**Conversations in Social Justice:**



**Dark Academia: How Universities Die**

**Podcast transcript**

Series 2. Episode 3.

Contemporary universities have been corporatised, commercialised and financialised in the name of transparency, accountability and 'value for money'. This raises serious questions about the meaning, relevance and viability of social justice within the academy today. In this podcast, in conversation with Peter Fleming, Professor of Organisation Studies at the University of Technology, Sydney, and author of Dark Academia: How Universities Die, Professor of Education, Matthew Clarke, discusses the dilemmas, contradictions and challenges confronting aspirations for social justice within the neoliberalised organisations that contemporary universities have become and asks whether there are any realistic grounds for hope and optimism today.

**Matthew Clarke**

I’m doing this interview for the Institute of Social Justice with Professor Peter Fleming at the University of Technology, Sydney, talking about his recent book, Dark Academia, how universities die. Welcome to this Institute of Social Justice podcast. Peter,

**Peter Fleming**

Thank you very much, Matthew. It's wonderful to speak with you.

**Matthew Clarke**

So just to kick off, can you say a bit more about why you think universities have so wholeheartedly and systematically embraced the doctrines and practices of new public management, public choice theory and other components of the neoliberal playbook?

**Peter Fleming**

I think there are several reasons for why that has happened. Perhaps predominantly, it's because governments of the day have insisted that public institutions in particular, behave as if they are large corporations, because it's tied to funding and they had a very strong ideological view about where higher education should be going. And it certainly wasn't the Social Democratic version of it, that had prevailed for so many years in countries like the UK, the US and so forth. So, I think, you know, in some ways, which makes the whole situation even a bit bleaker, is that the cause of the malaise that so many academics are experiencing today is outside the institution, which gives a sense of disempowerment when it comes to addressing the causes of, you know, the problems that we find in the neoliberal university.

**Matthew Clarke**

The book is infused with a fairly pessimistic tone, I think it's fair to say, and picking up on what you were just saying about the sources of this sort of new model, to what extent do you think it's realistic for staff and students to offer any resistance to this sort of neoliberal model? Academics who are maybe on precarious contracts and, you know, on part time, hourly paid contracts, etc?

**Peter Fleming**

Well, I think there's always the possibility of resistance, but academics have been pretty lousy,to be honest, when it comes to effective, collective resistance. The track record is patchy, to say the say the least. And it certainly hasn't confronted the causes, or stemmed the tide, of the marketization of higher education in most of the Western worlds that I’ve looked at. There have been kind of instances of successful resistance, but nothing that has really changed, you know, moved the dial in terms of the things we're seeing today. But when it comes to precaritisation yeah, well, the whole idea of Uber-ised workforces is that resistance is futile, because you're on your own and so any act of opposition or self-defeating; that’s the case in the gig economy, and I'm sure it's probably quite similar for many casualized academics in higher education. The difference being though, is that, you know, we're not necessarily all isolated in Uber cars, you know, as private citizens; we actually do turn up to the campus, or we did before the pandemic hit, of course. So that may provide a catalyst for collective action. But I think the real issue is where the standard academics with regular contracts, you know, have got to create a bridge with those casualized, precarious academics, because really, it's changing their working conditions as much as, as anyone else, at least creating an institution of anxiety. And so that collective action across the different contract types, I think, is the goal for effective opposition, but it hasn't really happened to a larger extent, hasn't really happened so far.

**Matthew Clarke**

I think part of the issue is the competitive ethic that has become so embedded in this sort of, you know, it's become something of a fetish, not just in higher education, but across the board. And it works as a divide and rule,. so colleagues are competing against each other, departments are competing against each other, universities are competing against each other, countries are competing against each other. And that all works to undermine possibilities for that collective coming together. So, I guess the question then is, you know, how can individuals, what can they do to overcome that, given that the potential price, the cost, of rejecting competition are potentially so high for individuals or for departments or for institutions?

