

Book Review

Dark Academia: How Universities Die, by Peter Fleming. London: Pluto Press, 2021. Pp. 224. ISBN 9780745341064

Ramon Guillermo

The decisive and founding act of the neoliberal turn in the University of the Philippines (UP) can be precisely dated to the release of a seventeen-page “Final Report” of the University of the Philippines Ad-hoc Committee to Review Tuition and Other Fees, otherwise known as the De Dios Committee (2006). Prior to this report, the creeping marketization of the university was considered an external imposition that impinged upon and damaged its public character. It was this report which gave this process an intellectually acceptable form, which was then championed by succeeding UP administrations. Its release was immediately followed by a highly controversial 300 percent tuition fee increase at UP. In other words, the report transformed an external imposition into an internal institutional imperative. This momentous change was signaled by a mere footnote in that document, which reads as follows,

A public subsidy to an activity is justified based on likely positive externalities arising from it, i.e., social benefits not apparent to the individual himself. It can be argued that virtually all the benefits of an undergraduate education are in fact appropriable by the private individual himself, who should be therefore be willing to pay for its cost. Proof of this is people’s demonstrated willingness to pay for private college education (and indeed

the Philippines already has an unusually high ratio of college-finishers to total its labour-force). (Emmanuel De Dios et al. 2006, 2, 3)

Looked at from any angle, it really is highly questionable whether “virtually all the benefits” of an undergraduate education in any society can be fully “appropriable” by any individual student. Despite this, only a very small minority among the teaching staff opposed these formulations. The probable reason is that when these ideas arrived in UP in the 1990s, they were already considered unassailable and hegemonic truths. Peter Fleming traces the origins of the neoliberal commercialization of public institutions in the Western world from the mid-1980s onward to the seminal ideas of the neoconservative economist James M. Buchanan. In the latter's view, students who get education for free end up having no appreciation of its true value. Consequently, they spent their time, to Buchanan's great dismay, irritation, and horror, protesting against such trifles as racism against blacks and the Vietnam War. Moreover, Buchanan argued that since the individual students themselves were the ones who benefited from their education in terms of future income, why should society subsidize them at all? According to Peter Fleming, these previously marginal ideas became mainstream policy with the rise of the Thatcher and the Reagan administrations with their ensuing devastating effects (127).

The implementation of these ideas under the guise of New Public Management (NPM) in public universities heralded the erosion of their public character and introduced radical changes in their modes of governance. Emulating private firms, collegial and democratic forms of governance gave way to top-down managerial and authoritarian forms of decision-making. Dissent was stifled under an increasingly numerous and overbearing swarm of managers. University presidents began to behave like CEOs with salaries, benefits, and perks, which distinguished them from the actual teaching staff. With the transformation of students into customers, instructors and professors themselves became hired employees increasingly subjected to the authoritarian demands of the managerial elite. This mode of corporatist governance demanded greater organizational control and surveillance over the teaching staff, which came handily in the form of seemingly objective performance metrics that could be pegged onto so-called Key Performance Indicators (KPI). Measures such as journal

rankings, impact factors, citation rates, and the H-index, among others, increasingly began to dominate the performance evaluation of academics in determining renewal, tenure, and promotion. This mania for metrics soon came to pervade the dreams and nightmares of academics everywhere.

Some of the most hilarious, as well as, dire pages of Fleming's book have to do with how academics have deeply internalized the relentless imposition of neoliberal quantitative performance metrics in the university as an institution. One of the most striking phenomena related to this process is the rise of the "academic star-complex" and the "celebrity culture" that comes with it (111-125). This phenomenon may appear to be an individual matter. Indeed, it is easy to satirize and make fun of its most extreme manifestations. However, Fleming repeatedly cautions the reader to always situate the academic star-complex within the structural mechanisms that produce individuals corresponding to certain "character types" within the academe, namely the *academic starlet*, the *wannabe academic starlet*, and the *failed starlet*. These types are generated by the unyielding institutional imperatives and constraints that are dominant within the contemporary neoliberal university.

Fleming first makes a strong distinction between the academic "star" or "starlet" and the public intellectuals of the past. He cites Jean-Paul Sartre and Noam Chomsky, among others, as embodying the ideal of the traditional public intellectual. According to Fleming, the crucial difference between these older models of the public intellectuals and contemporary academic starlets is that they became famous primarily because of what they do as intellectuals. Their fame is only a consequence of their uncompromising and consistent oppositional intellectual praxis. With academic starlets on the other hand, the substance of their intellectual output, if any, is only incidental to their dogged grasping for fame. Though French academic stars like Foucault and Derrida could be considered transitional figures in the formation of today's full-blown contemporary academic celebrity culture, Fleming avers that "media and money have entered the picture to a greater extent" (115). These French philosophers were still probably closer to the traditional public intellectual of the past than the academic starlet of the present.

