AOSIS

Academentia, management and satire: 'The good, the bad and the ugly'

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Orientation: The argument rethinks current managerial practices in higher education.

Research purpose: Satire beckons when normal science cannot reproduce itself or shift to account for different ways of doing things. When reality mimics satire, satire becomes an appropriate methodology. Such literary approaches can reveal what normal science cannot.

Motivation for the study: To add to critical management studies and the combatting of academentia as an institutional condition.

Research design, approach and method: The general methodology derives from both literary and business principles read through critical management studies and cultural studies. Autoethnography is shown here to be useful within accounting and management studies. The Semler and the Kalahari management practices explicitly specify the need to rethink 'operational models'.

Main findings: No findings are offered in the conventional sense. Rather, relations are analysed and conclusions result from my own internal dialogue as a central player in the case study. The 'transformation' objectives of governance were disconnected from educational purposes. The resulting dramatic narrative hopefully appeals to readers in terms of their own lived conditions: can readers insert themselves into the narrative in terms of their own experiences?

Practical and/or managerial implications: Institutions to be managed as adhocracies. What has been learned after 20 years of transformation and restructuring, if anything?

Contribution and/or value-add: An engagement with critical management studies from the perspective of cultural studies identifies some solutions. Like the former, the latter examines issues of power relations, in this case, relations subsisting within administrative systems rather than the more usual framing as being between classes, races, ethnicities and genders.

Keywords: academic corporatisation; critical management studies; university management; autoethnography; academentia; transformation; South Africa.

Introduction

The destabilising characters

Every now and again, much to everyone's surprise, and in transgression of the positivist tradition, academics do break with convention. A case in point is the canceled 2022 colloquium, titled 'Uncomfortable issues in management and business ethics: "The good, the bad, and the ugly".' The call for the colloquium referred to Sergio Leone's (1966) 'Spaghetti Western' with the same title. Geoff Goldman (2022) pointed out:

> [I]n this film, there is no 'good' character. Even though Blondie (Clint Eastwood) is seen as 'the good', he is essentially a 'con-man' … all three characters leave one feeling uncomfortable … The parallels to management and ethics in the workplace are striking, as the 'good', the 'bad' and the 'ugly' are encountered in every organisational setting, and each has its own ethical repercussions. Oftentimes, the actions and behaviours associated with these character types is condoned as 'that's the way business works', 'organisations function differently', or 'that is what is needed to get the job done', with very little tolerance of overt criticism thereof. (n.p.)

Goldman (2022) was hoping to attract topics that would challenge convention and ask 'uncomfortable (but necessary) questions', in confronting staid 'mainstream' management theory. The topics suggested included the coercive dominance of capitalism, struggles of voice

equity in the workplace, uneven power relations, the false hope prophecy of entrepreneurship and the managerialist coercion of professional vocation. Catching my eye, the conference call observed that (Goldman 2022):

> Many scholars have that manuscript that has been prepared, but the author is hesitant to submit it anywhere, as he or she knows it will be rejected outright, as the topic is too controversial. These are the papers we are interested in.

One such contribution is the Italian-led film genre – to which Leone's film belongs – fractured, critiqued and demythologised the good versus evil conventions of previous Hollywood Westerns. As Goldman suggests, they initiated morally ambiguous anti-heroes in a bleaker and much more complex West who confronted elite corruption. Similarly, the 'critical' in critical management studies (CMS), which has an affinity with cultural studies (CS), has comparable potency. As anti-hero transdisciplinary disciplines, both CMS and CS ask uncomfortable questions of prevailing orthodoxies. This is the task set in Goldman's (ed. 2021) edited book, which devises alternative epistemologies that, such as CS, focusses on the analysis of power relations. Like with the Spaghetti Westerns, CMS and CS offer resistance and the promise of, if only temporary, class emancipation. Perhaps rather over-defensively, Goldman (ed. 2021) starts his book with a 'self-justification':

> Being entrenched in the positivist tradition is arguably a major Achilles' Heel for the progression of management as a field of inquiry. Positivists do not engage in metatheoretical debate, as it is seen as a fruitless exercise. Positivists value neutrality, autonomy and impartiality in scholarship, leaving no room for the cultural, political and social realities that discourse functions within. (p. 1)

The book's opening statement is that CMS provides the peripheral point of view with a voice, presenting a space where scholars can engage with South African realities surrounding political, cultural, social and historic contexts and issues in management. 'Critical' and 'cultural' studies are epistemologically two sides of the same coin. The 'critical' component embraces social research in problematising how knowledge is created, by whom, with what objectives – ideological and otherwise. Cultural studies furthermore examine popular cultures in resistance no matter the mode of production to which they are responding (see eds. Connell & Hilton 2016). Both paradigms are uneasy subjects, although critical, of whatever mode of production is being examined. Each, while subjects of, and straying from normal science, such as the gunslingers, do cross ethical, methodological and theoretical boundaries. They are concerned with the meta rather than just discrete measurable positivist dimensions. Both CMS and CS underpin the morally ambivalent spaghetti gunslingers on behalf of the oppressed facing off elite forces far more powerful and much more organised, where the sheriff not only has to collect taxes but also keep the peace and order.