**Peter Fleming**

There's a good question. There's a couple of dimensions that I think are interesting when it comes to tackling that issue. The first one is that, I was amazed when the pandemic hit how much collegiality kind of came to the surface, and you know, a lot of cooperative, informal unpaid labour, in which old divisions kind of fell to the wayside as people knew they had to get together and work together in order to make the immense changes that were caused by the pandemic. And that was really interesting, because that collegiality is there in latent form. And there seems to be a dual consciousness, where that's kind of operating beside, at the other level, a kind of neoclassical-inspired individualism, in which the competition you talk about is a very, very important driver for what we do as academics; and that's interesting, because that has a number of levels as well, because it's not simply the dog eat dog world, competitive ethic of the marketplace, it's also linked to – which makes it particularly pernicious and insidious – It's also linked to our labour of love, right? We want to do well, we want to have space to research, we want to have the autonomy, you know, so I can get on with what I love, not for instrumental reasons, not for pay but for my intrinsic sense of enjoyment in my vocation. And so, I think that marketization of universities has been very cunning to connect that that vocational zeal to the metrics and the instrumental managerialism and the career progression and the rewards and recognition that goes along with that; and that makes it difficult to resist, because we're resisting something that we love, and that we think is actually not neoliberal. But of course, it is, you know, it is; I think that's been one of the reasons why the corporatization of the public university in particular has been so successful.

**Matthew Clarke**

Yeah, no, absolutely. I think, you know, we all get a little buzz of excitement when our citations or -our h-indexes go up,and, you know, we think, people are reading our work...

**Peter Fleming**

Yeah, exactly. So that then, therefore, leaves the option of self-denial, you know, which sounds a little bit too sacrificial for my liking. You know, I don't want to give up on my vocational love for what I do my labour of love. So it makes opposition to what is occurring, the institutional logic of that marketization process, which, of course, is difficult, because it's a mimesis,, you know, so the university, the corporate university, is ironic, because it's not a corporation, okay. So it's, it makes it very interesting when it comes to actually resisting these institutions as well, because it's not like resisting a big business, because it's not a big business, you know. It's a public institution that's pretending to be one. And that creates all sorts of interesting smokes and mirrors to negotiate as well. But the one that I think is really, really important to think about is how our intrinsic academic values have been tagged or hooked on to the neoliberal project. And that's one of the reasons why it's very difficult to counteract.

**Matthew Clarke**

Yes. So, a sort of related question, you've been critical in the book around the way social justice, you know, which is often an avenue for universities to resist that corporatization and that neoliberal ethic by championing social justice, you've been critical of the way that gets used as a sort of unique selling point as a marketing strategy. And I just wonder if you could say a little bit more about this?

**Peter Fleming**

Well, I think this is all part of the corporate mimesis process. If you look at any large corporation, there is some project that they’re championing, which is totally at odds with what the institution in reality does in practice, when it comes to its revenue streams, when it comes to its managerial processes, and so forth. And I think, you know, to a certain extent, public universities have more space to pursue this in an authentic way. But it does tend to also get pushed into the colourful brochures, you know, the glossy brochures, and it becomes a marketing exercise, as you would have in the business world too. So I think, yeah, I’m in two minds; I think that the space does lend itself to a more fully committed, which I guess is where the emancipatory hope lies with the with the public institution, to an emancipatory approach to social justice, but it seems to have been captured by that marketing machine, just as much.

**Matthew Clarke**

And I think it's probably incumbent on people to be aware of that dual side and not to necessarily give up on social justice projects in a totally sort of cynical way, but also not to embrace them with their eyes closed and naively, thinking that this is a free space, free from all the other trappings of the neoliberal university.

**Peter Fleming**

Yeah, no, exactly, exactly. Yeah, to recognise that there is a space that holds potential for pursuing a social justice agenda. And I think that one of the reasons why I wrote the book was not to cast such a pessimistic pall over the university, but to kind of try and rejuvenate what a publicly-driven, mission-orientated public university would actually achieve. And that would definitely have reach in that regard.

**Matthew Clarke**

What advice would you give to a university that finds itself perhaps at the wrong end of the various rankings and league tables and wants to its improve its position in regards to those?

**Peter Fleming**

Well, when the measure becomes a target, it always ends in tears. Andthat… I knew a dean in one of the universities I worked for, who always said, you know, things like the REF, these rankings, should be an outcome of what we do anyway, rather than something we should change to try and achieve. Because as soon as that happens, the tail starts wagging the dog, and it becomes awful, becomes an awful institution in which to work because everyone's under pressure to perform for these external numerical quantifiable reasons, rather than doing what they want to do anyway, you know, so I think becomes a very dangerous game in which an institution should go down. Now, being realistic about it, because can any university say in the UK or the US afford to ignore these rankings? Well, maybe the ultra-elite ones, but they are now tied to a lot of income, they are now tied to a lot of pressures that many, many institutions have to be aware of. I think, though, that, and so cannot just completely ignore them. But I think that there are degrees and one has to be very careful that in running a public university, that they don't ruin the institution in order to reach those metric targets. One of the problems, though, is that, you know, the institution is ruined, and then the managers leave, right, they go on to the next institution, gets promoted to another institution, it's very much like the corporate sector in that regard, where after the damage is done, you know, move on, move on, not hanging around to deal with the aftermath.

