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50 Shades of Rage

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Introduction

The process of being socialised into business schools[1] can often feel like walking between worlds. Indeed, in our experiences, navigating the norms and practices of a business-oriented and managerial common sense often contributes to a feeling of being outside of oneself within business school contexts. What to do if one feels outside of oneself in academia?

In recent years, the academic landscape has undergone significant changes, resulting in increased pressures and demands on scholars through a broader phenomenon of academic capitalism (Jessop, 2017). In brief, the organization of higher education is increasingly based on short-termism and self-interest (Colombo, 2023; Parker, 2018) with manifold implications for our institutions' research and teaching, as well as individuals within them. In the age of league tables and excellence frameworks, specific forms of research output often take precedence over our role as disseminators of new knowledge and facilitators of learning (Mingers, 2017). It does not come as a surprise that this academic system, which prioritises economic efficiency over academic freedom and well-being, can perpetuate alienation and disenchantment and stifle criticality (Alakavuklar, 2017; Brandist, 2017; Robinson et al., 2017). We write to be published, not be read and we teach for sustenance, never to be heard (Parker, 2021). Recent developments in UK tertiary education, for instance, at the University of Leicester, exemplify these concerns (e.g., Tim-adical Writing Collective, 2017).[2]

We belong to a generation of researchers whose experience of higher education has been profoundly shaped by these neoliberal trends towards marketisation, managerialism and metrification. Multiple studies have highlighted the pressures and precarity experienced by PhD students and ECRs (Ratle et al., 2020; Robinson et al., 2017), with the burden placed more heavily on those already subject to systemic intersectional oppression (Arday, 2022; Ivancheva et al., 2019; O'Keefe and Courtois, 2015; O'Shea, 2022; Seymour, 2022; Warnock, 2016). We have all either suffered from or know colleagues who have endured financial insecurity, exploitation or poor well-being as a result of their status

within the academy. At least for those located in business schools, there are (still) jobs for those with the tenacity, support and privilege to get to the end of a doctorate, unlike for so many of our colleagues in the under-funded/valued humanities and wider social sciences.

Nonetheless, we have also witnessed several talented students abandon their doctoral studies, becoming disillusioned with the process after finding themselves (and their thinking) adrift in their prescribed field of investigation. It is not a surprise that these experiences generate strong affective responses. In part, we were brought together around our common emotional reactions of anger, frustration, sadness, disappointment or anxiety. At the same time, we have also experienced intense positive affects associated with the formation of horizontal ties (Lauriano et al., 2024), the joy of sharing research and teaching interests, and supporting each other where possible, developing an affective solidarity (Hemmings, 2012; Vachhani and Pullen, 2019) in actions that foreground organizing academia differently. Noting the generativity of certain forms of anger (e.g., Lindebaum and Gabriel, 2016), and building on our *collective* postgraduate and ECR experiences, in 2023 we organized a conference workshop to learn about the (collectivized) role of emotions, particularly anger or even rage, in response to the neoliberal academy and towards alternative organizing in and for academia.

This note documents our reflections about organizing the workshop, which ran at the International Critical Management Studies (ICMS) Conference under the title: '*Fifty Shades of Rage: Prefiguring a School for Organising*'. The workshop aimed at providing a space to reflect on and collectivize accounts of anger experienced with regards to different facets of academic capitalism and how we could collectively organize differently. Drawing upon researcher reflections following the workshop and enriched by ongoing debates in the literature, we offer both a critical examination of the evolving dynamics of academic capitalism - through the eyes of business school ECRs - and issue a call to action.

In the following, we first outline the context of the workshop including the development of what we named the Ekstasis collective, and the structure and attendance of the workshop itself. The latter two sections concern reflections on the workshop, drawing on debates about critical organizational and management scholarship (Alakavuklar, 2017; Robinson et al., 2017) in the context of the neoliberal business school (Colombo, 2023; Parker, 2018), to foster a critical dialogue that explores the political and theoretical dimensions of the organization of higher education. In particular, we illustrate hegemonic forms of organizing research and teaching in the business school and call for affective solidarities to organize differently. Such shared emotional bonds might be a prerequisite for affirmative critique (Nyberg and De Cock, 2022), taking

responsibility towards each other in academia. Our note serves as a call to continue building a platform that foregrounds the formation of affective solidarities as the basis for rigorous theoretical and practical engagement with the issues of academic capitalism. This represents a grassroots challenge to established norms by exploring alternative, emancipatory perspectives on organization and management research and education.

