Times Higher Education

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**The case for academic Caesars**

Steve Fuller on the need for leaders who can make the radical decisions necessary to survive existential threats both internal and external

**January 26, 2017**

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In these turbulent times, universities in the UK and elsewhere need to be led by academic Caesars.

In ancient Rome, the role of the dictator – a position whose final incumbent was Julius Caesar – was to lead the city during emergencies when its citizens could not agree on a course of action. The sociologist Max Weber converted the role into an ideology, Caesarism, to describe a form of politics in which the populace turn to one person to embody their collective aspirations in some definitive way. Weber nominated Napoleon and Bismarck as followers in the footsteps of Julius Caesar. We may think of others from the more recent past and present. I want us to think of heads of university this way too.

This probably sounds vaguely threatening and, to a certain extent, it is meant to be. In the first instance, a Caesar of university leadership must be a proven academic who can command the respect of other academics (just as the Roman dictator had to command the respect of the other magistrates). But academic Caesars must also be consummate politicians. They must know the strengths and, especially, the weaknesses of their colleagues, so that they can divide and rule, impose their will and get some radical things done.

In the UK, universities face two existential threats, one external and the other internal. The external threat derives from universities’ lack of fiscal autonomy. Academics talk a storm about the need for academic freedom at the personal level of teaching and research, but they expect the material conditions for this to be provided – magically, it sometimes seems – by the state. Such days are long gone. Barring the unlikely resurrection of socialism, taxes will not be raised to finance the growing costs of maintaining staff and students in the higher education sector.

Of course, neoliberal policymakers have always known this. Their own solution is to make a couple of risky wagers: on the one hand, that students’ future income will justify, via repayment of their loans, the public’s paying up front the cost of their education; on the other, that external funders will pick up an increasing proportion of the tab for research so that the state’s own contribution can decline while universities continue to flourish.

This strategy is not only unsustainable but also fundamentally unfair to academics, who are being promised less state funding while being subject to greater auditing and regulation. To be sure, it reflects the desire by policymakers to make universities fit to compete in various markets in which they have often been disadvantaged by a failure to focus on specific tasks, such as producing employable graduates or lucrative innovations.

However, what policymakers see as a lack of focus on the part of universities is actually their hidden strength. Universities are not simply machines for manufacturing education and research on demand. Rather, they are ecologies inhabited by people with both the capacity to innovate and the desire to disseminate. It’s this Humboldtian bundling that constitutes the academic vocation and remains the university’s distinctive calling card.

Talk of our living in an “information society” fuelled by a “knowledge economy” has become the opium of policymakers and university administrators alike. While these slogans have increased everyone’s interest in higher education, they have also made everyone interested in turning all post-secondary institutions and online providers into universities. The university brand has been diluted, making governance even harder, since universities must now appear to be all things to all people. This is most easily seen in how the demands of teaching and research increasingly cut against – rather than mutually support – each other.

Academic Caesars promise to end this madness by placing their universities’ finances on a self-funding basis, pulling out of the state sector altogether. To be sure, this will involve some pain. Among the initial fiscal hurdles may be repayment of the state’s investment – from grounds to grants – that their universities have received over the years. But there is a bright side. Most states these days, including the UK, operate with major budget deficits and long-term debt. Thus, a mutually agreeable deal, which sees a significant influx of funds into state coffers, may be easier to strike than previously imagined.

The business model behind the Caesars’ thinking is that followed by the original US universities, the Ivy League, which remain at the top of all world university league tables without even trying to do so. Their existence predates that of the US Constitution. Their success has never been predicated on a beneficent state. Instead, outside capital-intensive research, they have financed themselves like an independent church, appealing to those who believe in the university’s core mission. This, of course, means that the university needs to have a core mission that transcends the ebbs and flows of market conditions.

At first, angel investors will need to supply the cash flow. But, eventually, successful graduates should be expected to contribute because they believe that others should be permitted the same experience as they had as students. Such “alumni endowments” are the bedrock of the Ivy League’s fiscal solvency, allowing them to charge the highest tuition fees in the world while heavily discounting them for academically worthy students from poorer backgrounds.

It is worth stressing that the wealth produced by the alumni making these endowments may be tangentially related to their formal studies. Yet they may still attribute their success in life to their receptiveness to their alma mater’s core mission. And that core mission is not reducible to credentials or even the institution’s standing in a national or international league table.

A university’s mission can be seen as a more articulated version of what a “brand” normally says with a logo. Thus, “Apple” stands for an array of products linked by some unique common sensibility that is thought to inform all of them. In fact, Apple’s strategy of encompassing all its users in a “community” is just a high-tech version of what Americans have known for years as alumni associations. To be sure, these associations have been the bane of rank-and-file academics, who have seen them as needlessly indulging former students. But the academic Caesar sees them, instead, as the basis for a solid expansion of the university’s core constituency.

Enfranchising the alumni is also a logical response to the deep sense in which a university is legally “incorporated”. A university is not a multi-purpose service provider but a social entity with ends of its own, and those who subscribe to those ends are welcomed to contribute to their promotion in perpetuity. This is the basic theory behind corporations having shareholders, who, in the Middle Ages – when the major corporations were cities – were called “citizens”.

