui sued Oxford University for one million Pounds, as he did not receive the top grade "due to the poor

teaching quality" (Fleming, 2017, p. 84). What is the role of students in the neoliberal university? Have they become customers/consumers? The opposing thought would be how can they become producers – to cite another idea which goes back to Walter Benjamin (1934) and has recently been elaborated by Mike Neary (2020)?

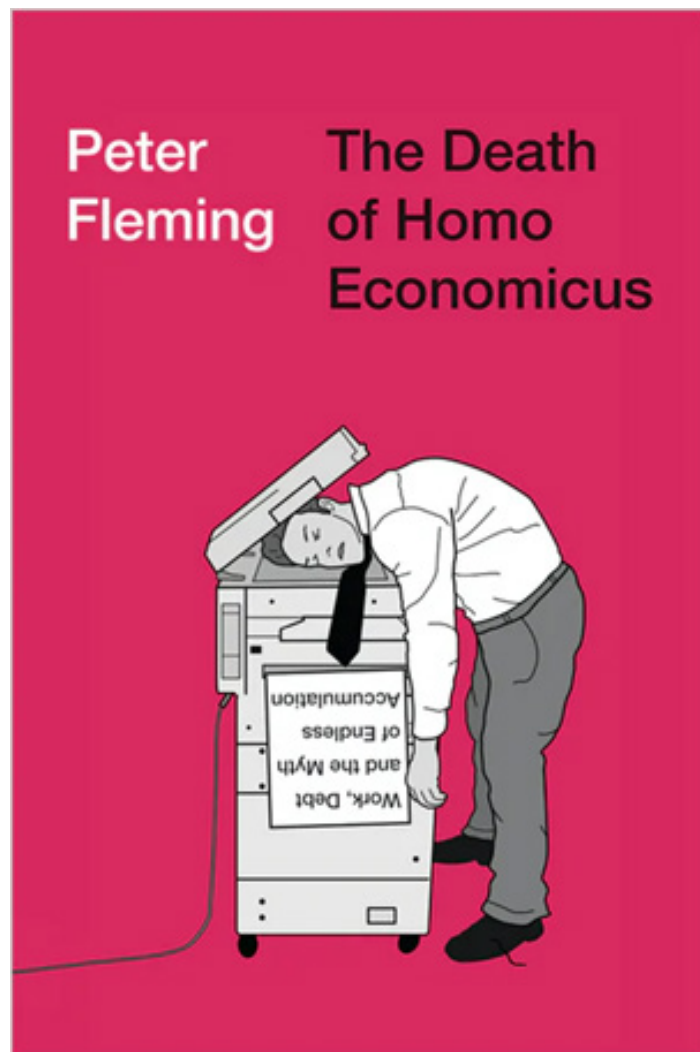


Figure 3: *The death of homo economicus* book cover.

PF: One thing I noticed when researching for the book is that students, in a lot of critiques of the university, don't really get taken too seriously. Students are seen as part of the problem. They're consumers now and they're demanding, sending academics email requests day and night. No doubt the nature of the pedagogical relationship has irredeemably shifted towards commercialism. But there's this almost derogatory narrative regarding students in critical university studies, and this really didn't sit well with me. I think students play a really important role in the emancipation movement if you want to call it that. Despite years of commercialisation, I see this feeling of revolt growing amongst the student bodies I've been involved in. Many students dislike what's occurred to their institutions as much as anyone else and are very uneasy about the managerialism and being treated like a call centre customer, so I think we're allies. We need to work together, and transformational change of higher education cannot occur without students being highly involved. We

must also remember that postgraduate students are also workers in most institutions and members of the casualised workforce, they may want to become academics as well.

JR: I have a philosophical question about the role of higher education. There is a tension between what has been described as reproductionism versus pedagogism. Schugurensky (2014), in a book on Paulo Freire, has described pedagogism as the naive optimism that places excessive confidence in education as the main remedy for all social problems. The opposite of pedagogism is reproductionism, i.e. the paralysing pessimism – and earlier you described yourself as a pessimist – that results from arguing that schools are nothing else than tools of the capitalist state to reinforce social inequalities. In your book *Sugar daddy capitalism. The dark side of the new economy* (2019, p. 75), you refer to Ivan Illich's *Deschooling society* (1970). Would you say Illich is more on the reproductionist side? What are your thoughts, importantly? Does education (within current educational systems) have the potential to build a better, more democratic society?

PF: Jeez, that's a big question there. And we've got lots of nuances there but Illich is definitely on the reproductionist side and nativism, a really interesting precursor to that postmodern critique of science, he was actually a priest or maybe an ex-priest, I don't remember.

