Northumbria Research Link

Beyond Measure: On the Marketization of British Universities, and the Domestication of Academic Criminology

Simon Winlow[1]

Introduction

In this short essay, I discuss two interrelated processes. First, I will address the marketization of British universities. Here, I claim that—despite appearing regularly in the public proclamations of government ministers and university leaders—the core ideals of the university no longer play a significant role in Britain's higher education sector and rarely intrude upon the working lives of British academics. The university's traditional telos was tied to the pursuit of truth and the expansion of human knowledge. However, only vague traces of the university's grand ideals can now be found throughout large expanses of Britain's university system. These traces take a ghostly form: their substance appropriated, these ghosts attempt but are unable to exhort an influence upon unfolding social reality (as originally discussed in Derrida 2006). Only flickering representations of the university's grand ideals remain. In their true form, these ideals are for the most part consigned to the realm of memory, and with every passing year seem at ever-greater risk of being forgotten completely.

After briefly outlining some of the key issues associated with the marketization of British universities, I will turn my attention to criminology. Here, I will argue that relatively new sectoral concerns about income, competition and the practical application of criminological knowledge are closely related to the rapid growth of careerism, factionalism, empiricism and conformism, and the swift decline of creativity, curiosity, intellectual ambition, and our willingness to stand apart from the crowd (see also Winlow and Hall 2019). My conclusion is that our disciplinary dialectic has stalled. Criminology is no longer moving forward to address the stark problems that beset civil society and the environments upon which we depend. While innovation and intellectual ambition continue to exist at the outskirts, the discipline's mainstream is increasingly cynical, circumspect, and trapped in a daemonic cycle of repetition. In an act of institutionalised fetishism, we return time and

---

*Signifies the use of a market neologism or buzz phrase now in common use in British universities. These phrases, and many others, were once mocked by academics. Now, they are ubiquitous and accepted.

✉ Simon Winlow
simon.winlow@northumbria.ac.uk

1   Northumbria University, Newcastle, UK

again to a depressingly familiar list of concepts and frameworks from the twentieth century that simply cannot reveal anything new and important about the way we live now.

British Criminologists and the Neoliberal University

The commercialisation of knowledge production is now so firmly established as a guiding principle in our universities and so taken for granted within our occupational culture that it often seems pointless to challenge it or even acknowledge that it is possible to organise universities differently. The language of commercialisation is everywhere, and I draw upon some of the most facile aspects of its phraseology in this paper*. As critical scholars, we often imagine ourselves to be set apart from the process of commodification. Rather than seeing ourselves as key protagonists in this process, we are more likely to see ourselves as its victims. It is, after all, the ordinary academic who is now constantly pushed to do more and achieve more, and to be brilliant at every facet of the job all of the time. It is the ordinary academic who must sacrifice an ever-greater proportion of her life simply in order to do what needs to be done to keep our programmes, departments and institutions ticking over. We gripe and complain about rising workloads, soul-crushing and often entirely pointless bureaucratic processes, and the now pervasive sense that we simply are not valued by the institutions to which we devote so much of our lives. However, there is also a general sense that the battles we needed to win to prevent commercialisation were lost long ago, and there is now little that can be done to prevent the logic of the market sweeping into every nook and cranny of the university system.

Many complain about commercialisation while tacitly accepting its inevitability. We voice our disapproval of the needless competition inherent to the REF (the Research Excellence Framework, the system used to assess the 'research output'* of universities and allocate state funding accordingly) while also hoping against hope that our research will be judged to be 'world leading'*. We criticise the ubiquity and power of league tables, while hoping our university can outperform 'competitor institutions'*. We offer up powerful arguments against the NSS (the National Student Survey, in which graduating students are asked to assess the quality of their education), but we still feel obliged to do all that we can to encourage students to complete the survey and reflect positively upon their time in our department. We can feel alienated from those who display an overt form of careerism, while our own careerism is neatly disavowed. And dissatisfaction with the commercialisation of the university is not restricted to those on the lowest rungs of the academic hierarchy. Out of earshot of their superiors, university managers often voice dissatisfaction with the incessant drive of the commercial imperative. They too often see themselves as separated from, and victims of, the process of commercialisation. After all, many carry a weighty bureaucratic burden. Their days are filled with futile meetings, and only rarely do they experience the compensations of teaching interested students eager to learn. They must absorb complaints from faculty members and do all they can to push academics into acquiescence. Like academics, they must respond to new requirements that emanate from some vague space above. They have not chosen commercialisation and often feel themselves to have made no investment in its processes. Indeed, many feel pushed to extend and enforce the process of commercialisation in their universities, despite disagreeing with it and hankering for a simpler time in which things somehow managed to get done without a blizzard of excel spreadsheets and the constant measurement and auditing of every facet of departmental life (see Shore 2008). Many managers, especially in the middle ranks,

imagine themselves to be holding on in the hope that things will improve. For them, there is a measure of value in simply making the best of a bad situation. They believe themselves committed to enforcing new policies with as much sensitivity as possible, softening the raw impersonal logic of commercial change wherever they can, and effectively going through the motions associated with the slow creep of neoliberal bureaucratic overreach so that what remains of innovative and valuable research and teaching can continue.

This is not a criticism of academic criminologists working in the British university system. Nor is it a defence of the managers who often seem responsible for the implementation of new policies that restrict our intellectual freedom and manipulate and commercialise the production of knowledge. Rather, it is an indication of how the ruling ideology continues to assert itself after the fall of the metanarrative, after decades of faithless postmodern individualism, after the descent of politics into banal administration, and after the virtual disappearance of all known alternatives to parliamentary capitalism (see Winlow et al. 2015; Hochuli et al. 2021).