Ekstasis

In the summer of 2020, we began forming what became the Ekstasis Collective, which provided the basis for our conference workshop in 2023. In its purest meaning, 'ekstasis' speaks of an experience outside oneself, to be elsewhere, cast from one's proper place (Lingis, 1998). This is an experience many of us could relate to when we first met. We decided there was scope to remedy such experiences by forming a collective community and organizing 'from below' (e.g., Ferguson, 2022; Ward, 1973; 1966) which emerged in the form of a semi-formal Ekstasis community. Initially, we probably also just tried to help ourselves in our roles as postgraduate students and early-career researchers to adapt and develop imaginative and critical methodologies needed to face growing systemic challenges. At that point, we were interested in critically interrogating our experience in business schools, exploring the implications our studies and roles as educators have in broader society; and cultivating alternative, informal, collaborative spaces for trialling more radical, innovative thought than is possible through recognised mainstream channels. In short, the goal of Ekstasis as a community is to collaboratively re-think management research and education through promoting experimental, philosophical and critical thought.

In 2023, we proposed the 'Fifty Shades of Rage' workshop as a provocation to collectively and experimentally engage with the recurring critical question of 'what is to be done?'. Through the event, we specifically sought to explore experiences of PhD students and early career researchers (ECRs) and consider what possibilities for radical transformations were offered by our position within the university and the field. While a few participants had registered with us before the event, the title had widespread appeal, with a far larger than anticipated number of attendees, representing all career stages and a wide range of business schools. Our perception was that most participants were based at UK universities; however, there were also participants from other European universities. This suggested to us both the resonance of anger as a theme; and that we had tapped into a common experience that there was considerable appetite to collectively explore.

The workshop started with two provocations by Martin Parker (2016; 2018) around his work on developing a school for organizing and Laura Colombo

(2022) on transforming management education into more 'civic' forms. Although these were conceptualised as individual provocations, they were, interestingly and in the spirit of the workshop, soon transformed into a dialogue. Participants were then divided into groups to discuss two key questions: 'What makes you Rage?' relating to workshop participants' experiences in the business school and 'What collective action can we take to shape a desirable future?', as an attempt to organize differently together. The format of this reflection mirrors that of the workshop, recollecting the responses to the two questions posed to the workshop participants. Within these two opening sections, we present key themes (*italicised*) which emerged during these conversations, and which have been derived from reflections collated by the research team following the event. We then connect these through our own commentary to provide a summary of the workshop discussion and interpret these comments in light of existing initiatives and scholarly work. We close with a reflection on what we learnt about strategies of refusal, reformation, and the development of subversive alternatives within the business school[3].

'What makes you rage?'

Firstly, we asked participants 'What makes you Rage?' to explore, create solidarity around, and cathartically release anger emerging from workshop participants' lived experiences in the academy. Some common terms from the discussions included the *hypocrisy* of the business school, whereby promises of success from hard work are cloaked in *smug* language and a masquerade of *neutral* management words that do little to address contemporary problems. This sentiment echoes the critiques around the performative neutrality of management discourse masking deeper inequalities and reinforcing institutional power dynamics (Steinþórsdóttir et al., 2017; Mingers, 2017).

Participants were angered by precarious work, vulnerability, and lack of decision-making power in institutions driven by superficial metrics (Sandel, 2020). This led to a common acknowledgement of the damage done by *invisible work*, which is often pervasive, frequently gendered, but not acknowledged and limits commitments to research or work-life balance (Seymour, 2022). Further shades of rage included societal problems like *silencing of protest* and how a *war on the woke* has contributed to a pretence of diversity, rather than substantive change. Others highlighted the often-backhanded offer for *counselling* following hard-fought disputes concerning redundancy and dismissal (often unhelpfully coined as 'restructuring'). It was asserted that at times it felt like they were going through the *stages of grief* in an experience where they thought they had already lost, noting that:

Academia makes you feel like you're not worthy

Relatedly, there were references to *loneliness* where one *rages against the self* in the absence of spaces to organize forms of collective support or action. Much of this critique stems from the need to *look busy* and *competitive* in the *busy-ness school*, as the management or organization school morphs into a need to *construct business*. These comments resonate with Graeber's (2018) theory of 'bullshit jobs', as they highlight the growing disconnection between the meaningful aspects of academic labour and the bureaucratic, often trivial tasks imposed by neoliberal managerial practices. This disjunction not only diminishes the intrinsic value of academic work but also exacerbates feelings of frustration and alienation among scholars, echoing Graeber's critique of work that lacks social value or purpose (Graeber, 2018). *What is the point of the University?* was a question frequently raised and solicits a return to Stuart Hall's famous statement that the university must be a critical institution, or it is nothing. The workshop found that in the current climate, answers seemed wanting but posing such questions represents an important call to action for critical scholars today.