JR: Yes he was.

PF: There's always this interesting religious element to his arguments, very radical at that time. I read him like Foucault in many ways as a weird critic of science and its disempowering effects when it begins to inform social institutions. Professional scientific discourse undermines self-help and self-organising and makes us dependent on these power-knowledge relationships that are painful to follow. I think that's right, to a certain extent at least. But I think Illich took the abolition of schooling per se too far. It is not something I would endorse.

JR: Me neither.

PF: I can understand it to a certain extent. But I don't know, if Illich had to sit down and homeschool his kids during a pandemic, he might have arrived at a different viewpoint. Jeez, it's something else (everybody laughs). After half a day of homeschooling, I'm all for those zones of containment we call modern education. 'Take them off me! Take them off my hands' (everybody laughs)! 'Give me some peace!' But I think that pedagogy and education are clearly a very important part of any emancipatory project. I do think there is an important truth to it. For example, Michael Sandel's (2020) *Tyranny of merit*: I don't know if you've come across this book? He argues that one of the problems with the neoliberalisation of education in universities, and espoused by many US presidents and administrations, is that it proclaims university education is the be-all-and-end-all. 'Get it regardless of the cost, regardless of the consequences in terms of student loans'. Sandel is very critical of this argument, arguing that it misleadingly places the blame for spiralling inequality on education. 'You are poor because you don't have a degree.' That's a convenient way out for the ultra-rich as class power

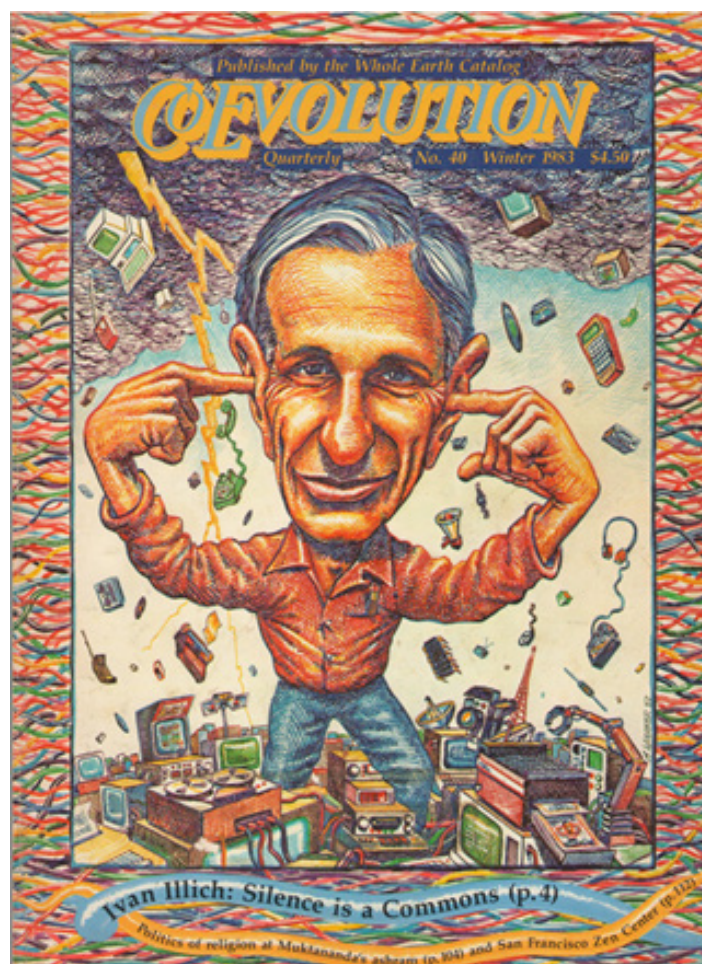


Figure 4: Cover of CoEvolution Quarterly, winter 1983.

is totally omitted from the picture. And it also places a huge burden on middle class and working-class folk. 'It's your fault you're struggling because you didn't go to university'. I agree with Sandel that this narrative is deeply problematic and harmful. It turns education – or at least the ideology of education – into a weapon of class oppression, whilst disingenuously spouting the virtues of merit.

Ultimately, I guess, I still hold on to the importance of study, going back to Stefano [Harney] and Fred [Moten], which really changed the whole way I've thought about this problem. *The undercommons* is a great book (Harney & Moten, 2013). That study is essential, and whether it happens in an institutional context or not is beside the point, but it has to happen in a supportive context.