Even after decades of commercialisation, there are few willing to speak volubly in support of the continued imposition of market logic. However, despite the scarcity of committed marketeers throughout the British university system, the process of commercialisation continues to move inexorably forward. As critical scholars, we can usually tell when forms of change are propagandised. However, we can learn more about power today by paying close attention to those forms of change that strike us as a regrettable inevitability despite the fact that they do not appear to possess a notable lobby of strident cheerleaders. As we will see, the ruling ideology today is no longer principally concerned with changing minds and moulding attitudes. Rather, it is concerned with shaping action and, in particular, *facilitating inaction*. Our inaction, of course, feeds into the prevailing sense of inevitability that many of us feel when we hear about yet another administrative procedure we are required to do before we can return to our 'real work'. We effectively delegate our dissatisfaction, frustration, and desire for change to groups or processes that we convince ourselves will push back against the bureaucratisation and marketisation of the university on our behalf (see Pfaller 2017). This delegation of dissatisfaction and opposition very efficiently disguises the fact that in our everyday working lives, the vast majority of us meekly accept our subordination. We accept the gradual disappearance of time free from work concerns and, despite the compelling and often positive associations of our work, accept its primacy over virtually everything else (see Fleming 2015; Lloyd 2019).

To suggest that commercialisation is a direct result of the market fundamentalism of recent Conservative Party governments in Britain is to simplify the processes and obfuscate the cause of university marketization. To understand deep processes of change we must move beyond the usual list of proximal causes to investigate the generative core of our present way of life. I will return to this point after briefly addressing a small number of contemporary manifestations of the commercialisation of knowledge production in British universities.

Research Funding

Research funding has, in a relatively short period of time, become a central concern for many academic criminologists in Britain. Academic criminologists working in the new university sector—which carries significantly less prestige and tends to attract students with less impressive qualifications—are, of course, mostly concerned with the management

of very high teaching and administrative workloads. They often find it very difficult to find any time to conduct research or apply for research funding. However, as these universities have become more 'business facing'*, their aspirations have grown. Research judged to be of particularly high quality can generate significant revenue for the university, and many leaders in this less prestigious sector—keen to develop their CVs and justify their inflated salaries—now demand that already stretched academic criminologists engage in research, publish their findings, and submit applications for external grant income. Each level of the university hierarchy feels the pressure. It cascades down through the academic ranks, with each leader pressuring the staff group beneath her to come up with ways of boosting performance. The Vice Chancellor, mindful of his promises to the board of governors and keen to overtake 'competitor institutions'* in order to make his mark, places pressure upon the Pro-Vice Chancellor for Research to boost the university's grant income and record for high-quality research. The Pro-Vice Chancellor for Research places pressure upon Deans and Associate Deans for Research to do the same thing. Deans and Associate Deans for Research then create or enforce new mechanisms—inevitably accompanied by yet more bureaucratic tasks that eat into already limited time—to assess staff performance and generally pressurise academics to get with the programme or leave. But from where does this pressure come? It is not set in motion by Vice Chancellors or university boards of governors. Nor, in truth, is it simply a 'political' creation, as new market-orientated governments take office keen to ensure that the exclusivity of universities is broken down and the focus of their activity becomes the creation, expansion and rejuvenation of markets. These groups and bodies and the ideas and orientations that structure their approach to higher education have not caused university commercialisation. Rather, they and the ideas that animate them are *effects of a deeper lying cause*.

This pressure to 'drive change'*—a phrase commonly used in university publicity materials that suggests continued improvement against established neoliberal measures—is everywhere in the British university system. The terror of stasis, of not progressing and moving forward, implies a profound dissatisfaction with what currently exists. On the surface of things, we might reasonably judge it quite laudable that these institutions are now committed to improvement. This commitment implies a drive to discover new and important truths about our world and give each generation of students a better and more edifying university experience than the last. However, in reality, this commitment is disconnected from the grand ideals of discovery and deep learning. The drive to improve, with no end in sight, is understood only in relation to the forms of neoliberal measurement that will be used to assess the university's inevitable improvement. No matter how good the performance of a university, an academic department or an individual researcher, next year they are expected to perform better. They must be forever dissatisfied with their existing achievements and determined to improve upon their performance. While it is true that we might, on occasion, be congratulated for a job well done, it is also clear that as soon as the congratulations offered by our managers pass into history, we are again subject to an injunction to replicate or improve upon our successes.

As capital moved ever more forcefully into its consumer phase, history was stripped of its substance, complexity and many of its established meanings (Hall 2012; Zizek 2008). History's place in our lives, especially with regard to self-identity, also shifted markedly (Winlow and Hall 2006; Hall et al. 2008; Lloyd 2012). Our forebears ceased to function as a symbolic audience who sat in judgement of our lives and deeds (Siedentop 2015). We stopped seeking their approval, and as time wore on, we instead placed ourselves in the position of judgement, often finding the beliefs and conduct of our ancestors parochial, illiberal, and unethical. Many commentators have suggested that the neoliberal settlement

brought history and politics, properly understood, to an end (see, for example, Zizek 2008; Brown 2017). As Badiou (2012) notes, there can be no true politics in times of broad consensus. The neoliberal consensus—which we should keep in mind lasted longer than the west's post-war social democratic consensus—effectively erased the future and the past, leaving us to live our lives in a perpetual neoliberal *now*. The future, as it was understood during capitalism's neoliberal phase, was simply another version of the present, and this is how the drive to improve is understood within the context of the marketized neophiliac university: it is a drive to improve those things that can be metricised and tabulated (see, for example, Burrows 2012), a drive to improve our performance relative to our competitors, and, of course, a drive to improve those things that open up new income streams and improve the bottom line. In the neoliberal university, the goal of advancing human knowledge is irrelevant unless advances can be captured and transformed into something that can be appraised, measured and commodified (see also Moore and Robinson 2015). How else are we to understand the advance of human knowledge today, if not by situating it within a framework of mere monetary value?