Within the workshop, there was a collective expression of exhaustion from being *at breaking point*, with resilience and wellbeing bureaucratized. This is also tied to the experience of having to *jump through hoops* for time to do research, which is then explicitly expected to be written or presented in line with REF expectations in 3 or 4 * journals.[4] There was an evident frustration with the constant push towards publishing in high-impact journals and the competitive nature of research funding. This competitive ethos often leads to a homogenization of research outputs and hinders innovative and critical scholarship (Mingers, 2017). It is a system which also contributes to a culture of *elitism and discrimination* based on specific expertise that marginalizes others (Robinson et al., 2017; Steinpórsdóttir et al., 2017). There is perhaps more than a hint of David Graeber's past observation of the repressive nature of neoliberal bureaucracy, whereby scholars' creativity and imagination are 'smashed and shattered' (2015: 99) through invisible work and seemingly endless metrics. Yet this frustration also fostered a strong desire to reimagine the academy as a place for genuine intellectual exploration and social engagement. Such a reimagining requires a radical departure from the current neoliberal model and the creation of new institutional forms that support critical and emancipatory scholarship.

A final area of consideration discussed within the workshop concerns our students and our role as educators. Many raised concerns around the *student as a consumer* becoming a pre-given actuality (Nixon et al., 2018). Moreover, the *instrumental approach* to education limits in many ways the critical faculty of their students and presents an employability narrative that remains at odds with

sustainability concerns, both social and environmental. Overall, participants expressed their rage about various aspects of working in the business school and the emotional toll this has, where rage was linked to other emotions such as loneliness, grief and self-doubt. What is interesting in these discussions is the predominant focus on experiences that are seen as preventing or limiting our ability to begin tackling broader societal problems which the business school in its current form exacerbates, including climate change (Nyberg and Wright, 2022) and a host of social injustices (Peredo et al., 2022). In addition to perceived limits of expressing criticality and voicing anger without being silenced, participants identified a need for us (the academy) to *get our house in order* and organize to stimulate the creativity and innovation needed to address the intensifying socio-ecological crises we face (often referenced by institutions as vague *sustainability challenges*) as a society and a discipline.

In a similar vein, business schools measure and calculate the “risks and opportunities” of climate change turning the current crisis into a means for the growth paradigm (Nyberg and De Cock, 2022). In this sense, the role of management education in perpetuating many ongoing socio-ecological crises was highlighted, suggesting that without developing a critical facet or faculty (of students *and* staff), we merely uphold business-as-usual perspectives on climate change (see also Nyberg and Wright, 2022) rather than confronting the forms of knowledge that fuel its acceleration. However, throughout this discussion there was an indication that in many instances here, staff and students alike are questioning the business school on multiple grounds, while also looking for the cracks within bureaucratic control, searching for *an audience for anger* and *space[s] for criticality*.

Overall, these notes on the first part of the workshop depict a plurality of shades in which anger, frustration or rage about current forms of academic capitalism within the business school become apparent.

‘What collective action can we take to shape a desirable future?’

The second stage sought to sift through these frustrations to consider ‘What collective action can we take to shape a desirable future?’, seeking to harness our collective rage to formulate an output from the ground up, as a means of shaping organization and management education across the business school anew and to decipher ways we might prefigure a more desirable future in the here and now (Branson, 2022; Franks, 2018).