JR: We asked a similar question to another friend of Stephen before: Martin Parker. He was saying that he doesn't believe in binaries (Parker et al., 2021). 'It's a bit of both' which I thought was a good answer, too. It does have reproductionist elements, obviously, but it's still a good thing: Education.

PF: I guess we are biased though as educators.

JR: We certainly are. My next question is related to an earlier one about Humboldt that we have already talked about. There have obviously been other visions of the university. Apart from yearning for Derrida's utopian vision of a university

“sans condition” with a no-strings-attached funding structure, what can the critical pedagogue in the employ of a university do about the crisis of higher education? You appear to regard Stefano Harney & Fred Moten’s (2013) call for decolonisation from the inside out as more realistic than Derrida’s utopia (though you do not regard them as binaries). Their aim is to arrive at a new conception of scholarship and pedagogy in the undercommons. In Harney and Moten’s analysis, the university becomes a place of refuge and a source of resources for critical projects in which academics problematise the university as well as themselves. How would you conceptualise and describe the undercommons, what is your take? You’ve already said earlier that it does not even need to be in the university.

PF: I think the undercommons is a really important concept. We really saw this in full flight with the Covid-19 pandemic, when everyone had to push our classes online: just the sheer amount of improvisation and knowledge sharing among academics that occurred, drawing on the depths of our professional knowledge, our professional and personal lives to make it work. It seemed to me that we did this not because of authority but despite it – despite the managerialism that surrounds us every moment within the university. I find this really interesting. At this crucial point during the crisis, management hierarchies were superfluous. They’d actually become an impediment to getting things done on the ground. This is a good example of the undercommons at work and the reason why universities still have a heartbeat despite all of the very dark business suits trying to run the show. The commons is where the lifeblood of the institution still comes from. It’s a shame that it flitted away once the situation stabilised during the pandemic, as we had the university in our hands there for six months. That now seems to have disappeared. The senior executives of the neoliberal university certainly didn’t let a good crisis go to waste. But the point is, perhaps more importantly, that we did. Anyways, the key idea about the undercommons is self-management. It begs the question of whether we really need these tall and mushrooming hierarchies. Probably not is my guess. All of this is linked to the state as well, government policy related to funding streams, accreditation agencies, ‘research excellent exercises’ and so forth. Every critique of the neoliberal university needs a robust theory of the capitalist state as well.

JR: Earlier, you were actually making a cross-reference to Scandinavian universities that they seem to do things a little bit better than other countries within all the gloom and doom? Are there actually any encouraging examples of countries that manage higher education relatively well, or universities that do things better than others?

PF: It’s a bit of a cliché to say, ‘oh Scandinavia’, because it’s been pretty heavily hit by the ideology of neoclassical economics too, but perhaps not to the same extent as the UK, the U.S. and countries that have followed this path. Finland has a pretty interesting model, as do parts of Canada, particularly Quebec, although things are changing rapidly there too. Germany is quite an interesting case in the way in which they run their institutions. And you have some countries where senior executives are elected from peers. But most of the Western world has really screwed up their

university systems, to be honest. Perhaps it’s better to look to non-western countries for inspiration in terms of your question.

JR: I’ve been out of Germany for way too long. My impression is also that it’s not quite as bad as in the UK and some other countries. But there is maybe the same trend and maybe Germany is just a couple of years behind that trend. That’s my concern.

PF: You’re probably right.

JR: Our next question is a bit of a biographical question, I hope you don’t mind and it’s not too intrusive a question. In *The death of homo economicus*, you briefly refer to your working-class background and narrate a surreal encounter at the unemployment office in Dunedin (New Zealand) in 1991 (Fleming, 2017, p. 146). Could you please tell us a little more about your early biography, what was your schooling, childhood and youth like and what made you study the subjects that you offered at University? How did your own educational experience influence your own views on teaching and learning?

PF: I think it probably did. That encounter at the unemployment office, I had forgotten I’d written about that, it was really awful. New Zealand had lurched from this kind of social democracy, which had its own problems – but social-democratic problems – to this right-wing ‘experiment’. That was the terminology used by U.S. neoclassical economists who watched with glee from a distance. ‘Let’s fully marketise and commercialise everyday life from top to bottom in the span of like four or five years’. Roger Douglas was the Minister of Finance in New Zealand, and he was a big proponent of neoliberalism in full bloom.

My father was a school teacher and the headmaster, but his father was a coal miner. I was the first in my family to graduate from university. My father was also an activist for the Labour Party in the 1970s. It was all very weird. He was quite a left-wing guy, but the Labour Party of course were the main vehicle for the neoliberalisation of New Zealand in the 1980s, as was the case in other countries as well. The Labour Party were involved in some horrible class betrayal basically. But my father died very young, so I don’t think he got to see most of it. My mother was a housewife, so we ended up on welfare and, and then I’d become a bit of a musician.