It is worth briefly acknowledging that British universities remain for the most part in the charitable sector and dependent upon state support. The Government subsidises higher education by offering students access to loans with favourable terms and conditions. Students are not required to make any repayments on their loans until they have left university and earn above £26,568 per annum. These loans are time limited, and any outstanding debt is written off after 30 years. Given that around 1.9 million British students are currently studying at British universities and a significant proportion of gross student debt remains outstanding and unlikely to be repaid, it seems reasonable to conclude that this is an unnecessarily convoluted and quite wasteful way of funding Britain's university system. The state also picks up the tab for a great deal of research funding, although again this relationship is managed by independent intermediaries. Of course, while the state continues to shoulder a significant proportion of the overall costs of the university system, despite the introduction of student fees and loans, the unstated goal has been to encourage the process of commercialisation, despite what appears to be a grudging acceptance that to force British universities into the market completely would in all likelihood lead to a significant reduction in the size and output of the sector. Students, who take on enormous debts often in the vague hope of improving their job prospects, are encouraged to pick the university that suits them and appears most likely to advance their interests. They are encouraged to demand value for money, and in turn, universities must respond to the needs, desires and feedback of their students to remain competitive in the market. The introduction of this system suggests a deep faith in the benefits of commercialisation. Students and citizens should be repositioned as customers, and all institutions should transform themselves into market competitors keen to offer attractive services. While neoliberalism in Britain was still in its first flush of youthful vitality, many devotees assumed that all state-funded bureaucracies were archaic and wasteful (Harvey 2007). The introduction of market logic would force lazy and self-assured academics to up their game. Ossified and out-of-date social practices would be dispensed with and the university would be forced to draw closer to an increasingly fragmented and consumerised civil society. Universities would be compelled to strip out waste or fail. Unpopular degree courses would be withdrawn and replaced by new areas of study more in keeping with popular interests. A new generation of university leaders would accept and embrace this new reality and fight hard to prosper in the market.

The imposition of the commercial imperative reflected the supremacy of neoliberal politicians from across the political spectrum (Winlow et al. 2015). All seemed to assume that the state was profligate, backward-looking and inept, whereas the market was innovative,

responsive and democratic. Neoliberal politicians talked down the capacities and power of the state and talked up the daring, creative and employment-generating investment class who they believed could drive us all to a better future. Even in those sectors where it was judged counterproductive to sell off state assets, it was still assumed the logic of the market could invigorate and improve performance (see Whitehead 2016; El-Gingihy 2018). This ideology quickly seeped through the sedimentary layers of British society. As time passed, many of its tropes were stripped of their political resonance to become basic common sense (Hall and Winlow 2015).

The neoliberal university's implicit drive to erase history and dash towards an idealised but vaguely composed future, only marginally different from the present, is simply an institutionalised and only slightly modified version of broader trends within society and culture (Winlow and Hall 2012a; Gill 2014). For the neoliberal academy, there is only forward, never back. The university before the advent of neoliberalism was of course far from perfect, but most who have some knowledge of both eras are quick to point out that in many important respects, standards have fallen (see, for example, Alderman 2007). The perpetual improvement message, trumpeted by virtually every university leader in the country, certainly distracts 'key stakeholders' from a patchier and not always positive reality, which in any case most would prefer to ignore.

When attempting to measure progress and improvement, we are forced to engage with layer upon layer of simulacra (Winlow and Hall 2012b). Much of what we do as academics and researchers, especially in the social sciences and humanities, is *beyond measure*. How can we measure accurately and without prejudice the quality of teaching and research? Who will decide, and on what basis will their decisions be made? How are we to measure the impact of our writing and research upon the world, without introducing numerous qualifications about what can be counted as a valuable effect? Despite these obvious impediments and frustrations, and because governments have decided that student consumers must be given as much information as possible in order to pick the university that is right for them, we must set ourselves to the task of measuring the kinds of things that resist measurement. And in the present context, it is inevitable that those things that are beyond measure fall into obsolescence and those things that stand in for what cannot be measured—in order to facilitate the process of compulsory measurement—come to the fore. The contemporary emphasis that is placed upon 'student satisfaction' is an obvious example. Idiosyncratic lecturing practices and the pleasures of watching a master explore an intellectual field without any plans or accompanying slides—without PowerPoint, Blackboard or Prezi—are regrettably disappearing from British universities. Instead, the drive is to ensure that every student consumer is given an orderly experience in which key issues are covered in detail and nothing important is left out. The experience should be uniform to ensure no student consumer is disadvantaged and all have what they need to perform well in the eventual assessment. When the traditional hierarchy is inverted, and the student becomes the appraiser and the lecturer the appraised, much that is of great value falls by the wayside. Undergraduate students are often not in a position to accurately determine what counts as a valuable lecture, seminar or module, and because university managers are keen to 'drive change'* by boosting student satisfaction, academics increasingly withhold difficult and demanding material and do what they can to be popular with their appraisers. I am generalising slightly, but the general trend is clear.

We should understand the relatively new emphasis placed upon 'employability'* as a key feature of this trend. At many institutions, 'employability' sessions—which might address, for example, how to develop an attractive CV, how to identify potential employers, how to seek out additional training or 'experience', and so on—are supplanting traditional

features of the curriculum as an ever-greater emphasis is placed upon transforming universities into training institutions for the labour market. I will not comment on the broad negativities of contemporary labour markets in Britain (see instead, Cederstrom and Fleming 2012; Lloyd 2019), but I will briefly note that in 'employability' sessions, academics often find themselves in a position where they must present a profoundly negative process—in which students are encouraged to outcompete their peers by transforming themselves and their personalities in ways deemed favourable to secure exploitative and downgraded labour—as positive, fair and ultimately inevitable. And, of course, the ability of graduating students to find 'good jobs' is metricised and tabulated and offered to prospective students as decontextualised nuggets of information to inform their consumer decisions.

Discussing 'dumbing down' is always awkward. I accept that very talented students continue to pass through Britain's higher education system, but at this stage of the university's history, it is pointless to deny the reality we see before us. Many lecturers have come to accept that most students will not read in preparation for class, and so increasingly the lecture becomes simply a means of passing on basic and easily digestible pieces of information that can be regurgitated in the assessment at the end of term. Students want lectures to be entertaining and not too taxing, and they want to be given the information they will need to perform well in the assessment. The problem of 'grade inflation' is significant and difficult to deny (see, for example, Bachan 2017). Handing out first-class grades help universities to improve their league table position, and students who achieve first-class grades are far more likely to comment favourably upon their lecturers and their university experience in the National Student Survey. The commercial imperative has also, in a roundabout way, transformed the ways in which we engage with social research. I will pick this point up later.