My own unexpected CMS trajectory stemmed from a 2010 invitation by the Corporate Relations division of the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) to write a light-hearted monthly column for the campus newspaper. My brief as an authorised discursive spaghetti gunman was to restore staff trust in the publication and institution that had been seriously damaged by an ill-advised, politically motivated merger between the Natal and Durban-Westville universities. The process had paid little heed to the application of management theory in planning and implementing the merger. Rather, an extreme authoritarianism propelled by an inefficient neoliberalism justified as a democratising transformation was forced upon the new institution by the newly installed liberation government during the early 2000s. Top-heavy and expensive self-serving management structures were instituted (see Guest & Stella 2018; eds. Makgoba & Mubangizi 2010). Yet, their executives demanded 'transformation', a quasi-neoliberal imperative concealed under an opaque ideological Africanist discourse, often at the expense of soul, collegiality and academic freedom. The Chetty and Merrett (2014) exposé of regressive forms of university transformation examines these consequences in terms of liberal democracies, enlightenment and autonomy (see also Benetar 2021; Mekoa 2018), among others (Maake 2011) and from a vice chancellors' perspective (see Jansen 2017).

As a consequence of these contending intertwined processes, the 2000s was the decade when many previously democratically managed South African campuses had squandered their humanist and collegial dimensions (Van Schalkwyk & Cloete 2023). Academics were reconstituted as factory workers, students interpellated as 'clients' and vice chancellors and their teams imaged themselves as chief executive officers (CEOs), securing excessive salaries, justified as 'market-related' (Bertelsen 1998; Cloete 2006; Duncan 2014). Human resource (HR) divisions constituted themselves as classic Althusserian (1971) ideological state apparatuses in rebalancing past inequities. No matter their officially imposed racial determinations, academics now have less protection compared to factory workers who can knock off at the end of the day, and whose unions will protect them from extreme exploitation.

The *UKZNdaba* monthly column that I wrote for the campus newspaper was a response to this kind of top-down transformation. For 10 years, it composed a satirical analysis of what this columnist considered as mismanagement, the reasons for it and the campus consequences thereof. In response, Professor of English, Mike Chapman (2021:Preface) wrote that inquiry is most effectively leveraged with the weapons of the satirist – irony, exaggeration, ridicule, and humour. These literary techniques are deployed here as a reminder that the mind-numbing controls of managerial tick-boxing ultimately do not defeat human resilience, imagination or the antidote of laughter. Indeed, bitter laughter is the critical role delivered by newspaper cartoonists. From these columns emerged the book, *Contemporary Campus Life: Transformation, Manic Managerialism and Academentia* (Tomaselli 2021b) that incorporated responses from my many readers who recognised themselves as participants on

the same stage (see Van Der Linde 2023) as did one of the reviewers of this article.[1]

Contemporary Campus Life examines my experiences in academia, specifically in relation to post-apartheid experiences, offering global comparisons. Discourses of transformation emerged from the mid-1990s as democratising and humanist strategies to reorganise institutions under a new dispensation that would transcend the apartheid legacy in sites of governance, demographic equity, re-curriculation, support for first-generation students; professionalisation of teaching; and the mainstreaming of community engagement (see Leuscher 2023). However, as practised, transformation soon regressed into power plays, racial engineering and intensification of line-management hierarchies. Simultaneously, capture of university counsels and some procurement divisions by corrupt elements and organised criminal syndicates occurred especially within public institutions (see Jansen 2023). South African universities thus were simultaneously negotiating imposed and instrumentalist but legal neoliberal imperatives while also having to address criminality from both within and without.

It was no longer entirely clear just who the good, the bad and the ugly were. New sheriffs – the con men – were protecting new vested and often opaque interests. From outside the academic enterprise, the transformation underway was impenetrable. However, from the inside, one could collect experiential information on how all these processes were affecting the university.

Auto-ethnography: An immersed lens

Autoethnography analyses the personal in relation to cultural experience, opening new lenses, redefining the relationship between subject and object (see, e.g. eds. Adams, Jones & Ellis 2013). As such, autoethnographic researchers transgress the restrictions of scientific method and its distancing objectivity, but at the risk of alienating themselves from their orthodox colleagues adhering to normal science.

Autoethnographers delve into the messiness of the real world and their often-fraught personal relations with it. That's often nerve-wracking in the doing. Goldman's cancelled conference had perhaps promised something of a safe space for such academically unusual immersive discussions asking unsettling questions about moral ambiguity, surveillance and class alliances.

South Africa offers a uniquely nurturing base for autoethnography in comparison to other African countries (Mara & Thompson 2022). Factors contributing to this prominence might be because of the underlying CS presence

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1. This reviewer who self-identified as 'an academic of colour' identified with my narrative in terms of his or her own experiences while working at UKZN over a 20-year period. As 'affect', this response is indicative of a kind of triangulation of common experiences, which was further evident in all the book reviews, as these situations occurring in the meta dimensions of knowledge problematisation were being experienced (by the reviewers at least) in one way or another across the Anglo-Saxon academic world.

linked to the institutional emphasis on post-apartheid discussions about transformation, social accountability, and redress. Cultural studies was suggested, for example, to be the watchdog watching the watchdog (the media during apartheid) (Strelitz & Steenveld 1998). When used as an evocative tactical intervention, for example, the Venter and De Villiers (2013) autoethnographic study of the ambiguous relationship between the accounting profession and academe, offers one such illustration. Although locating themselves as participants in the accounting profession, they however reveal little else about themselves, muting the approach's emotive and rawer lived power. Their objective was to position themselves as disrupters who ask about the assignment of professional loyalties.

