

## ETHICS, CORRUPTION, & AUTHORITY

# Owning Intellectual Leadership: Facing Down Academia's Intellectual Neglect

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Geopolitical convulsions have exposed the scale of atrophy and impotency of academia's intellectual contribution. While a contraction of intellectual leadership has been instinctively and perhaps idly blamed on higher education's neoliberalization, academics' apology neglects to address how their intellectual languor may also be operationalized into and obscured by a carousel of practices that academics have normalized, but should challenge.

Much has been documented of how universities' embrace of neoliberal logic has for some forty years eroded the intellectual contributions of universities around the world. Less addressed, for obvious reasons, are the more recent implications of populist politics which have engendered social distrust in established institutions like universities. Arguing that these institutions only benefit the social elite (and indeed degrade those outside of their orbit), populist movements claim that university 'leadership' today is non-representative, non-elected, divorced from and dismissive of common concerns. This shift in the public imagination has led to a radical reconsideration of academia's contribution and fueled public distrust and even anger at academics. Although these events have been much discussed, what is rarely covered is how higher education's own structures and practices have contributed to this atrophy of intellectual leadership. Although there are, of course, legitimate grievances about external threats, academia requires leadership that can robustly engage with these external forces. Both institutional leaders and individual academics, therefore, owe themselves a closer inspection of their own culpability in the erosion of higher education's intellectual authority and capacity for intellectual leadership.

This contribution draws on ongoing empirical work, as well as the authors' Anglo-American perspectives, to challenge three professionalized practices which are core corrosives to academics' intellectual leadership: productive individualism, internal censoring, and endemic conservatism.

### Productive Individualism

One academic practice that erodes intellectual leadership is the egocentric manipulation of academic labor, linked to the wider societal gravitation that Richard Sennett some forty years ago described as "chronic individualism." This individualism appears in university rewards systems that do not credit academics' servant leadership—i.e., intellectual contributions for a common good—with the same weight that they count the solo

scholar's grant income, numbers of research publications, or evidence of impact. In today's hyper-metricized higher education context, leadership concentrates only on the fast flow of productive output. Disincentivized to spend time pursuing intellectual leadership, many academics have resigned themselves to a widget-like role within understandings of universities as apoliticized engines of productive output devoted to the delivery of economic ends.

The problem is that, without radical change to insular reward structures, academics themselves become as myopic in vision as the system they decry. While some attempts have been made by funders to facilitate this change—the United Kingdom's Research Excellence Framework (REF) provides an example of a widened understanding of what "counts" by introducing social impact as a measure of research assessment—opportunistic academics and their institutions have often been the ones to resist the change. Instead, academics need to challenge structures that justify a singular fixation on the definition of scholarship or else they resign a key leadership role in society.

### Internal Censoring

A second set of practices eroding intellectual leadership relates to internal censoring. Critics of higher education point to an endemic of illiberal liberalism on university campuses, of groupthink and the morphing of universities into what Matt Goodwin (in *Bad Education*) calls "monocultures" (i.e., "institutions where only a single set of ideas, beliefs, assumptions and priorities are allowed to flourish"). A conformity to a single way of thinking, or a fear of speaking out, has, it is alleged, become ingrained in an intentionally de-intellectualized culture that limits opportunities for engaging with controversial topics. This culture of conformity causes academics to "play it safe," lest they expose themselves to the potential of recrimination or even "cancellation," of being derided by their peers, hounded by their students, or penalized by academic managers. Polling from a [recent survey](#) undertaken on behalf of the UK higher education

regulator, the Office for Students, finds that 28 percent of academic respondents believe their university has become less tolerant to a range of viewpoints, while one fifth do not feel free to discuss controversial topics in their teaching; a figure that rises to almost a third for academics from ethnic minority backgrounds.

In a climate where surveillance is normalized, internal censoring means that academic dissent is increasingly rare—and the blame for this cannot be laid entirely on institutional managers. Reputational management has become as important to individual academics as it is to the institutions they work for. This dynamic is particularly obvious in the realm of social media, where academics actively court followers through excessive agreeability and praise of even the most mundane of achievements. Identity management now trumps engagement in intellectual debate, and so intellectual leadership is reduced to an approval ratings race. When accruing citations, “likes,” and other forms of soft endorsement, academics are not leading but rather diverting attention away from the potential ambiguity of their contributions and the growing impotency of their scholarly and public impact. Reclaiming academic leadership requires generative criticality, something currently suffocated just as much by the pressure to remain “likable” as it is by institutional managerialism. Rather than compulsively posting images of themselves and their every whereabouts as testament to their illustriousness, academics would have better outcomes for society if they spent their time engaged in less heroic and self-congratulatory forms of leadership.

## An Endemic of Conservatism

A third academic practice that erodes intellectual leadership is an endemic of conservatism, particularly among officially

designated institutional leaders. Cowed by the barrage of criticism that emanates both from within and outside their institutions, their ability to provide dynamic leadership seems to have evaporated, as is evident in the case of many high-profile sackings and increasingly attenuated tenures across the Anglosphere (e.g., in the United States at institutions such as Harvard University, Columbia University, the University of Pennsylvania, Cornell University, and most recently Northwestern University; and, in the United Kingdom, [across multiple institutions](#)).

Institutional leaders too often function within narrow time frames to implement predetermined instructions or otherwise “window dress” in order to preserve their legacies. Like so many in the academic rank and file, structurally appointed leaders who adopt this conservatism are reduced to a function that is representative not of leadership but complicity.

## Reanimating Intellectual Leadership

A reversal of these processes will not be easy. Universities face strong headwinds that will only further constrain the disruptive potential of their faculty. And yet, unless academics start to resist these pressures, they will irrevocably lose their capacity for productive change. Instead, academics must heed the clarion call to reclaim factors within their control so that they can lead in such moments of turmoil. To do so, they must move past legitimate grievances, acknowledge the impotence of victimization narratives, and rediscover their role in crafting new paths to intellectual leadership.

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