

Industrial America, Managerialism and the “Fordist Academic”

By [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#)

Theme: [History](#)

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Two figures tower over the idea, and the realisation, of industrial America. The first is Henry Ford, whose factory process dedicated to mass car production featured specifically focused machinery, a moving assembly line, and a linear process of interdependent tasks. The second giant in this regard is Frederick W. Taylor, whose principles of scientific management involved the division of factory work into small and simple tasks in a coordinated, sequential manner in the name of maximum efficiency.

Both figures propelled standardisation, the finding of a mass produced common ground, the production, in fact of commonness. Intellectually, it might have been deadening, but mass production suited mass consumption. What, then, of this creep into other areas of society, including that of the university?

In her novel *Look at Me* (2001), Jennifer Egan sketches one of her characters as an atomised intellectual who claims that the “narrative of industrial America began with the rationalisation of objects through standardisation, abstraction and mass production”. It concluded “with the rationalisation of human beings through marketing, public relations, image consulting and spin.”[1]

The modern academy, far from being immune to this rationalisation, has capitulated to the Fordist-Taylor approach with enthusiastic abandon. The Fordist academic is a spineless, compromised product, an offspring cowardly in meetings, a lazy collaborator seeking to maximise production gains with minimal effort and one suspicious of individuality.

There are two vectors of influence here. The first is university managerialism, the propelling force behind the assembly line of dross and drudgery that is modern academic publishing, promotion and committees. The other is the idiosyncratic nature of the academic profession, populated by individuals who tend to be the first to fold before the next rationalising government scheme, the next foolish innovation, offering token, feeble resistance.

Bill Readings, in his bleak but seminal work *University in Ruins* (1997) made the important point that the university has been essentially prized away from the nation-state. The university has ceased “its role as producer, protector, and inculcator of an idea of national culture.”[2] The university, in fact, has become the inculcator of a service, economic culture, one marked by fictional work plans, aspirational production targets, and unrealistic aims termed “development goals”.

Liz Morrish, writing from her perspective as a former British academic, outlines a range of skin crawling measures that typify the Fordist academic work place. “Research grant capture” has become an obsession. The “research excellence framework,” underwritten by “anticipatory performance management”, has been fashioned as a weapon, while research

areas are singled out for targeting and saturation.[3] Intellectual curiosity is stomped upon and people are pushed down in what has been termed the “anxiety machine”.[4]

The Fordist academic, insecure and compromised, loathes individual aptitude and sterling initiative and loves the sharply cut corner, the quick fix, the rapid option. This form of propagated laziness has its distinct outcomes. Research, something to be usually savoured as singularly individual, with its raw delights, its fresh uncovering, be it in an archive, a collection, or laboratory, is outsourced, cast aside to a graduate student, or, in some cases, an undergraduate student of potential.

A philosophy has become de rigueur in some departments: making students undertake what can only be regarded as one bit research subjects that are overseen (read plundered) by slothful academics desperate to obtain the necessary points to stay in the good books of promotion, or, in some cases, survival.

Along with the tendency of appropriation comes that of trend subjects, glossed in temporary sexiness like fashion. In Australia, for instance, that mantle must go to domestic violence, a field so narrow in its realisation and analysis it is bound to sunder in due course.

Faddism – the embrace of what might be termed a niche market – is rampant in academic opportunism. New terms are sought to give the illusion of weight and substance. Take “digital humanities” with its vaguely grounded offshoots such as “digital criminology”, “digital ethnography”, “digital bollocks”. These airy topics supply the recipes to rewrite the same paper fourteen times within the Fordist caste of mind, provided that the wording in the title is slightly different. As Ford himself opined, he could make his car in any colour as long as it was black.

One of the most conspicuous casualties of the Fordist academic are students, designated as clients and consumers rather than learning pupils with curious minds. There are academics, for instance, who refuse to teach, taking pride in avoiding it altogether. They claim to be the sacred thinkers, when all they essentially do is redistribute already overly baked bones from one cemetery to another.

Nor is there ever a guarantee given to those who dare attend a modern class that their work will be graded by the instructor, the person who ventured to teach them to begin with. In some cases, the task is understandably impossible in the environment of mass production. Classes of five hundred make such a hope unrealistic. The same cannot be said for smaller classes.

Teaching duties are thereby sessionalised, initiating what can only be described as a new form of inferior, diminished pedagogy managed by the vulnerable and terrified. In some cases, department or discipline heads parachute individuals with inferior credentials to teach in degrees that they do not have, at levels that they never possessed. Collusion is manufactured across the board: never let qualifications stand in the way of the smelly deal. Such are the makings, and work, of the Fordist academic in full flow. The “intellectual hooligans”, as Michael Oakeshott termed them in 1950, are well and truly in the building.

Dr. Binoy Kampmark was a Commonwealth Scholar at Selwyn College, Cambridge and lectures at RMIT University, Melbourne. Email: bkampmark@gmail.com

Notes

[1] <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v33/n07/pankaj-mishra/modernitys-undoing>

[2] <http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674929531>

[3] <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/features/why-audit-culture-made-me-quit>.

[4] <http://www.richard-hall.org/2014/03/19/on-the-university-as-anxiety-machine/>

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Kampmark](#)

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