Marius Pretorius et al. (2021) similarly apply the 'analytical' strand of autoethnography (Anderson 2006), asking the question about management's penchant for promoting solutions that often fail. Such as with Venter and De Villers (2013), their autoethnography assumes the validity of immersed research experiences. They observe that 'The research was triggered by abductive observations which may lead the argument to originate from a single unexpected result or unique case' (p. 142).

My own lived relationship within UKZN, and as a global academic subject is now revealed through this autoethnographic narrative. My story is intended to cast some light on self-other relations in making sense of the new post-apartheid university bureaucracy as it affected UKZN's staff and students during the early 2000s.

Discovering critical management studies

It was to my surprise that I was invited in early 2021 by the UJ School of Management Studies (SOMS) to be the launch speaker at its proposed monthly seminar. One of the SOMS Deep Conversation inaugurators had found the precis of my book published in *The Daily Maverick* (Tomaselli 2021a). Soon after, a lengthy review by a critical Australian management scholar and an accountant arrived at my inbox (Klikhauer & Young 2021). Their review reminded me of a lecture I had delivered at Hofstra University in the late 1980s, in its Accounting Programme. Jet lagged and wondering what I was doing among accountants in Hempstead, New York state, I talked about South African vice capital that was being legally laundered through the Bantustan casino resorts network, thereby incubating contradictions that were to contribute to the demise of apartheid 12 years later. Intriguingly, the Hofstra accountants were applying CS to explain accounting as an indicator of power, power relations and hegemony. They were not just teaching the profession as a record of ideologically sterile financial cash flows.

Klikhauer and Young (2021) had systematically mined my analysis of the local, my daily experiences at UKZN as an indicator of manifestations of neoliberalism. They extended my analysis across the Anglo-Saxon world, while also relating my examples to their own experiences in Australia.

Where the South African reviewers of the book fastened on the actual management failures of local universities, the international reviewers examined the globalisation of the corporate imperatives that enabled growing inefficiencies to trail in their wake (see e.g. Greeff 2022).

Auspiciously or perhaps inauspiciously, the book's launch in April 2021 coincided with the devastating fire at the University of Cape Town (UCT). As political economist, Jeremy Seekings (2021) observed of UCT's allegedly inadequate response:

> In today's universities, massive power has been centralised in the hands of managers and the so-called 'Executive' … The devastating fire at the University of Cape Town on 18 April 2021 raises questions about the character and governance of South African universities. (n.p.)

Such was the fractious environment within which *Contemporary Campus Life* was launched, and indeed, one reviewer of this article cautioned reference to Seekings (and his partner) as commentators unauthorised to speak on the matter. The reasons for his excommunication were many, including issues of identity, combative relationship with authority and claims of doing bad science (see South African Journal of Science Special Issue, vol. 116, 2020) 16 years after the UKZN merger. However, this inflection over the relationship between identity, science and who is authorised to speak by whom within an institution, is not what is being addressed here, although my Griot column did find ways of addressing such fractiousness at an earlier time in a different university with a totally different history and a significantly different racial, language, ethnic and class profile.

The five UKZN campuses had been the recurring sites where student-led arson started every year, and which then spread across the country's mainly city universities. The annihilation of the executive offices and public relations division in 2005, the flooding of bathrooms and the burning of libraries was recurrent, resulting in the burning of institutional and public memory (see Ndebele 2017). Threats of violence against lecturers and students wanting to attend class were justified by the protestors in the name of inclusion, fee waivers, transformation and social justice. This behaviour was associated with the 'lost' Zupta decade (2009–2018) during which President Jacob Zuma had enabled state capture by a single recently arrived expatriate Gupta family from India (Chipkin et al. 2012). Violent, threatening and defamatory attacks on honest, senior administrative personnel seeking to eliminate corruption became the new norm.

Explanations for such behaviour tend to evade the frames of normal science, conventional economics and even social and cultural theory that identify resistance as the principle of history. In such circumstances, it is not clear what is being resisted, as illegal appropriation is the intention – by whatever means necessary. While such critical approaches do provide the conceptual scaffolding, in order to make sense of why transformation is clothed in the Fallist discourse as in

#Rhodes, #Fees, #Blade (Minister of Education), and often intensely destructive behaviour and the sabotaging of campus infrastructures, one must examine how power is corrupted and wielded by the contending constituencies, within them, and by whom (see Maylam 2020 for a review of seven books on the topic of Fallism).

Academentia

In facing down these new psychoses unleashed by so-called liberation, I concluded that satire would be the most fruitful analytical framework to use in the post-millennial period. The columns were invited by UKZN Corporate Relations as a means of critically addressing the concerns of staff (academics support workers, deans, administrators), most of whom had become alienated from the new university executive who had been cobbled together from the two institutions now merged into a single unwieldy executive, itself riven with conflict.

Academentia – a state of mental breakdown caused by manic managerialism – is my social metaphor for further analysis of this environment. The concept is not applied as an assault on the mental faculties of contemporary university management; rather it conceptually scaffolds the idea of university managements' practices as seemingly continuous and irreversible degeneration.

