

Call for Abstracts

Beyond the Horrors of the Academy: The end of academia, and other ghost stories

**Critical Management Studies beyond the Academy? 30th June – 2nd July 2027,
Lancaster University**

Session Type: To be decided based on submissions

Session Convenors: Dave Watson, *Senior Lecturer in Organisation Studies & HRM, Essex Business School – University of Essex*; Yousaf Nishat-Botero, *Assistant Professor Birmingham Business School – University of Birmingham*; Benjamin Richards, *Lecturer in Organisation Studies, Northumbria University*.



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Proposal:

For Marx and Engels, communism loomed like a spectre across Europe (Marx and Engels, 1848/1976), a spectre still conjured only to be exorcised by the forces of reaction (Derrida, 2006). Capital too requires a *spectral phenomenology* to uncover and follow its movements. It is, to quote Chris Arthur (2019: 369), 'a shape opposed to all materiality, a pure form which

takes possession of our world in the only way it can, through draining it of reality, an ontological vampire that bloats its hollow frame at our expense.' Money arrives in our hands stained with blood and capital rises vampirically to suck the life-force of labour leaving capital dripping 'from head to toe, from every pore, with blood and dirt' (Marx cited in Neocleous, 2003). Stripping the world of things from this sensuous morbid materiality, we find the super-sensuous and immaterial entity worshipped in capitalist societies: value, a phantasmal objectivity that colonises the body of things (McNally, 2011: 127-129).

In *Specters of Marx* (Derrida, 2006: 63), Derrida advocated for a hauntological rather than an ontological understanding, seeking to name something that can never be fully present but exerts a force either through remembered or anticipated effects (Fisher, 2012). A hauntological perspective draws our attention to the horrors of past and present, but with an eye to the future it also demands a confrontation with the spectres that haunt us.

“Hauntology attends to spectral visitations born of trauma that disturb the institutional order and call on the living to respond.” (Fleming and Rhodes, 2026, p.11)

This invocation is all the more poignant, since the untimely passing of one of its authors. Peter Fleming was a leading figure in CMS and beyond, who frequently revealed the dark sides of capitalism and academia. Peter's passing gives particular resonance to the need to attend to those ghostly futures that remain, haunt us, and call upon us to respond, as we inhabit and traverse this 'morbid conjuncture' (see Achcar, 2022 on *morbid symptoms* in Gramsci).

In many respects, the moment in which UK higher education and the academy finds itself in, is deeply chilling and perhaps haunting. Frustrated CMS scholars, who have been trying to move beyond the neoliberal academy by challenging narratives of performative excellence (Jones et al., 2025; Bristow et al., 2017) now find themselves being forcibly evicted. The financial crisis¹ currently engulfing most of the UK higher education sector, barring a few elite (read 'excellent') universities is making ghosts of many academics as we witness our colleagues being spirited away by programs of mass redundancies.

This exodus is not purely random and can have an ideological bent that should rightly concern those of a critical persuasion (Burrell et al., 2024). We should certainly not

¹ The Queen Mary Universities and College Union have been tracking the scale of cuts and industrial action through Higher Education Crisis Tracker that can be accessed here <https://qmucu.org/qmul-transformation/uk-he-shrinking/>

romanticise the academy and what is being lost; some rarefied intellectual space of dreaming spires and cloistered spaces for a noble pursuit that can scarcely be contemplated as we confront the reality of dark academia (Fleming 2021). This romanticised reality is one that few academics have ever encountered and neither is it necessarily desirable; arguably this elitest notion is complicit in some of academia's horrors. These horrors are not limited to widespread job losses, but also worrying trends in freedom of expression and suppression of speech (Bacevic, 2025) that might be considered excitable or harmful (Butler, 1997). This includes debate regarding speech and silence in relation to the grotesque war on Palestine (Srinivas et al., 2025; see also Prasad & Calvard, 2026 & Decolonizing Alliance, 2026). Add to this, attacks against schools (United Nations, 2026) and universities (Qaiumzadeh & Gordafarid, 2026) in Iran and scholasticide in Gaza (Shlaim, 2025) that leads some to claim that fascism is returning not as a ghost, but a plague (Giroux, 2026). At this moment when so many are exiting the academy through force and choice, or an uncomfortable mix of both, it is important to ask what kind of *spirit* is left behind (Derrida, 2006). What is haunting the academy and also how ghostly residues may make their mark beyond (and within) the academy. These disappearances and disturbances have produced forms of academic life that increasingly resemble a condition of institutional suspension – zombie universities, in an undead condition, neither fully alive nor entirely dead.