Although academics may not like the move towards including alumni among the university’s potential citizens, it helps to shift the balance of power from the consumer back to the producer of knowledge, thereby reversing neoliberalism’s debilitating effects on university integrity. After all, alumni have spent some considerable time as the captive audience of academics, which seems to suggest that students do respect what academics normally do, especially in the classroom.

How exactly all this plays out as a university governance strategy is less than straightforward. The path of least resistance for many American universities has involved massive budgets for their sports teams. A similar, if not sports-based, “bread and circuses” approach to alumni relations in the UK might be deemed wise, lest the alumni take their “citizenship” too literally and meddle in day-to-day university affairs. The academics working at US universities often don’t see the point of inflated sports budgets. But, then, academics themselves are not an unmitigated good in the academic Caesar’s eyes.

This brings us to the second, internal existential threat to universities: academics’ apparent inability to understand what a modern university requires of them. Academics flatter themselves that they are the guardians of the university’s soul, but they are the first ones to demand fewer classroom hours and bigger car parks so they can get in and out of campus more quickly. Of course, the academic Caesar doesn’t mind that academics hate serving on committees, but does mind when they complain about what happens in their absence.

Academics simply don’t understand that the core business of the university is to produce knowledge as a public good. This is not because academics don’t know what knowledge is. It’s because they don’t know what a public good is. Economists tell us that a public good is one that it costs less to freely provide than to restrict access to. On this definition (for which “cost” is taken in its broadest sense), it’s easy to see why censorship – the restriction of free speech – tends to be counterproductive. But academics also need to learn about what economists call “club goods”. These are goods whose value declines if too many people have access to them. Few academics would explicitly subscribe to this idea as regards access to higher education and research, yet it remains their default position. Even those who argue in favour of open access journals aren’t really concerned with boosting public knowledge of research since they well know that most of the people nominally given such access can’t understand academic papers. Yet this doesn’t seem to trouble open access advocates.

The culprit here is the effective cartel that disciplines enjoy over academic work. The journals are simply the front of this operation. Behind it lies a peer review system whose remit has extended well beyond strict issues of validation to judgements about whether academic work promotes the discipline’s current research trajectory. Such clubbiness is a recipe for self-perpetuation – that is, until the discipline’s paradigm collapses under the weight of the peers’ own epistemic inadequacies. At that point, as Thomas Kuhn famously observed, a “revolution” takes place in the discipline.

This is not to say that peer review is not important in validating academic work. The question is whether the peers’ discipline is entitled to effective ownership of that work. The academic Caesar says no. In fact, the academic Caesar sees delegitimising the role of disciplines as the flip side of delegitimising the role of the state in university governance. After all, universities don’t really need to be organised along fixed, discipline-based lines. However, the state audits and regulates universities on just such terms, via such mechanisms as the UK’s research excellence framework. This only serves to prop up the disciplines, while limiting the capacity of universities to determine their own fate.

The corrosive effects of disciplines on the very idea of the university can be seen in the value drift in academic life from education to research. Academics are nowadays deemed more valuable if their presence is scarce on campus because of their discipline-based research commitments off campus. Whatever new knowledge is gained in the process is destined to remain a club good unless special efforts are taken to turn it into a public good. Those efforts traditionally go by the name of “teaching”, and it is clear that this must be restored to its rightful place at the heart of the university.

The time is ripe for this radical shift in value orientation. The political campaigns that eventuated in the Brexit vote and Donald Trump’s election victory mark a watershed in the public’s distrust of academic expertise. Oxford Dictionaries’ choice of “post-truth” as its 2016 word of the year codifies this, while perhaps obscuring its real significance. In reality, the issue is less about the public’s rejection of academic knowledge per se than of academic knowledge wielded as a form of authority. As a populist might put it, if something is worth knowing then anyone should be able to know it for themselves.

Knowledge must be stripped of most of its epistemic access costs so that, ideally, people of any background can understand, use, evaluate and perhaps even contribute to that body of knowledge. This turns teaching into a kind of entrepreneurship, which the economist Joseph Schumpeter originally described as involving the “creative destruction” of markets. The “markets” in this case are the disciplinary cartels that currently control academic knowledge production. The entrepreneurial ingenuity required of the academic, then, is displayed in the classroom. It involves the compelling presentation of knowledge that the cartels encase in jargon and technicalities that only a select few can normally penetrate.

For too long, the grand narrative of the academic world has been all about students aspiring to “stand on the shoulders of giants”, which implies the need to retrace the giants’ steps to the top. But this strategy no longer works in a world that doesn’t presume the right of universities – let alone disciplines – to exist. People want to find the most efficient way to the top.

The academic Caesar proposes to address the matter directly by fostering an environment in which academics are encouraged to demystify and perhaps even vulgarise the work of their illustrious predecessors. In this way, the next generation will be enabled to enjoy the same sense of intellectual empowerment that historically made the university an attractive and dynamic setting for the exploration of new ideas.

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