Fame is the driving force of what is nowadays called the "promotional academic." Academic starlets at the top of their game devote themselves to hot and trending research topics, which guarantee

publication in the most desired journals in their field, ensure maximum public recognition, and hold the greatest possible potential for garnering prestigious grants and accolades. In an ironic reversal, what were ostensibly designed to be mere imperfect measures of intellectual and academic output have now become the targets themselves, “the measure has become the target” (153). Journals are no longer considered prestigious because of what they publish; scholars now want to publish in them just because they are prestigious. Upper management is hardly concerned with what the bulk of journal articles are about, let alone if these actually contribute to knowledge. The only thing that matters is the quantity of articles and the impact factors and rankings of the journals in which these were published. Nowadays, academics are even told not to bother publishing at all if it is not going to be in a “top journal” in their field. In fact, it could be even considered a liability or a blot on their CVs to publish what may be a pathbreaking article in a low-ranking or non-ranking Philippine journal. All other things follow. It is well-known that articles published in prestigious journals and submitted by authors attached to top-ranking universities are generally more cited than those published in more obscure ones by authors attached to “third-rate” universities in the Global South. More citations for more articles published in journals with high impact factors lead to higher H-indices for their authors (the H-index is intended to measure with one number both productivity and impact in terms of citations). Meanwhile, in line with their KPIs, university management sets higher and higher yearly targets for faculty to accomplish in terms of these purely numerical measures. It no longer matters if deep and genuine scholarship requires time and contemplation; the unyielding pressures of yearly audits and increasingly short-term performance reports demand continuous and frenetically accelerated output. The digitization of these metrics even allows real-time tracking of individual academics and the instant generation of data analytics for large institutions (66). Universities that aspire to climb up the rankings must accept the brute fact that the most important global university rankings centrally depend on these quantitative and supposedly intercomparable metrics in producing their yearly tables. Universities set on improving or maintaining their global rankings therefore compete among themselves to get “high-performing” academics on their roster. These elite few, by commodifying themselves, are in turn able to get the highest possible financial and other rewards corresponding to their academic reputations. They may therefore engage in self-promotion by all possible means. According to Fleming, they will use any and every opportunity to build and expand their social

networks, grabbing any chance to appear on major, and preferably international, media outlets. This all-consuming drive for mainstream acceptance and recognition is also the reason why Fleming finds that most of these “starlets,” sometimes feted as so-called “thought leaders” by corporations and think tanks, tend to be politically conservative (125).

The neoliberal university holds up the image of the “academic star” as something that all university teaching staff (or at least those on tenure track) should aspire for. It deliberately stokes their ambition and pride by parading before their eyes the various perks and advantages of academic stardom. The neoliberal university wins by motivating everyone to outdo and outperform each other. Early career “wannabe starlets” are still full of optimism regarding their chances. They strive to emulate the winning formula of successful stars and are committed to winning the academic game at all costs. According to Fleming, they are “walking CVs incessantly talking about their latest achievements.” They relentlessly saturate Facebook and Twitter with news about themselves and their hot takes on anything under the sun (118). The neoliberal university desires nothing more than that the mass of teaching staff imbibe the individualist attitude and competitive ethos of wannabe starlets. Their untiring efforts to meet and even surpass the quantitative performance targets set by the managerial elite, independently of their personal fates, will necessarily contribute to the neoliberal university’s rise up the rankings. The stars cannot do everything by themselves. Wannabe starlets must pull some of the weight after all. The boundless enthusiasm of wannabe starlets is a surefire formula for self-inflicted hyper-exploitation.

Implicit in the very image of academic stardom is its extreme rarity. It is therefore aspired for not simply for its advantages but also because of the social prestige that comes from its exclusivity. The inherent logic of the academic star-complex therefore ensures that the great majority cannot become stars. It accepts a few “stars” into its fold but creates widespread “non-stardom” in its wake. The “nobodies” are an integral part of the logic of the academic star complex (117). In Fleming’s taxonomy, the unavoidable fate of the overwhelming majority of “wannabe starlets” is to eventually graduate to “failed starlet” status (120). Fleming then describes the fate of the “failed starlets.” These have tried their best to attain fame and stardom for the best part of their productive years but have definitively failed for one reason or another.

Ironically, many of them will end up burdened with heavy teaching loads and all the drudge work meant to free star academics from the menial jobs of the academe. Management will say, “You are not a star... so get to work” (121). The irony here is that, as Fleming observes, despite their lack of success, failed academics continue to internalize the ideology of the star-complex. This is reflected negatively in the jealousy, bitterness, and resentment that they will nurture for the rest of their remaining years as academics. These types are disposed to take it out on their inferiors if and when they are eventually able to assume senior administrative and bureaucratic duties.