Immediately highlighted was the role of safety in numbers, the possibility of refusal without self-harm and supporting *slow scholarship*, which may benefit well-being and output by not rushing to fulfil or meet metric targets (Hartman

and Darab, 2012; Meyerhoff and Norterman, 2019; Mountz et al., 2015). This refers to calls for reconsidering academic labour practices, advocating a shift towards more humane modes of scholarly production (McGregor and Knox, 2017). Workshop participants discussed the value of unions with many identifying their importance for institutionally-oriented collective organizing but also their function as a limited bureaucratic interface between capital/the university and the worker/people. As such, there was an appetite for opposing the dominant ways of organizing teaching and research in business schools through less formalised and more experimental modes of self-organizing. The reference here is to a sense of *generative rage*, which is linked to a more complex notion of creating networks of *care and support* to harness and work through the rage and frustrations while producing platforms which support actions of refusal and challenge specific, problematic facets of the structure that may be targeted for resistance, or radicalisation. This purpose is elaborated through questions about *how we raise our voice?* and the importance of acknowledging that *solidarity is a two-way street*. Further comments outline the importance for critical management scholars to push to get into senior leadership roles to expand our activism further 'using the masters tools' (Firth, 2022: 98) and to develop links between student and staff activism by infiltrating the syllabus and curriculum to be more suited to radical research output. This may then be used to shape the role of educators and managers who might foster self-organized forms of refusal and resistance to reverse engineer what was identified at times as the *parasitic* role of the university system as an institution.

Some more illustrative examples of the above included developing networks of radical reading groups, interdisciplinary and cross-institution research themes, and action learning opportunities that draw on collective resources for alternative case studies and practical application. Moreover, participants emphasized the importance of creating identifiable spaces, that traverse common spaces or exist outside the institution, to foster regeneration. This includes producing networks and communities of academics, who can pool resources and knowledge to mutually aid and reinforce social movements, working with those outside the institution on collective projects. Such networks might offer an avenue to expose and subvert the *neutral* language of management and organizing by demonstrating what it might mean in practice. This might produce new avenues for reducing hierarchical power structures and managerial control in teaching and scholarship. By bringing in practitioners and examples from alternative economies, it would directly engage with critical areas of interest, helping to mitigate risks of 'care washing' (Chatzidakis et al., 2020; Chatzidakis and Littler, 2022) of the university.

Further comments developed on the implications of these points, with some questioning, *how organized are we?*, when highlighting the responsibility for one another within the community (see also Nyberg and DeCock, 2022). To an extent, this mirrors the sentiments of mutual aid, which focuses on the role of social relations in making community and co-operation possible (Spade, 2020; Ward, 1973). At the same time, it also links to concerns that collective action is often a privilege and needs to be supported by those who are, or can be, in more secure positions.

This idea of using mutual aid and solidarity from below (Ferguson, 2022) as a means to *stop playing their game* highlights that we must separate the refusal from individualism and provide a sense of support, care, and collective power in anonymous visibility. One idea to do so might be using university time for *other things*, such as getting involved with intellectual work outside of the university and collectively publishing and organizing in ways that use the (university's) rules and metrics against itself. Doing so could also provide space for additional authors to produce time and space to develop alternative outlets for certain types of work, so it is not co-opted into the system. Yet, doing so perhaps requires a sense of inverted hierarchy based on mutual aid, where those who can reach positions of power can leverage it for the collective while participating in alternative forms of organizing where that power is no longer in play. Here, past work on the 'undercommons' (Moten and Harney, 2013) was mentioned as an avenue for exploring how business school structures might be reshaped to provide alternative spaces that subvert its unsustainable and unjust business-as-usual logics.

Harnessing rage for affective solidarities

The workshop demonstrated to us the (unexpected) appeal of 'rage': the power of affect to pull us together in a form of affective solidarity (Hemmings, 2012; Vachhani and Pullen, 2019). As feminists have noted, grounding solidarity in affect has the advantage of moving beyond essentialist notions of identity which privilege particular groups (in that case, white middle-class women). The epistemic productivity and communicative power of emotions bring to light morally relevant features of a situation and promote a greater understanding of existing injustices (Lepoutre, 2018). In these ways, coming together around affects like anger have the potential to break down hierarchies and create more egalitarian forms of solidarity.

What did reflecting on and through our collective anger reveal about avenues for transforming the academic system in which we find ourselves? The workshop certainly highlighted the urgent need to address the structural issues within higher education and promote a more equitable and supportive environment

for scholars, particularly those who are more vulnerable to systemic injustices. Reflecting on the discussions, we identified the emergence of three interconnected strategies for transformation: refusal, reform and subversion. These are mutually compatible strategies rather than oppositions: we need a critical rejection of and engagement with existing power dynamics *and* the development of innovative, grassroots strategies for change.