As Klikhauer and Young (2021:76) clarify, academentia describes a state of organisational insanity. In post-secondary education, academia combines with 'dementia' to signify progressive impairments to memory, thinking and behaviour. The condition suggests a break with scholarly reality. Conversely, the condition can also afflict the subjects of managerialism such as in the academic sector especially. Here, academentia can assume any of the three dimensions: the professional, mental and automatism. Firstly, professionally institutional managerialism insufflates impersonalised organisational metrics called 'performance', a naturalising process attributed to the needs of 'institution' – an impersonal entity. Secondly, academentia signifies the protracted bureaucracy and policy scaffolds that 'slows down' decision-making. Thirdly, when automatism occurs, institutional decisions become automated duties, schedules, reports and deliverables. As managerialism is computerised, everyone becomes a staff number with automated duties but almost no voice. When this occurs, often-toxic agenda setting is overseen by a university's own managerial apparatchiks that includes academics themselves. These are imposed by a rigid hierarchy populated by multiple tiers of line managers reporting to quasi-CEOs, themselves subservient to governing university counsels. Where councils have been captured by outside criminals, as the university's de facto governors, they are able to position themselves as the controllers of allocative resources (Jansen 2023) and even to siphon funds out of the universities themselves.

The term academentia was first coined by a lesbian radical feminist scholar, Mary Daly, to capture the stultification of

the mind in patriarchal education (Daly & Madsen 2000). In adopting the term, one of Laura Favaro's (2024:663) informants reveals that she is a 'survivor of academentia' (p. 659), although in this instance the context was peer shaming regarding the 'gender wars' that characterise the demonising attitudes of some contemporary queer studies groups about early feminists. Favaro (2024:663) argues that academentia is a useful concept in relation to contemporary critiques of neo-liberalisation, 'contributing additional questions for future, more systematic, scholarly inquiry'. She applies the term in her own research context of 'mad' movements of virulent peer exclusion as her object of inquiry. In her application of the concept, she points academentia to 'the exodus of female academics with feminist views from gender studies because of persecution, for self-preservation or to escape "scholarship that is Thought Police," as one interviewee put it'. The condition, suggests Favaro, brings to mind 'those who claim to hold middle ground positions of feeling "anxious," "depressed," "frightened," "alienated," and in a state of scholarly paralysis' (2024:668). While we should all certainly be mindful of language and naming, literary devices do aid analysis by offering comparison such as in my case, where the term academentia is used to describe conditions operative within an institution, but not of the individuals managing it.

My satirical critique is offered as a metaphor to analyse the excesses, contradictions, and obstructions in contemporary university governance. Such governance is examined via the quirks of often unresponsive administrative systems, deficient software and managers who primarily service their own operational systems rather than people (staff, students), but whom they ironically commonly label as their 'clients'. The administrative systems and the assumptions that underpin them shape the lived relations of teaching, research, science and reasoning within the academy (Beiter 2019). Where Seekings (2021) and Johnson (2021) concluded – rightly or wrongly – that managerial and maintenance failures were a (metaphorical) factor in causation of the flaming disaster at UCT, retired botanist William Bond (2021) proffered a down-to-earth ecological explanation relating to vegetation management and the need to plan for the inevitability of fires, calling on 'radical rethinking'. The academy, they concluded, is not a necessarily safe or well managed space but that it is a contested one. The second reviewer of my article, however, took serious issue with my citation of these two commentators as neither fitted – as with me – the identity authorised by the reviewer to offer comment. My point is a metaphorical one – explanations of causation are not only physical but also psychological, with the conclusions reached depending to a degree on the subjectivity of the observer.

Satire as analysis

The form of the *griot* (the African oral storyteller), whose European equivalent is the Medieval bard, is the editorialiser of the day. The prime question asked is why the new beginning heralded by the 1994 election permitted our entrapment within new often soulless bureaucratic structures. Institutions, after all, are aggregates of ourselves.

Corporatisation and the bureaucratisation of solutions, ironically, was partly because of the demands of new cohorts of first-generation black students whose quest for 'administrative justice' along with neoliberal imperatives during the 1990s resulted in the curtailing of faculty and school decision-making flexibility. Apart from uniform administrative fairness, and a one-size-fits-all set of procedures, this retreat from individuated flexibility addressing the needs of specific individuals partly resulted in the opaque structural inflexibility of the new automated managerialism that had itself to respond to massification of especially the city universities on overwhelming scales in very short periods of time.

My key conceptual sources are derived from Thomas Lyle Martin's (1973) *Malice in Blunderland*. His postmodern compendium – 'an antidote to the flim-flam and flubbery in American bureaucratic life' – offers pithy declarations by economists, managers and especially academic administrators about the ways through which they mess up, especially when things are going right. As a 'logic of no-think, illusions of power, and myths of progress', breeding its own jargon, principles, and axioms, blunderland is found everywhere (Martin 1973:back cover flap). When all else fails, literary techniques provide not only metaphorical and comic relief, but also some insights. Such a method, while offered as spoof, finds its derivation in the well-known Northcote Parkinson and Peter principles, among others.

I now change register in illustrating some instances during the age of academentia.

Can a book be judged by its cover

With reference to *Contemporary Campus Life*, the cover design of a disembodied male's legs running alongside a dark background of vertical bars 'stands for' an inability to escape academentia. Anthropologist David Coplan, cited in the book, responded, 'I see you've turned your peeves into a rock "em expose"'. David was in hospital recovering from the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). To which I replied:

> 'Sorry to hear that you have been metaphorically incarcerated in that other Foucaultian prison, the hospital, as I deal with my own institution's self-styled, new, improved, upgraded performance management system that was advertised like Smarties on every internal email transmitted.'

