

Book Review: Felicity Wood, *Universities and the Occult Rituals of the Corporate World: Higher Education and Metaphorical Parallels with Myth and Magic*. Routledge, 2018. ISBN-13: 978-1138307117 (hardcover). 220 Pages. \$170.

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Universities and the Occult Rituals of the Corporate World: Higher Education and Metaphorical Parallels with Myth and Magic situates neoliberal restructuring of higher education within a metaphoric realm of magic, mythmaking, and ritual. Neoliberalism refers to cost cutting, efficiency models, and increased economic and commercial viability brought on by consumerist orientations. Wood describes the ascendancy of market-driven corporate managerialism and its false promise to improve the quality of education. While not a comprehensive treatment on the marketization and managerialism of higher education, this book explores how selected aspects of corporatized university resemble occult dimensions using “ritualistic imitations of power relations, procedures, and policies, tokens and trappings of the corporate sector” (p. 4). Wood highlights their strident symbolism and systems of control as higher education institutions reconfigured to run like for-profit organizations, drawing on parallels from occult economies of Comaroff. These economies refer to the confluence of modernity and magical metaphorical approaches to produce wealth.

Setting the stage, the first three chapters contextualize “market university” (p. 21) within the instrumental rational frame of calculability,

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performativity, and predictability. Conjoining these quantifying forces to marketized concepts, Wood mythologizes these associations using examples of wealth-giving spirits like Mamlambo. Universities turn to a magic of the market for promised economic security reliant upon its metaphors, enchantments, money fetishisms, massification (i.e. major increase of students into programs and classes), and institutional rankings. Wood uses a brief South African history of higher education to underscore the detriments of competition, climatic fear and mistrust. In the next chapters, Wood expounds upon the idea of wish fulfilment using the Melanesian practice of cargo cults. Cargo cults were an attempt to engender well-being and prosperity by building and partaking in structures and performances of power and dominance. Similarly, corporate simulacra inside higher education shows that “university staff devise and install replicas of corporate objects and artifacts and enact corporate procedures, while intoning corporate jargon, as if they believe that the products, processes and practices emanating from this sector are vested with a special potency” (p. 70). Two particularly strong chapters in the book are “Rituals, talismans and templates”, and “Performance and ritual”. In these two chapters, management employs rituals to steer, even exploit, the insecurity arising from neoliberal restructuring. Rituals function as an avenue to promote consent while limiting dissent, inculcating approved ideologies. Talismanic “words of power” like “quality, excellent, mission ... auditing, performance, accountability, and even ethics” (p. 98) conjure a magical potency to transform universities into successful enterprises. The reader will begin to see connections between corporate tactics, and that of ritualism and mythmaking.

Wood describes the problematic nature of using a free-market and corporatized ethos, embedding many ritualistic and deceptive practices, to control change. One of these institutional practices is the fetishism of performance appraisals and metrics, which is also discussed by the author in a later work (Wood, 2021). Performances and tasks become ritual displays. The chapters on witchcraft and secrecy underscore additional problems. As neoliberal conditions foster competition, staff engage in the ritual of witch-finding. This involves finding faults, weaknesses, or other deficiencies among each other in order to elevate oneself. The unknown obscures magic and universities alike. Secrecy and confusion permeate upper management. Elusiveness, a hidden wall of the workings of power, characterizes a division between management and staff. Privileged access, lack of clarity, and curated publicity enhance the stature of management, linking the disclosure of information and strategic plans with an imbued magical and inscrutable moral authority. Wood shares with us perhaps her

most potent metaphor, the corporate zombie. Trapped in a spell reifying staff into instruments of labor and material, they work pliantly and obediently bounded to a “soulless, dispirited world” (p. 157). This dehumanizing commodification reflects a kind of carcel system or captivity.

The final chapters visit the temptations and snares of profit-making and markets. Despite great sacrifices, Wood maintains universities are spiritually unfulfilled and dependent upon illusions, reaching for results that may be conflicting, antagonistic, or ephemeral to one’s welfare. The ironies and equivocations that emerge from “Smoke and mirror, and wind money” chapter undergird the rationalizations and twisted meanings within management discourse. The book concludes by cautioning academic staff against unexamined acceptance of dubious market-oriented and neoliberal fabrications. To break this occult spell, we must embrace dissent, defamiliarization, and derision (i.e. subversive humor). Wood explores the possibilities to respond and confront these problems. Universities can free themselves from the enchantments and powerful aura of promised wealth and well-being. Metaphorical parallels in this book reveal the anathema of reductionism and utilitarianism. Our destiny is more than that of servile zombies marching to the incantations from our magical overlords.

Felicity Wood’s *Universities and the Occult Rituals of the Corporate World: Higher Education and Metaphorical Parallels with Myth and Magic* creatively portrays the fabulations of higher education. Wood pulls from a variety of research and theoretical frameworks concerning globalization, neoliberalism, Foucauldian surveillance, Ritzer’s rationalization, and the power and insight of occult myths and arcane forms. Other research has taken on the idea of secrecy, obscurity, and confusion, speaking to enigmatic processes like becoming tenure at university (O’Donnell & Sadlier, 2021). An interesting connection worth noting may be how corporate symbolism, jargon, and rituals represent a kind of charisma. Weber (2012) explains the processes of the routinization of charisma, which I think may have an implication in helping us understand occult contexts and sourcing of legitimacy. The book adds to the framing of neoliberalism among higher education institutions; furthermore, it contributes to the ways university staff relate to management and a seemingly unending restructuring. Though I think the book tends to repeat itself with some ideas and subjects; overall, the author provides a critical argument for questioning the direction and values of our educational institutions. It is a reminder that ideas can capture and take a hold of a body and a mind – if we let it. The metaphorical richness and

contextual variety of this book allows us to consider neoliberalism beyond its usual narrative or instrumental impacts.

I highly recommend this book to students and staff alike, especially for decision makers and those interested in shared governance and regulation. Researchers in literature, sociology, history, and education will also find unique and uncommon perspectives to cogitate within their fields. The language and practices organizational leadership uses to introduce and justify change, especially when it assigns our place and ascribes our attained value, become indispensable for study and further consideration. Wood does a good job offering us a window into our institutional vulnerabilities and fears.

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