Firstly, in light of unreasonable and harmful norms, one response is to refuse. This raises key questions: what, when and how to refuse, and how to collectively support refusal, given the 'costs' of refusal are not borne equally. There are also important connections to explore between affects such as anger and the decision to refuse.

The second strategy is the extent to which we can reform the current system. Critical scholars (seemingly endlessly) debate whether real transformation is possible; or whether more minor 'reform', such as acts of tempered radicalism (Meyerson and Scully, 1995) reinforce rather than challenge the current system. There is no one answer here beyond the exploration of specific cases of iterative experimentation. However, this reflection builds on calls for new curricula and other initiatives to be connected to dismantling entrenched systems of inequality and reimagining the university beyond performance metrics, market-based solutions and treatment of students as consumers (Peredo et al., 2022; Stewart and Lucio 2017).

The third and final strategy is subversion and the creation of alternatives. Our institutions have a prefigurative (Franks, 2018) potential as we begin to shape them in the here and now into organizational forms we desire for the future. This could increasingly make space for creativity and innovation in teaching and research necessary to respond to mounting social and ecological crises. This requires us to make more spaces for experimentation and thought, community building and mutual aid, and anonymous visibility where we can not only scream for but also practise better academia and a fairer world. For example, Camille Noûs was a fictitious author created to symbolize collective academic protest against the pressures of hyper-productivity and individual recognition. Camille Noûs embodies the radical potential of collective authorship to disrupt conventional authorship norms, emphasizing the communal and collaborative essence of scholarly work and resisting the commodification of academic output.

For us, ekstasis, feeling outside of oneself in academia, has been the starting point for our reflections on academic capitalism and the potentiality of affective solidarities as an underpinning for the above strategies. As organizers, the experience of the workshop fostered a sense of belonging to a like-minded

community, which allowed us to embrace the feeling of being on the outside. This highlighted the importance of fostering affective solidarities which enable us not only to embrace this position, but also to realise that harnessing this feeling of ekstasis is necessary to develop collectively as critical scholars within the academy as an institution, particularly in our current employment within the business school. We deem this important to produce openings for alternative forms of organizing within and beyond business schools, as we - former PhD students previously standing somewhat outside these institutional structures - now undergo a further process of socialisation into the norms and expectations of professional academia and business school culture. As we transition from the periphery to become embedded actors within these systems, retaining a sense of ekstasis, resisting the challenges and constraints imposed by the financialised academy becomes even more crucial if we are to enact meaningful change.

In this sense, we hope that these collective reflections on 'what makes you rage' and 'what collective action can we take to shape a desirable future' draw people into the discussion and prefigurative praxis of alternatives. Several networks exist in which research on socio-ecological crises continues to be debated. Alongside the network around this journal, these include, e.g., Management Educators Navigating Degrowth (MEND), Ecological Crises and Organization (ECO) Network, Re-Organise and Socio-ecological Leadership, Organisation and Work (SLOW). Complementing these existing organizations and movements, we call for further collective efforts and reflections on the shape of management research and teaching to come and the roles of generative emotions such as anger.

And yet a year after the workshop, it is clearer than ever that we live in angry times. As we revise this text, we have seen an outpouring of far-right anger in the UK incited by disinformation and hate. There are many angers (Lugones, 2003) - many shades of rage - that we condemn, particularly the violence of oppressors and hatred of otherness. However, this does not mean all anger must be rejected. As the counter-demonstrations have shown, it calls for a nuanced, pluralistic account of anger, which must always be handled carefully, collectively, and critically.

[1] We are using the term 'business school' broadly, and in reference to what can be called 'management schools', 'management education' and 'organization-management studies'.

[2] The University of Leicester faced criticism for sacking critical scholars, viewed as an attack on academic freedom under the guise of financial reasons and strategic focus. More information is available here: ULSB16 – A site about the

purge of Critical Management Studies and Political Economy at the University of Leicester

[3] At the event, Damian O'Doherty also provided an initial summary of key discussion points to conclude the session, and relate the discussion to broader research challenges facing the university as an institution.

[4] The Research Excellence Framework (REF) in the UK is a system used to assess the quality of research conducted by higher education institutions, determining the allocation of public research funding based on the impact, environment, and overall "quality" of the research outputs.

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