Harry Wels, co-editor of *Academia in Crisis* (Donskis et al. 2019), confirmed that *Contemporary Campus Life* applies to the Dutch and/or European experience also. Another Dutch anthropologist observed: 'Very British too. At the University of California plenty bureaucracy, rules galore. You learn to ignore it. Is actually peanuts compared to society here overall? Quite mad'. A UCT professor complained about the

sudden deluge of work that had made him grumpy, while counting the days to a restful retirement. Well, the book has a section on 'Grumpy Studies', arising out of these kinds of experiences.

On reading the blurbs on the back cover, my previous student, later my Head of Department, mischievously commented on Jonathan Jansen's blurb, 'We need to get this printed on a mug, maybe a few t-shirts…?' Another wrote tongue-in-cheek: 'I do hope you'll raise the issue around the PMS (performance management systems) (good acronym)'.

To which David Coplan replied shrewdly, 'How did we get along all this time without personal minders?'

We are all implicated in the good, the bad and the ugly of corporatisation, although it is not clear who the sheriff is. The enemy – often – is us (Pogo, the cartoon character)[2] – via our committee work, being obstructive heads, serving on boards and senates and acquiescing without critical debate to questionable instructions, taking politically correct positions and othering each other. These once vibrant micro intra-institutional public spheres have been superseded by performance control that is likely to destroy individual initiative. Where academics/students/subordinates are constituted by their administrations as clients, they may become unconcerned with how products work or why and how things do operate and how use-value is conferred. The obsession with certification rather than education, however, impedes critical thinking – the resolving of problems through first principles, and improving the product and the way that it is made.

This automated acquiescence is a natural consequence of the 'value incongruence' between the tasks of scientists, which are highly uncertain, and quality management, which uses 'inappropriately' deterministic performance standards (Power 2008:15). As John Ziman (2016) observes:

> The administrative apparatus of a democratic state is not well suited to the management of scientific research. Its bureaucratic norms favour routine and reject risk. Its accent on accountability cannot be harmonised with the uncertain promises of experimentation. (Chapter 1)

Klaus Beiter, who chaired the book's launch webinar, introduced the event with this quotation (Collini 2012):

> [I]n several important ways universities are now *less* efficient than they were twenty years ago before the commercial analogy started to be applied in earnest. After all, two of the most important sources of efficiency in intellectual activity are voluntary co-operation and individual autonomy. But these are precisely the kinds of things for which a bureaucratic system leaves little room. We all certainly *report* on ourselves much more fully than we did twenty or thirty years ago, but the unintended by-product of that may be that we concentrate our energies a bit more on doing things that are reportable. It is a mistake to think that if you make people more accountable for

what they do, you will necessarily be making them more efficient at doing it. (p. 84)[3]

The blunders are indexed in all those pithy laws devised by Murphy, Parkinson, and Peter, now relegated to business folklore. Therefore, in our academentia, we repeatedly enact the same errors no matter the consequences, ignoring Albert Einstein's definition of insanity. Academentia and the loss of our ability to work efficiently, loss collegially and failure of campus safety are the results. Digitisation – which eliminates space and time – has compounded the problem, as everything now must be performed immediately during 24-h work cycles.

The cost of performance management systems

In calculating the cost of performance management systems (PMS), let's look at a cost-effectiveness ratio of a hypothetical university that employs 5 000 academic, administrative and support staff.

A total of 5000 staff × 1 h's PMS training = 5000 h consumed on just 1 day of expensive video conferencing use – not including the carbon emissions emitted which, if taxed, might sink the corporation. Add another 5000 h in consultation with line managers plus another 20 000 h filling in the form twice annually. Unremunerated after-hours work is not calculated. Therefore, my response to Coplan, happy in his non-PMS sequestration, was to help the doctors do busy work so that they can fill in their own PMS forms and charge his medical aid to tick all those boxes, while needy real-world patients are screaming for urgent attention.

While the minority percentage of unproductive staff who consume institutional resources on the employment bus will be always with us – such as death and taxes – the issue is how to retain the energy and commitment of the majority of efficient performers. Measuring efficiency and treating academentia with HR-led wellness programmes is not going to persuade the underperformers to be more responsible. Form filling becomes thereby a core key performance indicator that places values on the measuring activity itself, rather than the real productive work. The procrastinators on the university bus will always find ways of evading due diligence no matter how many forms everyone is required to populate.

There simply must be a better way

Managing universities as dynamic organisms rather than as cybernetic machines is one answer I offered on being approached by UKZN to devise a coherent corporate communication strategy to address the problems generated by the merger (see Tomaselli & Caldwell 2019). Both universities were lacking managerial expertise to deal with a shotgun marriage. The peer reviewer who also lived through this difficult period drew attention to the 'white flight' that had occurred as the idea of the liberal university was attacked and as the principle of academic freedom was dismissed as

2.Pogo Possum is a character in the American Cartoon by Walt Kelly.

3.This section partly draws on the book's online launch, available here When Universities are Strangled by Bureaucracy.

one of the privileges of previous patronage systems. Liberal universities in South Africa during apartheid were characterised by faculties that made their own policies subject to ratification from senates, but this no longer applies. The University of KwaZulu-Natal had by the end of the latter half of 1980s come to be known by local Natal constituencies as 'historically black' because of its acceptance of black students from the mid-1980s in the face of state sanction. Its hosting of 72 community-led and community-orientated campus-based projects working in townships and surrounding areas exacerbated tensions with the state. This unofficial local recognition notwithstanding, following the merger, the attrition was across the board as many black, Indian and mixed race personnel also reluctantly relocated to other institutions – or were simply pushed out, as is graphically described by Chetty and Merrett (2014).