It would be churlish of me to suggest that the increased orientation of university leaders in the new university sector to research is an entirely bad thing. There are talented academic criminologists working in this sector who deserve the chance to conduct research and play a more central role within the discipline. However, in most cases, this new focus on research has not led to a rebalancing of academic workloads. For the most part, academics in this sector are required to conduct research on top of everything else they are required to do to ensure that undergraduate and postgraduate programmes remain operative and that students graduate and reflect positively upon their university experience.

Even before the obvious stresses of the COVID pandemic, workloads in the new university sector were up significantly on where they used to be, as were institutional expectations. Stress levels remain incredibly high (Batty 2020; Hall 2021). However, the diverse effects of abundant stress are often disavowed. In a climate of high and rising competition, the goal seems to be to present ourselves to our peers as impervious, diligent, and deeply committed to our research and the intellectual improvement of our students. Sacrificing weekends and evenings in order to hit a deadline is presented as a price worth paying to do what we love.

As an occupational group, British academics are more anxious and insecure than they have ever been (Gill 2014). British university leaders, concerned about the bottom line, will withdraw programmes, disband departments and make academics redundant if a strong 'business case'* cannot be made to retain them (see, for example, Wolff 2010; Fazackerley 2021). University leaders also employ more subtle means of 'driving change'*. Pressure can be placed on academics to leave or take early retirement (Grove 2017). And short-term contracts have of course become increasingly common (UCU 2019), making it very difficult for huge numbers of British criminologists to plan for the future.

The effect of work stress upon our emotional wellbeing, families and social lives tends only to be discussed in occasional exposes written by academics who cannot take it anymore and decide to find work in the real world beyond the academy (see, for example, Moorish 2017; Coin 2017). However, it would be wrong of me to suggest that university leaders are blind to the issue of workplace stress and its subtle effect upon staff morale. In a move deeply indicative of the reversal of ideology, we can now take an online training session about managing our time better or attend a mindfulness workshop to learn how to divest ourselves of anxieties and somehow find happiness in our overwork (Cederstrom and Fleming 2012).

Stress and burnout are issues for criminologists working at institutions at all levels of Britain's university hierarchy. Criminologists working at established British universities—such as those that form part of the Russell Group, a 'research intensive'* collection of universities roughly equivalent to the Ivy League—have also been forced to deal with the whirlwind of change whipped up by the commercialisation of traditional practice. At these more prestigious universities, greater emphasis is placed upon the production of social research that has a chance to be judged 'world-leading'* in the REF. Criminologists working in this sector are less likely to be burdened by incredibly high levels of teaching and administration, and generally, there are fewer pointless, inhibiting bureaucratic processes for them to deal with. However, even in the most prestigious universities, things have changed. The standard neoliberal drive to reduce costs while pushing up productivity has now been around so long and has become so ubiquitous that it is scarcely remarked upon. The pressure to generate grant income varies slightly from institution to institution and is a little more pronounced in the older 'research intensive'* universities. It also tends to be felt more keenly by professors than by early career researchers, who are more likely to be overloaded with teaching. However, these slight differences should not draw our attention away from the fact that bidding for external research funding has quickly become a focal concern for the vast majority of criminologists working in the British university system. Anxious about the continuity of our employment and aware of negative comparisons with 'high performing'* colleagues, we accept our role as academic entrepreneurs and set ourselves to the task of convincing public and private research funders that we are trustworthy, informed and diligent, happy to work within the hazily defined parameters of the liberal reformist mainstream, and that our ideas for research are essentially apolitical and capable of producing benefits for 'user groups'*. In the contemporary British context, being a successful academic criminologist is less about producing important ideas that can illuminate the causes of crime and harm, and more about selling ideas to funders, filling our CVs with details of large research grants, and supressing awareness that we often work well within our capabilities and many of our proposed projects are of only limited intellectual value.

Neoliberalism works in tandem with the insecurities inherent to the project of postmodernism. The deliberate cultivation of anxiety has produced important political, economic and cultural outcomes that are too often overlooked in the standard academic literature on neoliberalism. When we are anxious about the continuity of our employment, and consequently our ability to secure the material wellbeing of ourselves and our immediate families, we become more compliant, more risk-averse and much less likely to challenge ideas we believe are wrong and practices we know harm our disciplines and our intellectual culture (see Lazzarato 2012; Horsley 2020). The political and intellectual radicalism of British academics has been truncated and commodified. Radicalism is encouraged by our university leaders, as long as it is of the broadly acceptable sort and does not get in the way of the commercial interests of the university. To be truly radical, to challenge the underlying principles of our present way of life and suggest not small-scale adjustments but deep and

transformative interventions, is increasingly rare. And not without good reason. It is difficult to defy convention when there is clear evidence that to do so may result in the termination of one's employment. While the social sciences in Britain remain undeniably middle class in terms of its predominant tastes and dispositions, most social scientists working at British universities rely upon the continuity of their employment. When our Dean or Pro-Vice Chancellor for Research tells us to focus our attention on winning external research funding, and by implication disengage from aspects of academic life unlikely to yield commercial benefits for our employer, most go along. Intellectual radicalism, like much else in the British university, is increasingly simulated and performed. Calls for the system to further accommodate the rolling demands of cultural liberalism have clearly forced out what now seems to be the rather old-fashioned demand that the system to be brought to an end and replaced with something else. Below I extend this discussion by looking at the rise of careerism, factionalism, empiricism and conformism, and the swift decline of creativity, curiosity, intellectual ambition, and our willingness to stand apart from the crowd.