**Matthew Clarke**

So I mean, I guess the theme that seems to be coming through both in you know, that question, and the response to the previous one was sort of the importance of a double perspective where you be pragmatic, and doing what you know, needs to be done to play the game to some degree, but not wholeheartedly embracing it, keeping a cynical, sceptical critical distance, maintain some separateness from all that, whilst not being able to completely divorce yourself from it and go off and shut it out of out of sight out of mind.

**Peter Fleming**

Well, maybe that's a problem with academia, you know, maybe that’s what we all do, right? We've got a double consciousness where we're critical of the of the institution, we hate the manager realisation of our occupation, but we play the game up to a point and get on with what we do. And you know, it doesn't really stop anything. So maybe, maybe I should revise my response and say that, yeah, just pull out do your own thing?

**Matthew Clarke**

Well, I'm thinking of, you know, Zizek talks about it, the way ideology works today, that we know that things are wrong, but we do them anyway, we know that capitalism is bad, but we embrace it wholeheartedly. And almost, the criticism allows us to do that with a free conscience. So as academics, you could say, well, we're critical of the neoliberal university. And the fact that we write about it and complain about it means that we can therefore go along with it without feeling grubbied and dirtied in the process, because we've been critical of it.

**Peter Fleming**

Yeah, indeed, indeed, cynical distancing. So you know, one can imagine I'm not very optimistic about it. But one could imagine the possibility of an institution pulling out and ignoring, you know, the rankings, and somehow avoiding the punitive reaction from government funders. When doing that there's a cascading moment of liberation, in which more and more institutions mimic,almost a withdrawal from the ranking system, and that cascades, rather than competing and trying to outsmart the next university that there is a collective response among universities towards this kind of meta industry ranking system.

**Matthew Clarke**

Organisations with the most to gain from that are also the ones with the most to lose the ones with the least resources. .So you could see a university like Oxford deciding to do to adopt that strategy and in some ways, things will just carry on as normal there and they've got the resources to weather any bumps in the road, right?

**Peter Fleming**

Yeah, that's right. That's right. It would be more difficult for the institutions, you know, mid range and lower. Yeah, you're right.

**Matthew Clarke**

So again, related to social justice, talk a bit about social mobility, social inclusion, and the way universities have been touted as vehicles for you know, those phenomena, not withstanding the problems and the issues with those terms, and you know, the complications of people with degrees going and working in supermarkets stacking shelves, because there aren't the jobs for them, which leads to the question of, you know, what do you see as the future of higher education and this notion of widening participation? Is that another fantasy that we're sort of going along with?

**Peter Fleming**

Yeah, well, I think the ideology of meritocracy as certainly, may have certainly had traction for some years during the 60s and 70s, especially when education, you know, following World War Two, when education was not financialized, like it is today, in was, was certainly a driver of… social higher education was definitely a driver of social mobility. And I think that's run its course, definitely with the over financialization of access to higher education, you're going to get, you know, a tendency, I would expect, for money and family wealth to be the main kind of way on which higher education is accessed, especially the elite universities. And you can imagine the thought process of someone from a lower socioeconomic background, you know, calculating whether it was worth it. Should I take on this £100,000 loan during the course of my studies for a job that may not materialise? Would it be more worthwhile to take up a trade and become a plumber? You can imagine that and so you're going to get this kind of class element coming into the into the fray as well, when it comes to people thinking about whether they should embark on a degree. And it seems to me, and I've talked about this in the book, that it's going to kind of be a reversion back to the pre-World War two kind of elitist institution, one defined definitely by class background, perhaps, not so much by the gendered backgroundthat was back then. But you could probably for see also that gender element becoming an important issue, but definitely class background becoming very, very important. And that seems to be the way in which it's going forward that year. Byt yeah, meritocracy? Yeah. Interesting. A lot of analysis on that at the moment, which is interesting stuff.

**Matthew Clarke**

Okay. Again, I'll come back at the end to some of the themes that you've touched on there, but I just briefly wanted to discuss the whole impact agenda. You know, you link that to the hollowing out of knowledge and see it as an anti-intellectual tool in many ways. So do you think impact can be redeemed? Or should it be rejected as a notion?