High rates of depression, anxiety, paranoia, suicide ideation afflict individuals invested in the academic star-complex (63). One reason for this is that both success and failure are ruthlessly individualized. Academics are made to believe that their failures are due to their own shortcomings, and the vast majority are made to feel like they are “good for nothings” (63). However, it is the system itself that is rigged to ensure that the great majority cannot succeed with the rules that have been put in place. The system also obscures the fact that the star academics can only succeed on the backs of innumerable non-star and adjunct faculty who have taken on their teaching and administrative duties or supported them in innumerable ways as fellow scholars. Factors such as class background and social capital are also not negligible as determinants for success (124). Meanwhile, rampant cutthroat competition erodes the academic ethos of cooperation, goodwill, and collegiality. Life in the neoliberal academe is definitely no idyll.

Fleming is careful to point that these three “character types” are integral parts of the academic star-complex. What then of those who are not part of this complex?

Some tenure-track faculty can be critical of the star-complex and may even consciously reject it. But survival can be difficult when the metrics come bearing down. Tenure, promotion, and recognition in the neoliberal university depend in large part on how well one performs according to these measures. These metrics can seriously “make or break” careers. The system of rewards and punishments in the neoliberal university will drive many to behave strategically in order to “hit their annual targets,” even if half-heartedly, in order to just survive. As Fleming says, try being a “slow professor” and see where that gets you (10). The situation becomes most worrisome when even those who claim

some distance from these norms begin to internalize them. Despite their protestations, they may not be able to hold back a smile when they see increases in their Google citation score. They may find themselves looking around for the highest impact journal to submit an article that they have worked so hard to put together. Even established senior professors may begin to feel a little bit of unease and self-doubt when confronted with the spectacle of their colleagues frantically jostling for a place at the head of the finishing line. Academic performance metrics may now seem indispensable even to those who doubt their effectivity. Indeed, Fleming encountered some scholars who had also written critical articles about the neoliberal university who took him to task for not citing them in his work. Senior university administrators who outwardly deplore neoliberalism but implement the policies associated with it, albeit with some headshaking, are even worse. This performance all the more entrenches the attitude of "economic realism," which can no longer conceive of any other way of doing things.

Some of these tendencies assume rather comical if not grotesque forms in the academic boondocks that is the Philippines. Here, we find scholars who may outwardly deplore the marginality and invisibility of Global South scholars in Western journals, spewing out innumerable quotes from Spivak and the like, but whose real aim turns out to be to increase their visibility in those very selfsame journals and whose actual ambition is to find suitable employment in some more prestigious institution abroad if they can play their cards right.

Adjunct and contractual lecturers who are not on tenure track are, by definition, excluded from the star-complex. Overloaded with work, struggling with low salaries, no benefits and insurance, and with few or nonexistent options for research and career advancement, their main concern is survival. Adjunctification is the real dark side of the academic star-complex. The major factor behind the power of the star-complex is undoubtedly the shrinking of the tenure-track faculty in relation to the non-tenure-track adjunct and contractual faculty. It is reasonable to suppose that the rapid expansion of the ranks of the adjunct lecturers has occurred in direct proportion to the increasing privileges conferred upon the small academic elite as well as those of the managerial stratum that oversees this whole system. The hyper-exploitation of adjunct lecturers provides the necessary resources that can be channeled to the star-complex and its associated system of rewards and benefits. In some, perhaps already rare, cases where adjunctification is still in

the minority and the gap between the stars and the non-stars is less pronounced (if it even exists), the majority of lecturers on tenure track may still be relatively immune to the competitive norms touted by the neoliberal milieu. We may also find there senior faculty who have had fruitful intellectual lives according to their own measure, not carrying the bitterness of those who feel that they have failed.

The widespread contractualization and adjunctification of teaching staff constitute the material and institutional precondition for the rise of the academic star-complex. The attack on tenure in the neoliberal university therefore does not only undermine academic freedom, something already well-known, but also directly and indirectly erodes academic values of cooperation, collegiality, egalitarianism, and solidarity and replaces these with the spirit of cutthroat individualist competition. Fleming admits that his somewhat aporetic conclusion, which swings from Derridean utopianism to small-scale strategies for not selling out within the system, does not point to a way out of this situation. The very valid contestation and struggle over increasingly absurd academic performance metrics and the related academic star-complex, when they do occur, are to be lauded and must be pursued with even greater vigor. However, universities can only be taken back as genuinely academic spaces when incremental gains and significant victories in the struggle against contractualization and adjunctification and in defense of the institution of tenure have been won. It may be, as Fleming points out, that these struggles have hitherto not led to broader and more sustained movements. But this may only mean that their time is yet to come. Fleming's book is a devastating and indispensable account of the slow death of today's universities. It reminds us that the stories we share may be the most powerful reserves we have in keeping alive our hopes for the future.

Ramon Guillermo, Ph.D. is Professor at the Center for International Studies at the University of the Philippines Diliman.

Reference

De Dios, Emmanuel et al. 2006. "Ad hoc Committee to Review Tuition and Other Fees Final Report." Presented to the University of the Philippines Board of Regents (BOR) on its 1210th meeting (30 June 2006).