The Ghosts of Criminology

The brief critique of British academic criminology I offer here should not be understood as a critique of academic criminologists working in British universities. There is little sense in criticising the individual for conforming to the structural realities of the institution in which she works. Rather, I am attempting to draw attention to the structures that inevitably affect the ways that we engage with teaching, research, and each other. I am also asking that we address these issues with a greater degree of honesty. If we are to truly grasp the power of ideology and think clearly about how the neoliberal project, which enriches a tiny proportion of the overall population at the expense of everyone else, achieved unmatched supremacy in the west for over forty years, we must occasionally pause and think through how, in our daily labours, we may become bound up in capitalism's process of adaptation and continuity. The first step is to accept that we do not exist in a wonderfully ethical space beyond neoliberalism. That is not how ideology works.

It is difficult to deny that careerism has become a more obvious feature of contemporary academia. Intellectual individualism has of course always been a key part of knowledge production, and yet for the most part this individualism has been disguised by a general cultural framework that held the knowledge producer to be part of a community of scholars working to advance human knowledge in the interests of all. This functional narcissism (see Hall et al. 2008), rooted in the desire for achievement and recognition, had positive social ends. However, in contemporary British criminology, we are increasingly able to identify a more obviously solipsistic and anti-social narcissism. Here, the principal goal is not to achieve renown for producing revelatory knowledge, but to advance quickly through the ranks and do what needs to be done to 'secure achievement'* and earn more money. The relationships that are integral to a functioning academic discipline are increasingly individualised and appraised for their utility. Close relationships are cultivated with scholars who might be able to dispense a favour at some point in the future. We speak warmly of the work of scholars who we hope will one day look kindly at our own work. We write articles not because we want to drive forward human knowledge but because we are required to do so by our employer, and writing articles is a key prerequisite of career progression. We apply for grants that have nothing to do with our academic interests because we must be seen by our employers to be hungry and committed to 'income generation'*. Some plot

their careers out carefully, recognising and committing to those things likely to please institutional managers and promotion committees. Others, perhaps less committed to intellectual matters and more interested in the immediate context of the institution in which they work, take on administrative jobs they hope will lead to other administrative jobs further up the ladder. It is certainly true that these characteristics and strategies were not created by the neoliberal project, and it is also quite easy to overstate the solidity of modern intellectual communities. Rather, it is my suggestion that this kind of academic individualism is increasingly framed by the commercial imperative, and, as the old cultures that stressed the communal project of knowledge production fall by the wayside, are openly and unashamedly practiced.

We have also seen an increased orientation to empiricism (see Winlow 2012). British criminology, now fully entrenched in both new and old universities as an attractive undergraduate discipline favoured by students, produces a huge volume of data. In terms of the production of illuminating datasets, British criminology is in vibrant health (see, for example, Briggs 2017; Ellis 2017; Tudor 2019; Kotze 2020; Ayres 2020; Treadwell et al. 2020). However, while we have made significant advances in terms of accessing and reporting upon key populations and practices of interest to criminologists, we have certainly not made equivalent theoretical advances. There is now a marked disinterest in theory (Hall and Winlow 2015). Quite often theory is presented as an elitist and entirely superfluous aspect of criminological scholarship, something to be tagged on at the end of an article concerned mostly with the presentation of data. Students often find studying theory difficult and demanding and consequently tend to voice their dissatisfaction when asked to comment on their university experience. It should come as no surprise that many departments are now thinking about how they can ditch dedicated theory modules and replace them with something more likely to be more popular with undergraduate students. Similarly, postgraduate students are rarely presented with the opportunity to commit entirely to theoretical matters; the assumption is always that empirical data collection is the core business of any PhD thesis. And of course, while it is possible to win a research grant to gather quantitative or qualitative data, it is incredibly difficult to win a grant that will enable the applicant to simply read, think and theorise. There have been few noteworthy advances in criminological theory in the twenty-first century. Although excellent and ambitious work is being produced by British criminological theorists working at the margins (Ellis 2017; Tudor 2019; Raymen 2019; Kotze 2020; Telford and Lloyd 2020; Hayward and Hall 2021), it seems highly unlikely that this work can move to the centre to reinvigorate our increasingly staid and formulaic post-political field. Some criminological theorists still offer their audience snippets of Foucault and Cohen as if in doing so they were challenging a prevailing positivist orthodoxy, rather than simply adding to what is, quite clearly, the true orthodoxy of panoramic liberal progressivism. Simply borrowing aspects of liberal social theory currently in vogue in sociology does not really cut it if our goal is to shed new light on the fundamental problems of the world as it is today.

Challenging orthodoxies is always difficult, and challenging contemporary orthodoxies in criminology is made more difficult by the institutional contexts I describe above. Given the pressure British criminologists face to generate external research income, it is entirely understandable that many simply reproduce intellectual and methodological conventions in order to satisfy peers who sit on award committees or otherwise evaluate grant applications. And similarly, when submitting an article to a core journal, why risk constructing a new theoretical framework when it is obviously much easier to publish an article that suggests a slight revision to one of the frameworks that appear on the list of approved ideas in criminology? Going with the flow, researching approved and conventional research topics

and applying approved and conventional ideas, is less demanding and is accompanied by much less risk.

Despite the huge growth of the discipline and the proliferation of interesting, bespoke sub-fields that hold considerable promise (see, for example, Raymen and Smith 2019; South and Brisman 2020), British criminology is more censorious and intellectually one-dimensional than it has ever been. The growth of workplace anxiety—which is made more complex by the proliferation of the new culture wars—has clearly contributed to a general aversion to intellectual risk-taking in British criminology. An ever more strident critique of the usual suspects really is not the same thing. It remains to be seen if we can break free from the chains that have been placed upon our imagination, slay a few sacred cows and join with others to restart our disciplinary dialectic, but even a disinterested glance at the horrors of the real world should affirm the urgency of this task. In a time that clearly needs new ideas and new theories, we are stuck rehearsing the same old arguments, convinced of our own criticality, against everything that is bad but for nothing that can be named as the Good (Badiou 2013; Raymen 2019).

