I would like to offer and discuss three particular themes that emerge out of a contemporary (Marxist) discourse on the university, which to me should belong to critical management studies (CMS). The important thing here is that CMS applies its thought also to its own locality, i.e. the university and the business school. Particularly the first theme will be familiar to a CMS audience, but the latter two are perhaps less widely debated and thus merit further discussion within CMS and the business school. I am taking these themes up here because all of them deal with the locality that is the university, and thus also the business school, and the way we as academics relate to this locality. Insofar as some of the trends in the university are global, these counter discourses might also be applicable in Aotearoa/New Zealand (A/NZ), and they are certainly global in intent. I am not, however, very familiar with the particular context of A/NZ universities, so would like to discuss with the audience in how far all this applies or can be applied in A/NZ.

University without ideas

This particular aspect of contemporary discourses on the university deals with the idea of the university, or, rather, its absence. This was most clearly expressed in Bill Readings’ *The University in Ruins* (1996). Readings’ argument is that whatever ideas of the university might have served in the past to guide university life and to unite it, none of them are functional today. Neither the model of the university as a place for the indoctrination of national culture, nor any other such image still reigns. Instead, Readings outlines an image of ‘the university in ruins’ that only holds together because of an administrative apparatus geared towards ‘excellence’. ‘Excellence’ here can mean anything, and anything can be done or performed ‘excellently’. For Readings this is a nightmare, in the way the discourse of excellence purges university life of any other value systems that might guide its operations.

While Readings is critical of this plight of the university, Stanley Fish (2005) is keen to endorse it. He embraces the image of the university as only united by administration, which he sees as merely facilitating whatever academic activity might be going on there. Fish “celebrates disciplinary insularity and resists all efforts to explain or evaluate what we do in the academy by measures or aspirations larger or more general than the measures (again internal) and aspirations academics stipulate for themselves” (2004: 279). He considers himself to be ‘the perfect dean for the modern posthistorical university’.
If you ask me in the service of what do you perform your pragmatic acts of middle management, I will respond with a blank stare and a glassy eye. And if you ask me what is your theory or vision of education – the question behind all the others – I will immediately run in the opposite direction. No theory, no urgent mission, no socio-political cause. (2004: 280)

What of course is missing in Fish’s pragmatic perspective is any account of what else, other than his personal vision or theory, might be driving the university and its administrative apparatus. And here the work done in CMS and elsewhere on the commodification and managerialization of the university is most relevant (e.g. Aronowitz, 2000; Giroux, 2002; Parker and Jary, 1995; Prichard and Willmott, 1997; Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004). What emerges here is a picture of the university that is driven more by the market, corporate interest, and managerial imperatives, than it is by academic logic. And what becomes necessary is to conceptualise the struggles that are taking place within these ruins of the university, and to develop and defend an image of the university and practice of university life that puts the academic problematic at its centre.

**Academic labour**

An area of work on the university that is perhaps less known to scholars within organization studies is that emerging out of the struggles, mostly by postgraduate students, regarding academic labour in the US (e.g. Aronowitz, 2000; Bousquet, 2008; Martin, 1997; Terranova and Bousquet, 2004). A lot of this is succinctly summarised and discussed in Marc Bousquet’s *How the University Works*. Drawing on his own experience of and engagement with the political activity of graduate employees at US universities, he draws out an image of academic labour that is quite shocking. He discusses such trends as the move towards contingent labour in the academy; the move towards the employment of more ‘nondegreed’ labour (PhD and Masters students) as opposed to degreed and tenured faculty, and the concomitant hierarchization of faculty; and the labour performed by students.