The primary contradiction initially manifested in a kind of capital (the executive) versus labour (academics, support, administrators, cleaners, and messengers) stand-off. The actual schisms were much greater than these. While space precludes their discussion here, they were compounded not only by cultural, organisational, administrative and professional conflicts but also intellectual fraud occurring in academic pockets, and the use of KGB[4] surveillance tactics by anarchic staff wanting to delegitimise the work of the embattled executive. These conditions are hardly ever admitted in the theory of management, the sociology of organisations, or the anthropology of interpersonal relations. The mess, confusion and conflicts are sanitised, the theory abstracted, and the survey methods found wanting, whether or not we are discussing normative or critical theory. That is why in some instances less accepted forms of observation and explanation are more suitable, and why many scholars now resort to autoethnography, metaphor and satire as helpful ways out of the sterilising conundrum proffered by theory.

But the framing remains an issue. For example, the many reviewers and commissioning editors through which my book passed described it as 'not scholarly'. But what is scholarly? Thousands of excellent studies have been published on what makes good management practice. Although written by eminent professors and published in scholarly journals, they are largely ignored by the universities that employ them. Such studies were not in evidence during the formation of UKZN, as the implementation had preceded the planning, because of impatient political directives that had no idea of complexity, budgetary considerations and pressing logistical imperatives.

The scholars who should have been consulted up front on management solutions are rewarded for their publication outputs, but not for their conceptual insights. In ignoring their home-grown talent, managers more likely rely on scorched earth private consultancies who recommend converting universities into corporations. Ironically, many such accounting, auditing and business consultancies

4. A Soviet-era government surveillance agency, also termed The Committee for State Security.

contracted by South African universities to audit staff conflicts of interest arising out of internal university criminal capture were directly (or through monumental incompetence) involved in national state capture that ran riot during the 9 years of the Zuma presidency that totally bankrupted state-owned enterprises (RSA 2022:[Zondo Commission]).

What is the solution then?

In 2021, while browsing the shelves of the dusty tented !Xaus Lodge lounge, a surprisingly successful Kalahari poverty alleviation project that applies innovative management techniques in the face of state development planning failure, I found a copy of Ricardo Semler's (1993) book, *Maverick*. The remote, state-funded community-owned desert tourism project that fed over R50 million in multiplier effects into the local desert communities between 2007 and 2022 had been vilified by a Dutch scholar who, misconstruing David Harvey's (2005) theory of neoliberalism, the financial evidence notwithstanding, asserted that this 24-bed facility was the vanguard of voracious international extractive neoliberal tourism capital. The tourism anthropologist's target was the small Black Economic Empowerment (BEE)-compliant lodge management company based in Cape Town that had been contracted by the Lodge's local community owners and who each were granted 10% shareholding of the management company (Tomaselli 2017). The Lodge was built in contravention of most of the state's own development criteria and the BEE firm was the only one that submitted a bid (by invitation). The respective owners knew that they lacked the expertise, skill, or capacity to manage the facility, hence their approach to the small hotelling business. Yet, the venture was mercilessly criticised by some non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and a few state officials, notwithstanding the transparency of the financials, data and books made available to the critics. The questions related to business model, not ownership, to the management company's requirement of trained and educated site management, and of a professional culture of hospitality. The respective desert community owners happily worked within the possible, but external detractors tend to want the impossible, given all the extraordinary considerations that had to be negotiated.

Capital is capital, while its social value is contingent on how it is invested, who it benefits, and how it is managed (e.g. capitalism, socialism, communism, apartheid, mixed modes of production, zuptanomics, theocracies and state economies that turn entire national populations into slaves, such as in North Korea). In the case of !Xaus, the good guys helped save and amortise a rotting carcass and potential environmental hazard on an inaccessible sand dune and who, apart from leveraging what resources were possible from the many state stakeholders, invested their personal funds over a long-term period. In contrast, the NGO and academic detractors had invested nothing material at all. They relentlessly played the ideological auditing role of sheriffs. They were silent about the massive multiplier effect to the local communities because these had not yet generated or proposed any of their members as potential managers of the facility, although they comprised the Lodge's

staff. What is a HR issue then is made into a racial issue irrespective of the actual considerations alleged by outside commentators who are external to the actual communities of ownership. This is not to say that all was always well as different stakeholders haggled over responsibilities for building maintenance and repair of design flaws.

Unfair practices were eliminated by Semler's Brazilian company[5] by its emphasising humanistic successes, decentral management and adhocracy, a flexible, adaptable and informal form of organisation constituted of specialised multidisciplinary function-led teams. The Brazilian CEO had dumped over-regulation for flexibility. Productivity and job satisfaction were meshed with democratised production units. Adhocracy, popularised from Warren Bennis's (1968) work by futurist Alvin Toffler (1970), replaces a rigid corporate approach with decentralised leadership, individual initiative and organic decision-making. In terms of this approach, the contradiction is clear – the Lodge's social responsibility operating principles are simply a tiny microcosm – more or less – of the massive Semler corporation in Brazil – but without easy access to deep funding to facilitate continuous maintenance of an ill-designed structure that is seriously constrained by Park regulations from achieving an economy of scale.

