



Parker, M. (2018). *Shut down the business school. What's wrong with management education.* London, England: Pluto Press.

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The book's hyperbolic title caught my attention as somebody who is involved in business and management education. As the title suggests, Parker's work is admittedly polemical rather than a detailed analysis (xiii). One could be tempted to dismiss a book with such a seemingly exaggerated title as a marketing ploy to sell books by the droves, with the purpose being to enrich both author and publisher. But Parker's book offers a serious, yet humorous, evaluation of the history and status quo of the business school, which unsurprisingly, is less-than-favourable.

Martin Parker is currently a Professor in the Department of Management at the University of Bristol and thus an insider of the very institution that he so fiercely attacks (he is well aware of the irony that he bites the hand that feeds him (15)). Professor Parker is a prolific writer, and this book is the most recent in a series of four books that explore alternatives to the current business school models as well as alternative forms of organisation. (The previous three publications of this tetralogy are *Against Management* (2002), *The dictionary of alternatives* (2007) and *Companion to Alternatives* (2014).

Martin Parker (without too much hope of succeeding) proposes to close down business schools and replace them with 'schools for organizing'. The 198-page book is organised into two parts (with a total of ten chapters) and usefully includes endnotes (with some excellent references) and an index. The first part analyses business schools from a historically- and philosophically-informed perspective and the very concepts of the business school and management are deconstructed. The second part explores alternatives to the status quo and outlines Parker's vision of a 'school for organizing' that is substantially different from the business school, as it is not merely focused on 'teaching capitalism' and the dominant market-managerial model.

In the first part, Parker argues that business schools are dominated by 'market managerialism' which, in his perspective and that of 'Critical Management Studies' (CMS), is but one of many forms of organizing. While the business school's account of the modern world mentions topics such as sustainability, diversity and corporate social responsibility

(CSR) in passing, and like some kind of fig leaf, it offers the "promise of technology, choice, plenty and wealth" – and "capitalism is assumed to be the end of history, an economic model which has trumped all the others, and is now taught as science, rather than ideology" (35).

Parker opines that business school disciplines such as Economics, Accounting, Finance, Management Information Systems, Marketing, Human Resource Management, Innovation, Operations or Logistics, International Business, Strategy, etc. are neither neutral nor context-free. I quite enjoyed Parker's sarcastic descriptions of these subjects. Perhaps a reading sample is in order (one could accuse the author of quite a few things, but certainly not of a lack of satirical, deadpan British humour):

Human Resource Management is the application of theories of rational egoism to the management of human beings in organizations. It is what used to be called 'Personnel', but now contains the implicit claim that the 'human resource' is an input to organizing that might be paralleled by the 'technological resource', or the 'financial resource'... Rather than being the end of organizing, or its fundamental precondition, the human is something to be engineered by using the sort of knowledge generated in organizational behavior. Despite its use of the word, Human Resource Management is not particularly interested in what it is like to be a human being... Human Resource Management is not on the side of the trade union, the worker" (29).

The third chapter (titled "What's wrong with Management") has wonderful historical discussions of management also from a literary perspective (which borders on the encyclopedic), including many cinematic classics. Amongst an astonishing number of literary references, there is Dilbert (my personal favourite amongst 'management gurus'), a cartoonist, and a wide range from Dickens' *Hard Times* to the TV serial *The Office*, and cinematic references from *Modern Times* to *Spiderman* (51-56). Gems include Ambrose Bierce's definition of the corporation from his *Devil's Dictionary*: "An ingenious device for obtaining individual profit without

individual responsibility" (54).

The fourth chapter ("What's wrong with the Business School?") discusses the relationship between business schools, business leaders with MBAs, and the Global Financial Catastrophe of 2008. People with a vested interest in business schools may be quick to deflect the blame to 'the system' and some 'bad apples' – not forgetting that consumers borrowed too much and bankers behaved riskily (77). To Parker, the central issue is that the business school is "a factory for producing employees for capitalist organizations, a machine for producing a very particular kind of future" (81).

In the fifth chapter, the relationship between the business school and the (for instance, in the UK, increasingly privatised and 'marketised') University is explored, and here Parker accuses business schools of adversely affecting neglected and under-represented stakeholders:

The US home owners with foreclosed properties based on sub-prime mortgages in 2008, the 1,129 people who died in the 2013 Rana Plaza sweatshop building collapse in Bangladesh, the boarded-up shops on the high streets of the city I come from in Northern England, the 100,000 people who live in Kiribati in the Southern Pacific and will see their island disappear in half a century (87).

While not directly responsible for all sorts of social, economic and environmental disasters, business schools may act as a "loudspeaker" for "market managerial capitalism" (97). Business students are invited to join such an unpleasant "utopia for the wealthy and powerful" that results in "environmental catastrophe, resource wars and forced migration, inequality within and between countries, the encouragement of hyper-consumption as well as persistently anti-democratic practices in work organizations" (158).

In a 'Fordist' and 'McDonaldized' University environment, managerial technologies include ranking and branding. For instance, "the ranking of academic journals means that only certain kinds of publications count", with non-tenured academics asking themselves: "Should I publish here? Should I say this? What grading will the students give me? How many citations do I have" (93)? Parker is aware that business schools are highly successful and oftentimes, provide much-needed financing to the University. Nonetheless, business schools are on occasion regarded as 'cash cows' that lack academic rigour.