**Peter Fleming**

Oh look, you know, I even started to use the word impact. And I had to stop myself and say, ‘What on earth am I doing?’, you know, epic. It's such a, it's such an insidious part of the new speak of the corporate university today, along with, you know,a load of other terms that we shouldn't be using, you know, impact. And I have to say, you know, that when I first heard the word impact that did kind of bring to mind a science fiction movie of a meteorite obliterating or threatening to obliterate planet Earth, you know, it's something very, very violent about it. So, I don't think there is much redeemable about the word impact. And I think if I picked a word that was, you know, ubiquitous in higher education, todayit's impact. I would use the term reach, I think the idea of universities having reach into the community is very important. But the way in which impact has been loaded towards very neo- classical ideas of relevance is very, very dangerous. And it's turned institutions into these very instrumental kind of focused organisations when it comes to, for example, impact in terms of graduate attributes, you know, with leads to the idea that we're training institutes, that we're training students for the labour market, and that is the case and we're doing a pretty lousy job, you know. I don't want to be responsible for training someone to be an effective traffic controller or airline pilot or anything like that. I think education needs to be very, very broad, and its impact maybe in the long term. And it won't be quantifiable by any of the metrics used around the narrative of impact as we see it today.

**Matthew Clarke**

So given the way that universities have, as you put it being corporatized, commercialised financialized inn the name of transparency, accountability, value for money, it raises questions about, you know, what are universities for, which you've just touched on, in your last response there, and I guess I’d ask the question, if universities are, as the title of your book puts it dying? What are the prospects for their rebirth,reincarnation, in the future?

**Peter Fleming**

Yeah, well, I think there's some things that we've got to hold on to if we think that the university is still worth fighting for. And I do broach that question at the end of the book and the start of the book, because I think it's important, you know, the answer to that, maybe no. And if that is the case, then what do we do? And the reason why I say that that might be the possibility, I think there is a tendency for this kind of cheap optimism now on the left, when it comes to critical university studies, to kind of, you know, have that obligatory chapter at the end of the book on on alternatives. I really didn't want to do that. It just felt disingenuousand instead, in the last chapter, I wanted to broach the question about hope and is it permissible in the context in which we find ourselves in, because it seems to me from what I've heard from many colleagues around the world in terms of higher education, mainly in Western countries, is that they're very really asking that question themselves. And it's interesting, where do we go from there? Well, I wouldn't have written the book if I did not have something that I was at pains to protect. And there is a moment of protection in the book. And I don't mean that in any grandiose way, but just as a motivation for writing, that I wouldn't do something as painful as writing a book if I didn't think there was something still worth fighting for. And so what is that? Well, I think the institution of a public university in particular can be a critical conscience of society. And I still think that any progress in our society is still based upon the notion of study, and that used to be seated in the university, but it doesn't have to be, it doesn't have to be. And, I mean study in the broadest sense of the term of just analysis and investigation. And there has always been an amateurism in the moment of study, it' always very agent driven, you know, you cannot have authentic study if it's linked to extrinsic metrics and centres and rewards, it's not going to work; it's got to be driven by the individual, I still think there's very, very important that ethos of study in the broadest sense of the word,that's what a university is for.

**Matthew Clarke**

Yes, it would be nice to think that that could be there in schools as well, like, you know, yeah, someone who writes about education, but it's like, they've just become exam factories. And that notion of study, it’s completely been lost in schools. And you, as you say, you would hope that universities, at least, can hang on to some notion of that… So really, sort of, perhaps, big picture but challenging sort of questions. So, you could argue that the problem isn't so much the university today, but the late capitalists sort of system in which they're embedded. And you could also ask question of whether it's possible to have an egalitarian, more egalitarian, sort of peer collegium sort of university in a capitalist system that's built on class, gender, racial hierarchies, and I'm thinking here of Maurizio Lazzaroto, his recent book, *Capital hates everyone: Fascism or revolution?*, you know, he sort of puts those as the two options that we have facing us. Do you think that is the case? And in which case, which way do you see things going?