The Reversal of Ideology in the Neoliberal University

The traditional Marxist account of ideological control directs our attention to those processes that disguise reality with a positive representation. We are denied access to the truth: in conducting our everyday lives in the established pattern—accepting wage labour, aspiring to the symbols of consumer success, competing against our neighbour, using education to improve our position within the system as it stands—we unknowingly contribute to our own oppression and lend our weight to the reproduction of tyranny. Engaged in our private concerns and accepting the basic structure of everyday life as it is presented to us, we do not see the reality of our situation. For Marx and Gramsci, capitalism essentially relies upon complex processes of distraction and misdirection. It is the job of the critic and the scholar to strip away the gaudy shroud of positivity that has been thrown over everyday life to reveal the brutal reality beneath (see especially Gramsci 2005). However, the rise of post-68 capitalist ideology changed things. The ruling ideology is no longer principally concerned with preventing an encounter with reality. Rather, its strategy is twofold. First, we are encouraged to cynically accept that nothing better might be brought into being, and second, we are offered the comfort of separating ourselves from the negative consequences of market enterprise while imagining that we are in no way complicit in the horrors we see unfolding around us every day.

Knowledge of the broad harms of contemporary liberal capitalism is broadly dispersed throughout the population. We know about the degradation of the natural environment (see Brisman and South 2014). We know about the breath-taking power and influence of the new global oligarchs (Winlow and Hall 2016). We know that our cities are being ruthlessly commodified (Winlow and Hall 2012a). We know that meritocracy is a myth. We know that capital will spare not a backward glance for the millions thrown out of work as it moves from one exhausted market to the next (Telford and Lloyd 2020). All of these things, and much else besides, are out in the open. They are also often acknowledged by those who act to preserve and justify the global capitalist system in the eyes of national electorates. The fundamental drive here is to encourage all to assume that these problems are being addressed by politicians and philanthropists, and that there is no need for fundamental change. There are problems, sure, but we

are heading in the right direction. The emphasis on piecemeal adjustments, rather than radical and transformative upheavals, has served the liberal capitalist system well for centuries (Winlow et al. 2015). All other comprehensible forms of social and political organisation are inevitably judged to be worse, so we are encouraged to weigh the negatives of the present system against what we must assume are its abundant and diverse positive features. For example, our democracies may be doggedly apolitical, ineffectual, exclusionary and corrupted by private interests, but at least we are given the opportunity to vote. Electoral democracy, we always assume, would be the first thing to go if we were to pursue a deeper intervention. We may complain about the Starbucksification of the city and the shopping mall, but, hey, we do get better coffee these days. We are free to mock the stupidity of our politicians, as long as we continue to vote. We are free to decry the power of oligarchs, as long as we continue to consume. We are free to endlessly mock and criticise every aspect of the world as it is today, in fact we are encouraged to do precisely that, as long as our mockery and criticism do not take on a more serious tone and ascend to the realm of true politics. In this way, we believe we see the world as it is, recognise its injustices and feel we play no part in their reproduction. Where once injustice was ideologically camouflaged to prevent concerted political action, now injustice is out in the open and, like the continued commercialisation of the university, tacitly accepted as a regrettable inevitably. And in the contemporary era, the fact that it is out in the open and tacitly accepted ensures that no truly oppositional politics can rise to prominence. Ideology is so often thought to involve ideas and the manipulation of popular understanding, but ideology, and ideological domination, is really about practice. We can believe ourselves to be true progressives, committed to all that is good in life. But if we do not act upon our professed beliefs, if our anti-authoritarianism remains, as it were, simply 'in our heads' or restricted to mere discourse, then the capitalist system is untroubled, and the ruling ideology has done its job.

We see one aspect of this reversal of ideology very clearly in the contemporary British neoliberal university. As I mentioned earlier, our immediate managers are quite often critical of the introduction of new bureaucratic mechanisms tied to market performance. The standard modern mode of institutional authority, in which our managers simply tell us what we have to do and do not bother to explain why, has been reversed. Quite often we are not told directly that we must carry out a particular administrative task. Rather, we are enjoined to carry out the task by a manager who expresses exasperation at the constant growth of bureaucracy and administration, and politely asks us if we would mind carrying out this task as a personal favour so that it can be set aside, and normality restored. Our manager now presents herself as being on 'our side' and no longer the bearer of traditional authority. But in fact, when we find ourselves in this position, we are ineffably subject to institutional authority. We are encouraged to believe that we possess a degree of agency and carrying out the task is our choice, but the entire scene is pitched in a way that ensures the removal of genuine choice. In this scenario, it is almost impossible to refuse to carry out the task and remain on good terms with our immediate manager. Refusing to carry out the task also encourages the individual to negatively evaluate her own conduct. Here, our manager is our friend. Like us, she would prefer not to have to deal with another bureaucratic task entirely separated from the fundaments of university life. Our manager is in a difficult spot and needs help. To refuse to help would be selfish, and we would be revealed as an anti-social individualist rather than a dedicated 'team-player'. In simply turning down a polite request, we obstruct the smooth functioning of the institution. We have the appearance of choice where no choice exists. Beneath the polite and solicitous request resides the power of traditional authority (see Zizek 2008; *passim*).

Postmodernism stripped us of what we were told were our unworldly beliefs. Anything that solicited our faith was judged to be flawed in some crucial respect and unworthy of our commitment. The metanarratives of the modern era crumbled one after another, and we were thrust into a post-political era in which the dyad of liberal democracy and free-market capitalism became all encompassing. We became convinced that any attempt to create a future beyond this horizon would rapidly bring to an end the freedoms we had been told were the only true source of value in the world. All that remains, once we have divested ourselves of our commitments and accepted that every leader, ever political project, every truly transformative policy shift is tainted and doomed to failure, is the defeatism of personal gratification and interest, both of which can be endlessly commodified. This tendency to withhold belief—which is of course far more complex and multifaceted than we imagine, given that we must believe in our own non-belief, or, to put it another way, disavow the forms of belief that make our conscious non-belief possible—is both an outcome of the ruling ideology and a key feature of its staggeringly variegated cultural output. And so it is in the neoliberal university.