JR: Oh really?

PF: Yeah. I found myself unemployed, like thousands and thousands of other 20-year olds and went into the unemployment office. And the guy was basically a drill sergeant with a tie. He hated unemployed people and so I guess was suited to the position. I told him that I didn’t really want to work at McDonalds. And he goes right there to cut off my dole. ‘You’re on your own’.

I got organised and went to university. And then just managed to do scholarships through to my PhD, and was exposed to structural Marxism from my third-year undergrad. And that’s really when I got turned on intellectually. This

unlocked the world for me and made sense. I had some great teachers from the U.S. who were based in Dunedin at University of Otago, and they were talking about world systems theory, Althusser and theories of the state -- along with the mainstream stuff of course

JR: You studied largely economics?

PF: It was a different setup back then in New Zealand, it was like social sciences. So you'd have a bit of business, you'd have a bit of economics, you'd have a bit of everything. There was no business school then – they're a recent invention outside of the US.

JR: May I ask what kind of music you made?

PF: It was Ska actually, and Reggae.

JR: Something like Madness or The Specials?

PF: With a little bit of hip hop, yeah.

JR: Fantastic. The next question is about your international experience. You have taught at Cambridge University, Queen Mary University of London, Cass Business School, and currently at UTS [University of Sydney Technology]. How has this teaching in different countries, and giving presentations in many different countries, shaped your view of the world and that of higher education?

PF: I guess it's opened my eyes to the spirit of a model – the model that is the topic in the book, and that model has replicated itself in all of the countries in which I've lived and worked in and, and also quickly, as these models have spread quickly. When I first started at Cambridge, nearly 20 years ago, I was told, 'do not worry about publishing for the next few years, you've just finished your PhD, you must be tired, take a rest and read'. [Everybody laughs.]

JR: How nice!

PF: That may have been indicative of Cambridge rather than other institutions. But even at Cambridge now, you wouldn't hear that happen, right? So the pressures have changed a lot over the last 15 years or so. And as I said, it has happened really quickly. I wasn't in the previous system, but I could see echoes or vestiges of the previous system when I started out as an academic. All of those metrics and the things that we're talking about weren't as strident as they are today. Coming into this today as a junior lecturer, it must be just so difficult. I don't think I could do it. To be honest, I think I'd fail to hit my targets!

JR: I very much doubt that. There is much focus on student employability these days. This can be related to your books on work – *The mythology of work* (2015) and *Resisting work* (2014). If one were forced to summarise the bulk of your vast academic output in a few words, would it be fair to say that it has focused on the crisis of work?

PF: I think you're right: the crisis of work has been a defining feature of Western capitalism for some time. And weirdly, that crisis has been normalised or institutionalised. A new

normal. That has been a real interest in most of my research, especially how work is no longer about manual or cognitive outputs, but has morphed into the ceremonial ritual detached from anything meaningful or useful to society. Also, with the help of technology, it has become something that follows us around like an evil twin. Existential almost. Linking these things – which most of us can relate to on a personal level – to changes in the political economy has been my goal.

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JR: You appear to be a very hard worker yourself, your academic and journalistic (for The Guardian and the BBC) output is extremely prolific. Is this a 'contradiction', is this self-exploitation or is writing a joyous – or necessary – activity for you?

PF: I think it is fear of death basically. [Everybody laughs.] Because that's the only thing that gets us going in the end. Time is running out. The clock is ticking. And then it's infinite black with no return. So try to leave some positive traces. I guess I'm also a consummate auto-exploiter [laughter]. I don't find it particularly enjoyable, to be honest, writing books, I don't like the person I become. And, I don't like being that focused on something for a long period, it does some weird things to you. I find it very unnatural. But something that obviously you have to do, I feel, to get a story across.

JR: I was reading in *The mythology of work* that you were saying that book-writing is "an unpleasant and laborious affair" and that you refer to your "study space at home as the 'torture chamber'" (Fleming, 2015, p. 190). [Laughter] So that would also be confirmed by you just now.

PF: I always think that writing is a good excuse to read. Reading I really enjoy. If all I had to do to be an academic was reading! 'You don't have to write, just read', it'd be lovely, as reading is something I really enjoy.

JR: But at the same time, you seem to be an incredibly fast writer. In *The worst is yet to come* (2018, p. 114), you say that you wrote most of the book over a three-week period. Any advice on how to hone one's writing skills?

