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CULTURE REVIEW

The Disenchanted Academic

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We are all now post-academics, lapsed academics or at the very least skeptical academics. Whether we acknowledge it or not, and even if (or especially if) we are highly successful grant-gaining, research-intensive, eminent professors, we have lost or mislaid our scholarly vocations. We now either (ironically or otherwise) mimic with greater or lesser success the concept of the scholar; or have adjusted to the new vocation of influencer-sales-marketing-entrepreneurship; or, having resisted and rebelled, finally walked away.

It started with our dis-enchantment.

The idea of the University as a place of freedom of thought and impartial scholarship and learning became impossible to sustain. Feminism revealed the phallogentrism, or more straightforwardly the misogyny, of the institution. For a while we believed this could be changed by opening spaces for female bodies and feminist knowledges within the academy. This dream faded as women's studies (with only a few embattled exceptions) became marginalized, incorporated or rebranded.

Racism studies and postcolonial studies revealed the whiteness of academia not just in terms of its faculty (currently in the UK 91% of professors are white and 75% are male) but also in terms of its teaching/research orientations and its support (through these perspectives and assumptions) of the continuing colonial project.

In the meantime, other forces were restructuring Universities into commercial enterprises and structures of surveillance. The Commercial-Enterprise-University focuses on student numbers, cost-cutting, (value-added) achievement levels, student (consumer always knows best) satisfaction, employment outcomes, research outputs (numbers not ideas are key here), KPI's and USP's.

The Panoptic-University sanctions and enacts surveillance with requirements to register international students' attendance (to ensure they can't use study as a vehicle for 'illegal' immigration) and policing 'terrorism' through the Prevent (and other similar) strategies.

The political right, having already gained control of the economy, governments and the media, has turned its attention onto the academy and is swiftly abolishing academic freedom by redefining scholars as coppers and hucksters.

In this context you either decide to stay (and adjust) or you decide to leave (in a fit of rebellion or in a state of trauma-induced burnout). If you leave you may begin a new life (after death) as a lapsed academic. You might, for example, join Climate Uprising or become part of The Other Academy, an art collective made up of committed, lapsed and disenchanted scholars. This might make possible alternate post-academic lives:

Climate Uprising

Seated in a circle, you are all new to Climate Uprising and Issy is introducing you to the main principles and structures. You start with names and motivations but as late-comers drift in these are continuously interrupted, and, with the shuffling to make space for more chairs, any feeling of connection is broken. Eventually introductions are abandoned and Issy asks if anyone knows the founding principles. Someone jumps in providing a long-winded explanation. Issy fails to interrupt or to orchestrate inclusiveness.

The next day, at the costume-making workshop you overhear Zalika and Billie dissing Issy:

'She didn't even explain the importance of non-violence.'

'I know. And it's kinda the central thing.'

'And the stuff about 'tell the truth' was so confusing. As though it was us who were meant to be telling the truth.'

'Oh. Aren't we supposed to tell the truth?'

'Yes. But it's meant to be about getting the politicians to tell the truth.'

'As if.'

'Well, exactly.'

There's a few minutes silence then Billie's baby cries and she goes into the next room to shush him. When she returns the two of them continue making bees and butterflies for the 'no insects, no future' action. After a while Billie continues the conversation:

'I kinda couldn't stand the lack of direction so I just had to jump in at the general meeting to suggest making these costumes for the action.'

'Absolutely. Otherwise nothing would've happened.'

'And then Kris had to sort out about the guerrilla gardening next weekend.'

'Issy really messed it up – there was no direction or leadership.'

'Exactly. So then Willow had to explain about the art blockers workshop.'

'Just as well Audrey asked about the 'shop till you drop dead at "Horrids" event.'

Silence follows, then Zalika begins again:

'Actually, it's weird but ... it's sort of ... almost as though none of that woulda happened if Issy had led things and decided things and told us what to do.'

'Do you think ... maybe ... it mighta been ... kinda, intentional, in a way?'

'No. Yes. Well ... maybe ... like getting everyone to participate rather than controlling everything?'

The Other Academy

Taking it upon himself to direct proceedings at this reconvened meeting of The Other Academy, Orlando proclaims that 'Impossible has two meanings: irritating (as in an impossible child) and unable to occur or exist (as in, the earth is flat).' He's an academic superstar so you all puzzle silently about what deeper significance might lie behind this rather obvious dictionary definition. You wonder whether he's implying (but prefers not to say) that the problem is NOT that the University can't exist but that academics are impossible in acting like annoying rebellious children.

Zuri intervenes, simultaneously supporting and dismissing Orlando: 'Orlando is, as always, so *penetrating*. But we should add here Freud's insight that there are three impossible professions – analysis, education and government.'

Hilda, backing up Zuri, adds: 'It's not so much that the University is non-existent like a flat earth but that the pedagogical mission of the University is impossible.'

George interjects: 'Aren't we post-Freud now? What about Blanchot's concept of the impossible? His articulation of the impossibility of writing could be deployed in relation to the Academy.'

Arlo, bored by the endless discussion of impossibility, deflects: 'Let's move on. The more urgent issue is the concept of the 'we'. And especially as 'we' is becoming less and less 'we' in the era of Trump and his collaborators. We need to articulate the transformations in the 'we' from the solidarity of communism to the liberal fallacy of community to the current investigations of plurality.'

The meeting finishes soon after with nothing resolved. Heading for home along dark and empty streets, she realizes she's been at several meetings and still hasn't figured out what this group is about: Is it an on-going performance art event that rehearses (replays and enumerates) the problem of the Academy? Could it be that performance art enables forms of thinking that are impossible in the commercial-panoptic-university whose purpose is control and domination not the generation of debate and ideas? As the drizzle intensifies into a downpour, she thinks, 'I've forgotten my umbrella.'