Conclusion

As Marx and Engels (2015) recognised long ago, in its dash to a commercialised future, the market tends to put an end to 'feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations'. All that remains, once the market has commodified a particular aspect of our cultural life, is 'naked self-interest, [and] callous cash payment'. Or at least, almost only that. Simulations of traditional cultural forms become ubiquitous, and, with the passage of time, we lose the ability to distinguish what is real from what is simulated. The British university system clung on to its ideals and many of its traditions much longer than other broadly equivalent institutions. For a long time, power seemed to accept that the university produced something rare and of great value. What the university produced was something abstruse and difficult to quantify, but it was considered valuable, nonetheless. Aside from occasional outcries and witch-hunts, for the most part the British political class accepted that the university should be left to its own devices and remain apart from global capitalism's project of continuous self-revolution. However, the counter-revolution of the neoclassicists puts an end to the university's splendid isolation. The social-democratic age faded from view and neoliberalism's cold market logic became so ubiquitous that it ceased to be considered an ideology and instead established itself as basic common sense. As it did so, it became clear that nothing would be considered sacrosanct and held apart from the vigorous cut and thrust of the market. Virtually every aspect of our collective life was to be opened up to private investment. As we rushed towards illusory images of a positive, technocratic future—in which the political passions of the modern age were to be replaced by the dispassionate efficiency of experts, and in which constant technological innovation would solve the world's problems and improve the lives of all—traditional sources of value were judged archaic, parochial and exclusive, and so were consigned to history with scarcely a backward glance. Henceforth, money and its effects would be all that really mattered. Of course, as we drew closer to the twenty-first century, the market moved beyond collective life and intruded ever more forcefully upon the intimacies of our private lives (Hall et al. 2008). Traditional boundaries and demarcations became porous and then collapsed. Our dreams and fantasies became inextricably bound to the ruling ideology's sign-value system.

It is not simply that neoliberalism rose to a position of dominance and the population were forced to dance to a different tune. Neoliberalism's expansive ideological support mechanisms altered the ways we think, feel and react to the world around us. Our hopes, dreams and expectations of both our collective and political life have been reshaped and enclosed, to the extent that it has become almost impossible to imagine a future free from the market's malign influence. For years now we have been encouraged to form the view that the supposed gifts of the consumer age are redolent of 'freedom', and that any future in which the commodity form is not central to our cultural life will be regressive, barren and, in all likelihood, totalitarian (Winlow et al. 2015).

Our resistance to the totality of global neoliberalism has been curtailed, manipulated and commodified. While the idealists revel in the conceit that their activism scares the system and time and again forces it to yield ground, and that a growing proportion of the population are committed progressives willing to fight for a future free from the travails of the present, it seems to me important to continue to point out that the system, properly understood, is perfectly capable of assimilating the dissent of radicals, as long as that dissent continues to focus upon the injustices of the cultural field and ignore entirely the realm of political economy, which is of course the true locus of entrenched power and privilege. Even our forthright critique of neoliberalism remains tied to its base logic. It is a mistake to assume that the personification of the contemporary capitalist system is a slow-witted behemoth unable to keep up with its supposedly nimble ideological adversaries. Capitalism is more nimble, adroit, adaptable and ruthless than it has ever been, and it is incumbent upon us all, as critical academics, to wrestle with the possibility that our radicalism can be co-opted by the very system we expend so much energy criticising.

Contemporary capitalism is perfectly amenable to cultural change; in fact, cultural change tends to drive market innovation and create new investment opportunities. It also tends to bolster the view that our democracy remains vibrant and open, and subject to the will of the people. As long as critique is directed solely at the injustices of the cultural field and the realm of political economy remains off-limits, the capitalist system is happy to allow its adversaries to claim a victory. The market system is not threatened if one cultural elite is deposed and replaced by another. The moment we feel we have overcome the ruling ideology's snares and pitfalls and occupy a space external to its rule is the moment the ruling ideology again tightens its grip upon our intellectual and political life.

References

Alderman, G. (2007) 'League tables rule - and standards inevitably fall', The Guardian, 24/4/2007. Available here: https://www.theguardian.com/education/2007/apr/24/highereducation.universityguide

Ayres, T. (2020) 'Childhood Trauma, Problematic Drug Use and Coping', *Deviant Behavior,* DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/01639625.2020.1746132

Bachan, R. (2017) 'Grade inflation in UK higher education', *Studies in Higher Education*, 42, 8: 1580-1600

Badiou, A. (2012) *The Rebirth of History,* London: Verso

Badiou, A. (2013) *Ethics*, London: Verso

Batty, D. (2020) ''I feel out of my depth': university lecturers in England on the impact of the pandemic', *The Guardian*, 3/12/2020. Available here: https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/dec/03/i-feel-out-of-my-depth-university-lecturers-in-england-on-the-impact-of-the-pandemic

Briggs, D. (2017) *Dead-end Lives*, Bristol: Policy Press

Brisman, A. and South, N. (2014) *Green Cultural Criminology,* Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge

Brown, W. (2017) *Undoing the Demos,* New York: Zone Books

Burrows, R. (2012) 'Living with the h-index? Metric assemblages in the contemporary academy', *The Sociological Review*, 60, 2: 355-372.