PF: I think that everyone's got their own style and unfortunately, I'm a binge writer. Hence my complaints

earlier about enjoyment. I don't think that's a particularly productive way of writing, where you just shut off everything and you get it done in an intense period of time. Probably a more healthy way of approaching writing would be putting in your two hours every morning. I've tried that, but I find it didn't work for me. I like to see an end in the foreseeable future. There's no trick or special technique, it's just getting it done. But to work that quick for me, you have to make sure you're prepared. And to do a lot of reading beforehand and just know your stuff. And I take loads of notes, with a pen and paper, never on a computer. That's the part that takes a long time. Once the argument is formulated, then you can get it down pretty quickly. And it tends to write itself after a certain period. But I don't know many people that enjoy writing. There may be some. It is therapeutic to a certain extent I guess. But it is a difficult, very unnatural thing for humans to do.

JR: But the fact that you're also writing for *The Guardian*, for instance, I think shows that you try to reach out to a larger audience, and I would say that can also be seen in at least some of your books which are not typically academic perhaps. And I mean that as a compliment obviously.

PF: Thank you! Now that's definitely some conscious thing. I'm not particularly against very jargon-orientated books. In fact, I read a lot of books like that and enjoy them. But as for my writing, I do want to have a bit of a wider audience. Even then, I guess *Dark academia* is still not exactly a breeze to read [laughter]. I don't write for *The Guardian* anymore but I did for a while, and you get a wider audience or a wider group of people to communicate with which is nice, but ultimately unfulfilling as a medium.

JR: The next question is a really big picture question. At the end of *The death of homo economicus* (2017, p. 268), you write: "The growing winter of a wasted world, a vapid monoculture of nothingness, is encircling us as we speak... For the future to begin again and history to be made, one has to be correctly poised. Be ready. And therein lies the most important question: will we ever be *worthy* of that history, still yet to come, but certainly demanding a response from us very soon". You wrote this four years ago. May we ask what are your current thoughts on this?

PF: I'm reading a lot of Sartre at the moment – after his famous turn to Marx, although he was really an anarchist struggling with Marx. And he writes in 'Problem of method' (Sartre, 1957), it's about having the right way to look at the world that matters. If you don't have a good method, then you're not going to see anything. I guess it goes back to the old idea of being able to see even the smallest changes as an echo of something coming down the line, like [Walter] Benjamin was talking about. This idea has an intellectual history that I find really interesting, but maybe a little bit apocalyptic in that sense [laughs]. I'm not too sure if I'd subscribe to the apocalypse quite as I did when I was writing that book. Is that how it ends? I don't remember?

JR: It is.

PF: I think the apocalypse will be very disappointing. [laughter] It won't be as colourful as that.

JR: So we're almost at the end of my barrage of questions. And thank you so much for humouring us.

PF: No worries. Thanks for those questions! It's really interesting to discuss those issues.

JR: Could you please tell us about your future projects? You were saying you don't particularly enjoy writing books, but of course from our own selfish interests, we hope that you will continue writing.

PF: I'm working on a couple of things. I'm working on a couple of articles on Jean-Paul Sartre, the *Critique of dialectical reason* (Sartre, 1960), which is a difficult book to get to grips with, but I'm finding it very fascinating. And I'm writing on, in particular, his theory of organisations and resistance. I think it is really interesting what he has to say. And also, I've got a book proposal that's under scrutiny at Bloomsbury. It is with a good friend of mine in New Zealand, and that's going to be fun to write if they like the proposal. But it's going to be a bit different. It's going to be a kind of 'Rules for radicals', not quite self-help, but in that genre. And it'll be written with a co-author, which I haven't done for years. It'll be either great or awful. You know what it's like when you're writing with other people? And I've just finished another piece on the university. That's for an online open access journal *Emancipations* (Fleming, 2021b). So I don't know if you've come across this journal, that's going to be an inaugural issue. James Chamberlain and Albenaz Azmanova are the editors of that. So that's promising to be a really interesting journal. I've really enjoyed writing that piece. And so they're the main things that I'm working on at the moment.

JR: Is there anything else that you would like to talk about below?

PF: No, I think that's cool. Thanks for that. It's a bit of a blast from the past with the other books, which is nice and it's cool. Thank you very much for inviting me to chat with you both and let me know if there's anything else I can do.

JR: Thank you so much.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Stevphen Shukaitis for contacting Peter Fleming on behalf of JALT and also for his much-appreciated input and commenting on an earlier draft of the interview transcript. Also, the research assistance by Tammy Tan is acknowledged with gratitude.

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