For example, with regards to what he calls ‘job market theory’ – i.e. the idea that doctoral students, not to mention other students, are training for a job, in the academy or elsewhere – he writes:

> From the standpoint of the organized graduate employee, the situation is clear. Increasingly, the holders of the doctoral degree are not so much the *products* of the graduate-employee labor system as its *by-products*, insofar as the labor system exists primarily to recruit, train, supervise, and legitimate the employment of nondegreed students and contingent faculty. (2008: 21)

The PhD student emerges here not as a scholar lucky enough to be on the road to full-time permanent employment as faculty, but rather as one exploited in the academic labour machine along the way to his (useless) doctoral degree. Similarly, Bousquet highlights the plight of more and more undergraduate students, who are supposed to be in education, but are often used as cheap labour in the service industry and elsewhere. Tiziana Terranova notes succinctly:

> There is this weird conjuring trick where they are really ‘sold’ this image of themselves as customers in the university supermarket, while for many of them the reality is that they are working in supermarkets, hospitals, and temping in offices to pay for their maintenance while they are studying. (Terranova, in Terranova and Bousquet, 2004)
This literature also points to the consequences this has for tenured faculty, with regards to their labour being undervalued as a result of the cheap labour employed elsewhere. What emerges overall is an image of the university not as excluded from the economy, or one that merely produces trained labourers, but one that is already part of the economy, and one in which the exploitation of labour already takes place on a daily basis.

What seems to be relevant in the CMS discussion of the university and the business school is that this kind of work on academic labour turns our discourses on work and the economy inwards towards an analysis of our own labour, and thus leads towards an understanding of our own locality. In how far these trends, which were mostly identified and are perhaps most prevalent in the US, also apply to universities in the UK or A/NZ is something I would like to discuss.

**Common knowledge**

Another contemporary discourse on the university has to do with the production of knowledge. There is certainly a wide debate within CMS regarding the function and production of knowledge within the academy and the business school (e.g. Pfeffer and Fong, 2002; Tinker, 2004; Starkey and Tempest, 2005; Bridgman, 2007a, b). The framing of the question here has more often than not revolved around whether the business school is or is not producing ‘useful’ knowledge, mostly with regards to its perceived clientele, managers, and an attempt to redefine what the clientele of the business school, and thus the kind of knowledge required, might be.

As Harney (2007) has pointed out, what is odd about much of this discussion is that it still assumes that the business school is a site for the ‘socialization’ of managers, i.e. that students of the business school will at one point become managers, if they aren’t already. The question of the production of knowledge is thus framed in terms of how an academic might engage with a manager, and what the former might have to offer to the latter, and how a critical engagement might take place. At this point it might be worth considering what kind of students we are meeting in our classrooms, and how many of them will be managers.

What kind of knowledge might be useful for these students? How are we to address them? This question is not answered by ‘as future managers’ but rather by ‘as working subjects’ by much contemporary Marxist work (e.g. Moten and Harney, 2004; Terranova and Bousquet, 2004; Tinker, 2004; *edu-factory*), much of it currently being discussed under the activities organized by the *edu-factory* collective, and inspired by autonomist Marxism. The discussion above on the commodification of the university and academic labour already produces a certain knowledge that does not resemble what is usually on offer in business schools, and one that is already not geared towards managed, but rather towards the labouring subject.

It is also a discourse which imagines a different organization of society. To borrow the words of Jason Read (2008):

> Is knowledge a social good, a common, which must circulate in order to produce effects? Or is it a commodity, something that can be purchased, an investment that has value only as property? These conflicting understandings of the value of knowledge are conflicts that are embodied in
practices of the university, in its structure. As such they have the potential to extend beyond the ivory towers of the university, to spill over into two very different understandings of the organization of society: one based on the commodity, on private possession of knowledge, resources, and rights, the other based on the commons.

What the discourse that employs terms such as ‘mass intellectuality’ and ‘general intellect’ aims at is a conception of knowledge that serves the masses and not managers (much of the imagery is closely associated with informatics and the promises of the internet). To properly present such an account of knowledge and its relation to a certain Marxist conception of the role of theory etc. would require more space than is available here. What I would like to discuss though with participants, is how they address their students, that is, who they think they are talking to, what kind of people their student body is made of, and what kinds of knowledge they seek to provide for them.

References