**Peter Fleming**

That's a really good question. And I've just read Milanovic’s *Capitalism, alone*, saying, you know, critics of capitalism, are now having to face the awful prospect that this is the only system in town, you know, everyone's adopting state capitalism, China and so forth. And that was a very bleak book. You know, I think that no doubt about it. And one of the problems with critical university studies, well some critical university studies is that they don't have a theory of the state, and they don't bring in governmentality as a key kind of feature, if you like, of what's happening in, to, the university today. And there's one reason why we tend not to have the state involved because, you know, that means.. broadens the project of reforming and saving the university to a pretty unwieldy level that we also have to fight on these fronts as well at a societal level; but no doubt about it, that it's a symptom. The corporate university is a symptom of what's going on at the state level. Does this mean that we can't recuperate the university within a capitalist system? I'm not sure we can, to be honest, I'm not too sure we can. I think that… ther’svarieties of capitalism, of course, it's not just pure capitalism. There's social democratic capitalism. There's post-Keynesian capitalism. There's…and capitalism, is always within an ecosystem that's made up of other dominions, seldom we do we have a pure capitalist society. So, I think we've had a kind of a relatively complex understanding of what we mean by capitalism. In that context, it's usually a combination of social logics, including non-capitalist ones, but capitalism is dominant. That provides a little bit of space, I guess. But I think the university that we are talking about, if it is redeemable would have to be happening within a social democratic polity, in which the market isn't the dominant logic or the dominant trope determining everything else. I think it has to be one in which the market and the corporate sector in particular has been reined in quite significantly, and then the university would echo I think, some of those aspects of a wider polity, because otherwise, otherwise it becomes an enclave and it's constantly fighting. It's like, it would be like socialism within a neoliberal horizon, it would be spending more energy on fighting, fighting its context rather than getting on with what we talked about earlier.

**Matthew Clarke**

And it may be you know, that our hands were forced, in terms of, if not fully abandoning, then at least sort of seriously remodelling a capitalist system by environmental catastrophe. And on top of that, you've got growing awareness of you know, racial and gender inequalities and their persistence. These all seem to be signs that our capitalist system is broken and it's not fulfilling the promises and the dreams. So maybe the changes will happen from… as a result of those phenomena that universities can work with and benefit from, rather than themselves being the drivers of change.

**Peter Fleming**

Yeah, no, definitely, definitely. And, you know, there's no reason why civil society cannot be recuperated or regenerated in the sense of learning, non-profit, self-organised, learning institutions, that basically kind of try and create an alternative pedagogy, etc, etc. Butyou know, as we've been talking about the university has become the place for certification, we'd have to give up on the idea of certification and so forth. Yeah, it would have to happen in a context that isn't so hostile to the values of a public orientated civic University. And that is a very hostile environment for that. And also, we have to remember that one of the biggest critics and I talked about this in the book, one of the biggest critics of the neoliberal university is still the right wing. Right. So, it is being hammered still, by the market zealots and the Milton Friedman freaks, you know, they're the ones that are being listened to by the big government kind of bureaucrats who control the purse strings of higher education. So, we have to be careful about how we craft our critique as well, because you can imagine, you can imagine some Chicago School economist looking at higher education, agreeing, ‘yeah, universities are dying, they should die, they're not fulfilling their mission’. And all of a sudden, you're kind of adding fuel to that fire, which we want to avoid completely as well. So we also had to be very careful with the way in which we pitch our critique. And be careful not to reinforce that particular ideology as well, that there are different variants of critique bearing down on the institution that employs us.

**Matthew Clarke**

Yes,, no, absolutely. I mean, going back to what I was saying, before about Lazzaroto, and that sort of revolution or fascism sort of dilemma that we face, and thinking of other writers, Rasmussen, the Danish political theorist has, you know, described our current time as ‘late capitalist fascism’, in terms of the growth of authoritarian cultures, the demonization of the other, be that the migrant, women, transgender people, any sort of person who doesn't fit this sort of traditional white male sort of norm? Do you subscribe to that, to some degree, that characterization of our times as sort of being more than just about sort of neoliberal capitalism, but that there's actually this authoritarian, proto-fascist slide happening?

**Peter Fleming**

Oh, yeah, definitely, definitely. I think that neoliberalism as a dominant political ideology is kind of hasn't disappeared, but it's being augmented and may kind of blend into something even worse, right. And that is this fascist kind of authoritarian element. You know, Mark Fisher used the term market-Stalinism to describe these dominant institutions saying ,look, they're not corporate kind of tigers, you know, or competing in a marketplace, like a Hayekian wet dream, they are very, kind of big, bureaucratic, angry institutions that drive their employees… you know, like a Stalinist kind of authoritarian regime, in the name of the market. So, it's kind of this market-Stalinism that, I think, is an interesting way of thinking about what the next step after neoliberalism may look like..it's pretty bleak. But the authoritarianism, I think, is definitely an important strand that we're seeing kind of emerging, xenophobia, and so forth. Yeah, it's a very, very kind of worrying development. But, you know, at least we know what our target is when we kind of try and oppose it.

**Matthew Clarke**

Okay, on that cheerful note, thank you very much for your time and for a fascinating discussion, and I would encourage listeners to the podcast to read your book if they haven't done so and I think they'll find it incredibly thought provoking and engaging.

**Peter Fleming**

Thank you very much, Matthew. It's been lovely talking with you.