



FEBRUARY 3, 2021: The University of Leicester has proposed targeted redundancies of academics working in Critical Management Studies and Political Economy. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic which has led to millions of deaths and untold economic and social damage and at a time when university staff are supporting their students and communities in extraordinary ways, these proposed cuts demonstrate in the most serious terms the precarity that university staff find themselves in. And sadly, this is happening at a time when the two areas targeted: critical management thinking and political economic education; are more central than ever to addressing the great challenges of our time. The Academy of Management CMS Executive stand in solidarity with colleagues affected. Gibson Burrell and Simon Lilley ex-heads of department write about the proposal below.

BEING CRITICAL OF MANAGEMENT

Anyone looking out of their window in the last 12 months, across many parts of the world, might have had an opportunity to think about the issues of political economy which are involved in closing down economies and polities, instructing the population to change their behaviour and restricting whole areas of economic activity. They might also have thought about the management of the pandemic and the ways in which the health services, big pharma and national and local governments have administered their activities in these remarkable times. Many of those staring out the window could have easily concluded that they were critical of the management efforts of those to whom they looked for some sort of help. In the UK, more than 100,000 people are dead due to COVID-19 and poor management has something to do with that horrendous figure.

Yet, senior managers in The University of Leicester have decided that critical management studies and political economy, two branches of knowledge that deal directly with phenomena staring most of us in the face are no longer necessary and are thus ripe for 'disinvestment'. Their rationale is remarkably incoherent. It appears to be that student recruitment would be higher if such issues were exorcised. Raising of funds for a cash strapped university is therefore placed much higher as an objective than the freedom to research current problems, directly and specifically.

No evidence has been produced which shows that students have an aversion to critical work on management. Goodness knows that this year that they have witnessed poor management right across the sector. The years in which the School (of Management as it was then) proclaimed itself interested in critical management studies was also the first time it was subjected to the National Student Survey. In 2005, 2006 and 2007, when students were fully aware of the School's statement of intent and of its commitment to critical work on the management of all organizations- including itself- the School was rated 1st, 5th and 6th of all business and management units across the UK. Students did not reject 'political economy' because courses on cooperatives, global warming, surveillance and financial impropriety were all well attended and receiving really good feedback. Over the years, the School also achieved accolades from senior figures in the Business School community. In the June 2007 issue of Long Range Planning, a piece by Don Antunes and Howard Thomas entitled 'The Competitive (Dis)Advantages of European Business Schools' (pp 382-404), made positive reference to Leicester three times. The School sat 2nd and 6th in the country for business and management in the Guardian League tables of 2010 and 2011. It delivered this performance alongside very substantial financial surpluses that kept the rest of the institution afloat. Since the end of 2015 when there was a change in 'leadership', the School and the university has not so subtly and increasingly consistently sought to minimise work that draws on political economy and is critical of management. The visibility of such work in communications to students and prospective students has also been significantly downplayed. The School currently sits 110th in the Guardian league table (out of 123 providers).

Thus, the evidence from students was, and is, not that critical management studies is deemed irrelevant, nor that political economy is no longer a central way of understanding the world. The absolute contrary would seem to be the case. The evidence rather suggest that senior management of the University do not like criticism of their own management style nor the way they seek to develop, or at least stabilise, its institutional economy. The University of Leicester has struggled financially for many years and has sought to slash and burn its way back to acceptable levels of performance. Scholars within the School of Business point this out as a duty to colleagues and students. If one is in the field of organizational analysis should one not start by analysing the organization of which one is part? The critical scholars in the School happen also to be heavily involved in the university staff trade union, UCU. They have things to do and say - in a professional and institutional way - about the propensity of senior management to engage in the congenitally failing practice of attempting to cut their way back to financial solvency through staff reductions.

So, anything labelled 'critical management studies and political economy' is to be banished from the School of Business at Leicester -if senior managers are to get their own way. This cannot be because of poor research or teaching. Staff are told it is on the basis of hypothetical numbers that would be generated if the words 'critical' and 'political' were exorcised from School literature and School corridors. This comes at a time when professional business organizations across the anglophone world are calling for more self-reflective analysis to be offered to and by students rather than the Business School production of organizational or 'portfolio career' drones.

A critical management analysis of the current plans by senior managers at the University of Leicester would show there is no sensible rationale of any kind to closure of the area, save its strong trade union membership and staff willingness not to hold their eyes downcast and their palms held up when faced with their 'betters', who appear to know so little about the world of business.