

Brainwashing the Corporate Way

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One of the most original and provocative books of the past decade is *Disciplined Minds* by Jeff Schmidt (Rowman & Littlefield). “A critical look at salaried professionals,” says the cover, “and the soul-battering system that shapes their lives.” Its theme is postmodern America but also applies to Britain, where the corporate state has bred a new class of Americanised manager to run the private and public sectors: the banks, the main parties, corporations, important committees, the BBC.

Professionals are said to be meritorious and non-ideological. Yet, in spite of their education, writes Schmidt, they think less independently than non-professionals. They use corporate jargon – “model”, “performance”, “targets”, “strategic oversight”. In *Disciplined Minds*, Schmidt argues that what makes the modern professional is not technical knowledge but “ideological discipline”. Those in higher education and the media do “political work” but in a way that is not seen as political. Listen to a senior BBC person sincerely describe the nirvana of neutrality to which he or she has risen. “Taking sides” is anathema; and yet the modern professional knows never to challenge the “built-in ideology of the status quo”. What matters is the “right attitude”.

A key to training professionals is what Schmidt calls “assignable curiosity”. Children are naturally curious, but along the way to becoming a professional they learn that curiosity is a series of tasks assigned by others. On entering training, students are optimistic and idealistic. On leaving, they are “pressured and troubled” because they realise that “the primary goal for many is getting compensated sufficiently for sidelining their original goals”. I have met many young people, especially budding journalists, who would recognise themselves in this description. For no matter how indirect its effect, the primary influence of professional managers is the extreme political cult of money worship and inequality known as neoliberalism.

The ultimate professional manager is Bob Diamond, the CEO of Barclays Bank in London, who got a £6.5m bonus in March. More than 200 Barclays managers took home £554m in total last year. In January, Diamond told the Commons Treasury select committee that “the time for remorse is over”. He was referring to the £1trn of public money handed unconditionally to corrupted banks by a Labour government whose leader, Gordon Brown, had described such “financiers” as his personal “inspiration”.

This was the final act of corporate coup d’état, now disguised by a specious debate about “cuts” and a “national deficit”. The most humane premises of British life are to be eliminated. The “value” of the cuts is said to be £83bn, almost exactly the amount of tax

legally avoided by the banks and corporations. That the British public continues to give the banks an additional annual subsidy of £100bn in free insurance and guarantees – a figure that would fund the entire National Health Service – is suppressed.

So, too, is the absurdity of the very notion of “cuts”. When Britain was officially bankrupt following the Second World War, there was full employment and some of its greatest public institutions, such as the Health Service, were built. Yet “cuts” are managed by those who say they oppose them and manufacture consent for their wider acceptance. This is the role of the Labour Party’s professional managers.

In matters of war and peace, Schmidt’s disciplined minds promote violence, death and mayhem on a scale still unrecognised in Britain. In spite of damning evidence to the Chilcot inquiry by the former intelligence chief Major General Michael Laurie, the “core business” manager, Alastair Campbell, remains at large, as do all the other war managers who toiled with Blair and at the Foreign Office to justify and sell the beckoning bloodbath in Iraq.

The reputable media play a critical often subtle role. Frederick Ogilvie, who succeeded the BBC’s founder, Lord Reith, as director general, wrote that his goal was to turn the BBC into a “fully effective instrument of war”. Ogilvie would have been delighted with his 21st-century managers. In the run-up to the Iraq invasion, the BBC’s coverage overwhelmingly echoed the government’s mendacious position, as studies by the University of Wales and Media Tenor show.

However, the great Arab uprising cannot be easily managed, or appropriated, with omissions and caveats, as an exchange on the BBC’s Today programme on 16 May made clear. With his celebrated professionalism, honed in corporate speeches, John Humphrys interviewed a Palestinian spokesman, Husam Zomlot, following Israel’s massacre of unarmed demonstrators on the 63rd anniversary of the illegal expulsion of the Palestinian people from their homes.

Humphrys: . . . it’s not surprising that Israel reacted the way it did, is it?

Zomlot: . . . I am very proud and glad [they were] peacefully marching only to . . . really to draw attention to their 63-year plight.

Humphrys: But they did not march peacefully, that’s my point . . .

Zomlot: None of them . . . was armed . . . [They were] opposed to Israeli tanks and helicopters and F-16s. You cannot even start to compare the violence . . . This is not a security matter . . . [the Israelis] always fail to deal with such a purely political, humanitarian, legal matter . . .

Humphrys: Sorry to interrupt you there but . . . if I marched into your house waving a club and throwing a stone at you then it would be a security matter, wouldn’t it?

Zomlot: I beg your pardon. According to the United Nations Security Council resolutions, those people are marching to their homes; they have the deeds of their homes; it’s their private property. So let’s set the record right once and for all . . .

It was a rare moment. Setting the record straight is not a managerial “target”.

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