Cederstrom, C. and Fleming, P (2012) *Dead Man Working*, London: Zero Books

Coin, F. (2017) 'On Quitting', *Ephemera*, 17, 3: 705-719

Derrida, J. (2006) *Spectres of Marx,* London: Routledge

El-Gingihy, Y. (2018) *How to Dismantle the NHS in 10 Easy Steps,* London: Zero Books

Ellis, A. (2017) *Men, Masculinities and Violence,* London: Routledge

Fazackerley, A. (2021) ''Despicable in a pandemic': fury as UK universities plan job cuts', The Guardian, 22/1/21. Available here: https://www.theguardian.com/education/2021/jan/22/despicable-in-a-pandemic-fury-as-10-uk-universities-plan-job-cuts

Fleming, P (2015) *The Mythology of Work,* London: Pluto Press

Gill, R. (2014) 'Academics, Cultural Workers and Critical Labour Studies', *Journal of Cultural Economy*, 7, 1: 12-30

Gramsci, A. (2005) *Selections from the Prison Notebooks,* London: Lawrence and Wishart

Grove, J. (2017) 'University tells entire professoriate to reapply for their jobs', *Times Higher Education* (7/7/2017). Available here: https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/university-tells-entire-professoriate-reapply-their-jobs

Hall, S. (2012) *Theorizing Crime and Deviance,* London: Sage

Hall, S. and Winlow, S. (2015) *Revitalizing Criminological Theory: Towards a New Ultra-Realism,* London: Routledge

Hall, S., Winlow, S. and Ancrum, C. (2008) *Criminal Identities and Consumer Culture: Crime, Exclusion and the New Culture of Narcissism,* Cullompton: Willan

Hall, R. (2021) 'Four in five university and college staff struggling because of pandemic, union says', The Guardian, 4/3/21. Available here: https://amp.theguardian.com/education/2021/mar/04/four-in-five-university-and-college-staff-struggling-because-of-pandemic-union-says?__twitter_impression=true

Harvey, D. (2007) *A Brief History of Neoliberalism,* Oxford: Oxford University Press

Hayward, K. and Hall, S. (2021) 'Through Scandinavia, darkly: a criminological critique of Nordic noir', *The British Journal of Criminology,* 61, 1: 1-21.

Hochuli, A., Hoare, G. and Cunliffe, P. (2021) *The End of the End of History*, London: Zero Books

Horsley, M. (2020) *The Dark Side of Prosperity*, London: Routledge

Kotze, J. (2020) *The Myth of the 'Crime Decline'*, London: Routledge

Lazzarato, M. (2012) *The Making of Indebted Man,* Amsterdam: Semiotext(E)

Lloyd, A. (2012) 'Working to live, not living to work: Work, leisure and youth identity among call centre workers in North East England' *Current Sociology,* 60, 5: 619-635

Lloyd, A. (2019) *The Harms of Work,* Bristol: Bristol University Press

Marx, K. and Engels, F. (2015) *The Communist Manifesto,* London: Penguin Classics

Moore, P. and Robinson, A. (2015) 'The Quantified Self: What Counts in the Neoliberal Workplace', *New Media & Society*, 18, 1: 2774-2792.

Morrish, L. (2017) 'Why the Audit Culture Made Me Quit', *Times Higher Education*. Available at: https://www.timeshighereducation.com/features/why-audit-culture-mademe-quit#survey-answer

Pfaller, R. (2017) *Interpassivity,* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press

Raymen, T. (2019) 'The Enigma of Social Harm and the Barrier of Liberalism: Why Zemiology Needs a Theory of the Good', *Justice, Power and Resistance,* 3, 1: 133-163.

Raymen, T. and Smith, O. (eds) (2019) *Deviant Leisure: Criminological Perspectives on Leisure and Harm*, London: Palgrave

Shore, C. (2008) 'Audit Culture and Illiberal Governance: Universities and the Culture of Accountability', *Anthropological Theory*, 8, 3: 278-298

Siedentop, L. (2015) *Inventing the Individual,* London: Penguin

South, N. and Brisman, A. (eds) (2020) *Routledge International Handbook of Green Criminology*, London: Routledge

Telford, L. and Lloyd, A. (2020) 'From "Infant Hercules" to "ghost town": Industrial collapse and social harm in Teesside', *Critical Criminology*, 28, 4: 595-611.

Treadwell, J., Ancrum, C. and Kelly, C. (2020) 'Taxing times: inter-criminal victimization and drug robbery amongst the English professional criminal milieu', *Deviant Behavior,* 41(1), pp.57-69

Tudor, K. (2019) 'Symbolic survival and harm: Serious fraud and consumer capitalism's perversion of the Causa Sui project', *The British Journal of Criminology,* 59, 5:1237-1253

UCU (2019) 'Counting the costs of casualisation in higher education: Key findings of a survey conducted by the University and College Union'. Available here: https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/10336/Counting-the-costs-of-casualisation-in-higher-education-Jun-19/pdf/ucu_casualisation_in_HE_survey_report_Jun19.pdf

Whitehead, P. (2016) *Transforming Probation,* Bristol: Policy Press

Winlow, S. and Hall, S. (2006), *Violent Night: Urban Leisure and Contemporary Culture,* Oxford: Berg

Winlow, S. and Hall, S. (2012a) *Rethinking Social Exclusion: The Death of the Social?* London: Sage

Winlow, S. and Hall, S. (2012b) 'What is an 'ethics committee'? Academic governance in an epoch of belief and incredulity', *The British Journal of Criminology,* 52, 2: 400-416

Winlow, S. and Hall, S. (2016) 'Realist criminology and its discontents', *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy*, 5, 3: 80-94

Winlow, S. and Hall, S. (2019) 'Shock and awe: On progressive minimalism and retreatism, and the new ultra-realism', *Critical Criminology,* 27: 21–36

Winlow, S., Hall, S., Treadwell, J. and Briggs, D. (2015) *Riots and Political Protest: Notes from the Post-Political Present,* London: Routledge

Winlow, S. (2012) 'Is it OK to Talk About Capitalism Again? Or, Why Criminology Must Take a Leap of Faith', in S. Winlow and R. Atkinson, (eds) *New Directions in Crime and Deviancy: Papers from the York Deviance Conference 2011*, London: Routledge

Wolff, J. (2010) 'Why is Middlesex University's philosophy department closing?', The Guardian (18/5/2017). Available here: https://www.theguardian.com/education/2010/may/17/philosophy-closure-middlesex-university

Zizek, S. (2008) *Living in the End Times*, London: Verso