!Xaus's joint management board is drawn from the Lodge's community stakeholders, external organisations reporting to themselves, state entities such as South African National Parks (SANP) and national tourism departments, with a level of inter-reticulated and often opaque ideological complexity that makes the giant Semler firm look relatively uncomplicated. And while all these negotiations are going on, and often going nowhere, working conditions of employees come under strain, as the stakeholders argue about who has responsibility for what.

So how does one address these opaque complexities, complicities, and internal contradictions?

Also, on the dusty lounge shelf overlooking the breath-taking pan below was Jonathan Culler's *On De-construction* (1982). Deconstruction scholars, while still deconstructing mainly literary texts, could also become useful deconstructive economists. Deconstruction examines the internal workings of literary expression and conceptual systems, in terms of the relational quality of meaning, and the assumptions implicit in various forms of expression.

Meanings shift because the language is itself unreliable, signifying that the determination of fixed, underlying meanings within a text are always somewhat elusive. Of course, such a non-structure has to negotiate determining structures, corruption, and pure bloody mindedness. Because reality – thanks to the indeterminacies of language – is therefore difficult to pin down – the literary imagination is more helpful than is usually accepted as it can get into the

cracks that are opaque to positivist methods and automated management. Critical management studies is one such discipline that questions the intact received meanings of the parent discipline, subjecting them to indiscipline and in the creation of floating signifiers that are anathema to normative scholars. The struggles over !Xaus thus can be understood as a struggle between different stakeholder constituencies about what the financial success of the Lodge means, who benefits, who should benefit, and who should control the income, split between many groups and individuals claiming jurisdiction within these networks, themselves not always in agreement.

Similarly, in opposition to Taylorism and Fordism, Semler's firm, Semco built its management style from the bottom up, developing theory from practices implemented by workers themselves in the firm's own factories. The taken-for-granted top-down structure was replaced with a two-way dynamic that vested a degree of power also with the workers on the factory floor, thus searching for solutions through differential experiences that would normally separate labour from management, as occurred recently with Boeing, the outcome of which was that their 737 Max planes were no longer safe to fly. The engineers and workers knew what was wrong – lack of quality control – in the interests of very short-term shareholder profit maximisation, but at the expense of nearly 346 passengers and crew on the two-failing aircraft, not to mention near misses of many others. Shareholder value cannot be maintained under such circumstances of technological failure.

For Semler, technology sometimes accelerates malfunctions and increases the intensity of miscommunication. Computers are unable to rectify mismanagement. Misused, they create a polluting electronic tsunami of more useless and ever more complex software and carbon emissions. Entrenched blundering occurs when businesspeople forget their own identities and humanity and avariciously interpellate themselves as mere subjects of invoicing. Universities similarly find identity in their international rankings, fund raising lists and publication audits. But in South Africa the arson recurs, and the physical intimidation and the assassinations of senior academic whistleblowers continued into 2023. Bodyguards now are the gatekeepers at most university executive offices.

My vision is where faculty again become self-governing and self-propelled adhocracies, where quality is valued over quantity, and where students can engage with the best professors available. What to do with the recalcitrant on the bus is the real issue. At Boeing it was the suits in the executive offices ignoring the warnings of their production staff. Such corporate passengers, who are alert to the exploitable contradictions, have worked out that PMS democratises towards the lowest common denominator. The real challenge in overcoming academentia, dis-economies and inflexibility, will occur with the restoration of democracy, collective accountability, civility, and creativity. Productive academics need time to think, read and write in addition to advising on,

5. Semler is the CEO of Semco Partners, formerly Semco Group founded by Antonio Curt Semler. This investment management company is based in São Paulo, Brazil.

and themselves doing fire prevention, office cleaning and negotiation with protestors. Academics work best in adhocracies, uninterrupted by tick box management and surveillance systems.

What would best swing quality upwards? The answer – PMS adhocracies designed by academics themselves would recognise and measure the quality of what we actually do (such as teaching, editing, peer reviewing, reading, debating, writing for popular media, community service, administration). Academics should be consulted when designing tools of their appraisal, for they do much work beyond that which is captured by the current appraisals. And, at the risk of yet more form-filling, and tongue in cheek, I suggest something of value might be learned were academics to be invited to measure the performances of their line managers, deans, and university executives in relation to their own roles and work. No fires or chants and fallism would be necessary.

It's rare that critical academics admit to learning from industry or industrialists. The Semler approach however suggests that synergies can be found and applied. The next section revisits the two decades of transition.

Humanities to the rescue?

Humanities scholars were at the forefront of critical public commentary during apartheid (1948–1990). From this work, the 1990s burst upon us as a decade cued on Mikhail Gorbachev's *glasnost* and *perestroika* strategy, and full of hope, visions and missions, with new ways of relating to each other. The re-envisioning of our emergent nation embraced from the extreme right to the extreme left, and even on SABC-TV talk shows some guerrilla panellists were hooded to protect their identities. That was Nelson Mandela's gift – not constrained by path dependencies he offered ways of manoeuvring through the past to the future. We did, once have democracy as chaotic as it was – in that decade. But we dropped our guard. The honest intellectuals have however reappeared in pop up form and are again addressing the issues. The Zondo Commission (RSA 2022; see also Buthelezi & Vale 2023) and investigative journalists were the driving forces exposing corruption, along with whistle blowers, academics and civil society. But the financial and symbolic harm done has been devastating.