Parker's critique of the business school can perhaps be summarised in saying that they teach a 'hidden curriculum' (a term partially associated with radical educators such as Paulo Freire and Ivan Illich). For instance, the 'hidden curriculum' in the 1960s was that business schools taught about white middle-class men's knowledge, not about women, people of colour and working class experience. And at present, business schools focus on the virtues of 'capitalist market managerialism' and do not teach enough about co-operatives, social enterprises, "degrowth, the beauty of small, worker decision making and the circular economy" (Parker & Starkey, 2018). (Degrowth advocates argue that overconsumption is the root cause of environmental

problems and social inequalities. A circular economy is a counter-concept to the traditional linear economy (with a 'take, make, use, dispose' model of production) and a regenerative, more sustainable system in which resources are maximised and waste is minimised.)

After his critique of business schools in the first part, Parker develops his alternative vision of 'schools for organizing' in the second part of his book. Parker (like me) has a sociological background, and this makes it more understandable (in the sociological sense of *Verstehen*) that he wants to replace the narrow focus on for-profit enterprises by business schools with a very long list of institutions and their different ways of organizing:

families, stewarding, retail co-operatives, markets, kinship systems, groups, networks, communes, tribes, partnerships, local exchange trading systems, hierarchies, polyarchies [forms of government in which power is invested in multiple people], democracies, city-states, trusts, Stiftung [German: foundation], co-producers, monopolies, communities, sociocracies [systems of governance which seek to achieve solutions that create harmonious social environments as well as productive organizations and businesses], NGOs, professions, family businesses, lineages, monopsonies ['buyers' monopolies'], institutions, trade unions, states, companies, councils, governments, clubs, cultures, worker co-operatives, totalitarian regimes, occupations, societies, foundations, holarchies [Arthur Koestler's alternative concept to hierarchies], matriarchies, solidarities, associations, Waqf [an endowment made by a Muslim to a religious, educational, or charitable cause], charities, non-profits, villages, sects, phalanxes, credit unions, provident or mutual societies and hybrids of all the above (115).

To illustrate his point, Parker offers two intriguing case studies. The first one is about Suma Foods, a British wholefood wholesaler with many laudable organisational innovations of 'self-management' – amongst other things, every multi-skilled worker is paid the same (each of the 161 employees earned £40,000 a year in 2016) and participates in collaborative, democratic decision-making, and Suma's products are all vegetarian, "cruelty-free" and 'fair-trade' (116-119). The second case study is about Premium-Cola, a German Internet collective with "no office, no fixed salaries, and no formal boss – just a moderator", that incentivised smaller distributors by offering an anti-volume discount (171-173)!

Parker's book ends manifesto-like: "[L]et's celebrate and explore multiplicity, and imagine the fantastic world we might create together. Let's bulldoze the business school" (180). While I find Parker's critique of the business school partially justifiable, and while I share his concerns about a humane workplace, CSR and environmental sustainability, some of his commentary appears to be polemical, and quite entertainingly so, over-the-top. His idea of 'schools of organizing' is, however, more revolutionary than reformist, and, being a historically-informed skeptic of revolutionary zeal, it is here where I disagree strongly.

Bulldozing the business school would throw out the baby with the bathwater. As Ken Starkey in a readable dialogue with Martin Parker argues, "business and finance are crucial to a healthy economy and society" (Parker & Starkey, 2018) – for instance, via the countless entrepreneurs who start small businesses, employ large portions of the populations, and who have learned the tools of the trade in business schools. And there is business school research "on the big social issues – environmental, social justice, social enterprise, eradicating slavery in supply chains, developing work opportunities for refugees", though there could be more of it (Parker & Starkey, 2018).

I believe that lecturers in management and business are uniquely positioned to teach organisational alternatives to their students within the existing framework. Despite his at times ferocious critique of the business school, Prof Parker himself is an illustration of that belief, as he continues to be in the employ of the 'business school' – which could be construed as a compliment to his employers past and present who at least tolerate alternative viewpoints in the spirit of academic freedom.

While I am all for having (more) qualitative subjects (and minimally, electives of a more sociological nature), I find the quantitative subjects (like Accounting and Finance) still important. There are plenty of disciplines in business schools that focus on matters such as Organisational Behaviour, Human Resource Management, Organisational Development, Business Ethics and the like that may assist in addressing some of Parker's concerns, and it is hoped that there would also be at least sub-topics on concepts such as, for instance, the Learning Organisation and Organisational Learning.

To me, the whole argument of 'bulldozing the business school' and especially the second part of the book is unconvincing. If the author wanted to go beyond teaching modules such as, for instance, organisational innovation within the given framework, he and like-minded people could consider creating a Master Degree of Alternative Organising, or perhaps a MOOC or multi-MOOC certification for starters?

In conclusion, this is a thoughtful and provocative book that I enjoyed reading. There is plenty of good humour throughout the book. For instance, Parker reminds us that MBA also stands for 'Mediocre But Arrogant', 'Management by Accident', 'More Bad Advice' and 'Master Bullshit Artist' (13). As I am sure that Parker would not want a uniform and uncritical following, so let us agree to disagree agreeably.

Additional References

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