The real issue is the nature of the interacting triad between bureaucrat, citizen and policy. This I learned from African National Congress (ANC) stalwart Mewa Ramgobin (n.d.), one of the founders of the United Democratic Front and of the Natal Indian Congress. Taking his cue from *perestroika* and its associated *glasnost* strategy, he promoted dialogue, cross-ideology engagements and monuments as beacons of reconciliation. The dialogue was still born, however, and the monuments became the misplaced targets of angry fallist constituencies who resented the failure of populist redistribution during the Zupta decade, even as they defended the ruination of the economy. The outcome has been a regression into ever more strident racial and class conflict. The moment of cultural and heritage reconciliation heralded by 1994 and promoted by Ramgobin went into abeyance as a direct outcome of fallism.

Educational Fordism and corporatisation

Educational Fordism arrived in South Africa in the late 1990s, implemented to encourage 'efficiency' and to address the political imperatives of student massification, the majority of whom were under-educated, under-prepared for campus life, and thinking of the university simply as a certification factory. Campuses were overly stressed as they were not designed for instant population surges. When faculty questioned the resulting corporatisation, this was dismissed by the new university executives as 'resisting transformation' and therefore deemed by them to be 'racist', emphasised after 2016 when transformation became 'decolonisation' – with which everyone is compelled to comply in their research, curricula, performance reporting and day-to-day conversation. The second reviewer of this article, from a different university, for example, invoked this new discourse of institutionalised fallism to dismiss my argument as objectionable. When discourses become institutionalised and measurable they become monologues lacking in dialectical analysis.

Fordism is simply the primitive implementation of Taylorist economic principles for conveyer belt modes of production. Corporatisation was the post-apartheid option applied by some new vice chancellors to dismantle inherited (mainly white) power structures. Centralisation of power in university executives – as was occurring across the Anglo-Saxon world – led the rise of highly adversarial relations. When interpreted through a particular lens, accountability leads to bureaucratisation (Muller 2022:96). Bureaucratisation then results in managerialism, which in turn generates a push for quantification – especially of daily performance. Finally, the combination of these shifts from the premise ('public universities should be accountable') results in an entirely different activity: incentivising individual intellectual outputs with metrics of performance output. Incentives in turn generate the curious contradiction that work critical of the academy is tolerated – but only if it fits the national and international financial reward systems by which universities protect their bottom lines. The scholars internal to universities who lived within the previous adhocracy were subordinated to external planning experts and assessors employed by the very same auditing, accounting and management consulting firms that were later implicated in state capture and national corruption on previously unimaginable scales. Such measurement in turn encourages alienation from the real world as we organise ourselves in terms of incentives and punishments within the homeostatic machine that is now masquerading as a university (or a management consulting firm).

Who can possibly object to a new public management regime that enables benign efficiency? The outcome is often different, however, imposing coercion rather than negotiation, conflict rather than consensus, and decision-making power removed from the rank-and-file academics. Exhaustion and delay are outcomes of bureaucratisation anywhere: too many administrative layers, too many rules, too many ill-trained gatekeepers and too many policies complicate our profession. But these hoops are also the result of a highly litigious society pursuing administrative justice where discretion and flexibility cannot permit exceptions when these are leveraged by the opportunistic to become the new rules.

At root, the too fast massification, the politically driven university mergers, and the simultaneous overnight adoption of new and sometimes rigid multilayered and utterly hierarchal administrative regimes created mega institutions on miniscule budgets, unprepared for the challenges to come. Simultaneously they tried to retain research momentum and secure global ranking improvements. The academics were caught between the global and the local, rankings and chaos on burning campuses, and trying to cope in seriously traumatising environments. To manage massification and deal in redress, universities had to over-bureaucratise simply to manage the demands of delivering the impossible to an impatient student population.

In his inaugural speech as the new University of Witwatersrand (Wits) Vice Chancellor, Professor Zebron Vilakazi (2021:17) put his finger on another hoary issue. Wits University, he said, is 'intellectually elite' but not elitist. As an elite institution, it cannot fix the schooling system, neither the housing shortage nor the responsibilities of the state. It can, working through qualified researchers, advise on solutions.

Concluding remarks

My exorcism of blundering states of mind is to write about it in satirical style, which I know is not everyone's cup of tea. But it is over tea that serious academics, always on journeys of discovery, might find common ground and function best in adhocracies. How to grow such scholars from being the precarious minority to the secure majority is the task that lies ahead. Calls on personal genealogies and popular culture as Goldman (2024) does vest legitimacy in such discourses also, especially as a generator of different ways of thinking about disciplines and social roles in historical contexts.

One of the strengths of autoethnography as applied here is its ability to get beneath the surface of experiences, along with an objective of being self-reflexive, of examining the self in relation to the other as I have tried to do here. The method does not take sides; rather it exposes thoughts, vulnerabilities and insecurities. This is how Goldman (2024) expresses this:

> [T]he more I researched and conversed with certain colleagues, the more I started realising that certain anomalies existed within the discipline of Business Management. It struck me as odd that the majority of Business Management research was conducted from the organisational point of view, or from the perspective of management (see Goldman 2012). How would this lead us to any insight beyond affirming the organisational perspective, or the managerial plan of action, as the legitimate course of action? This is tantamount to asking members of Stalin's Supreme Soviet whether the Soviet government was doing a good job. The only answer one could expect would be 'Yes' … (p. 113)

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