Riffing on the famous opening to *The Communist Manifesto* Kociatkiewicz et al., (2022) point to the spectre of capitalism haunting business schools and management studies. This pervasive and malign presence has been linked to the fetishization of excellence (Wilmott, 2011) and the striving for growth at all costs, whether grant capture or student bodies. Much like Marx's vampiric conception of capital and its ravenous werewolf like hunger for surplus labour, we can envisage universities as scrabbling for student bodies in an increasingly desperate search for income with scant regard for students themselves, despite worthy talk of employability and student outcomes. Drawing, for instance, comparisons of the political economy of the recruitment of foreign students to 'trafficking' (see Schackle, 2026).

Marx's work has been characterised as a scientific or structural critique of capitalism, yet it is also saturated with imagery drawn from the Gothic, mythology, folklore, and the supernatural (Greenaway, 2024). Throughout his writings, he offers a critique of political economy populated with a cast of ghosts, vampires, monsters, enchanted objects, and mythological forces. These motifs are not incidental literary flourishes or mere metaphor, they also describe the ghastly realities of capitalism (Neocleous, 2003; 2005); rather, they provide Marx with a language for describing the strangeness of capitalism and warning us. In *Marx's Inferno*, William Clare Roberts (2016: 1-2) describes a descent into the 'social hell' of capital

as a lesson in “not only how this “infernal machine” works, but also what traps to avoid in [...] efforts to construct a new world.” Marx’s use of these motifs as rhetorical devices appropriate to their time might be reimagined for our own, where the shadowy forces of AI and big tech bro’s give flight to justified and conspirational concerns (Verdegem, 2024; Cohen, 2023), while fossil fuel companies make billions in infernal conditions of war, genocide, and climate crisis.

Whilst the stream takes inspiration from Marx, there are many others we might consider working with this imaginary in similarly critical fashion. Across psychoanalytic, feminist, anti-colonial, queer, and disability theory: haunting, monstrosity, abjection, ruins, and estrangement have all been mobilised as ways of apprehending alterity in social life. The uncanny as expressed in the writings of Sigmund Freud and the films of David Lynch offer us a language to understand the strange and defamiliarizing realities not only from *within* the academy (Beyes and Steyaert, 2013), but also from *beyond* it, from ‘an outside that breaks in’, in encounters with strange intrusions, temporalities, and agencies (Fisher, 2016: 16). This extends to queer readings of ‘body horror’ (Heinecke, 2025), interpretations of the ‘American gothic’ as haunted by the spectres of chattel slavery and white supremacy (Taylor, 2019), and the monstrous politics, ethic, and futures of organization (Thanem, 2011)

In this stream we invite contributors to draw upon the rich seam of work in Marxian and extra-Marxist traditions of critical theories of organization, which combines reflection and analysis of work, organizations and management with the mythological and the monstrous (e.g. Laberscheck, 2025; Neel, 2025 Hunter and Baxter 2021; De Cock et al., 2013; Thanem, 2011; Parker, 2005; Bos, 2004). We place no limits on imagination, what appears horrific and strange can and usually does take many forms. Shape-shifting and transformational qualities may indeed be central to what is horrific, as Marx reminds us. We encourage contributions that engage with this theme that take the form of more standard academic writing or those that adopt a more literary or poetic style (see for inspiration Nathues et. al., 2026, Neel 2025). We encourage contributors to reflect on the current conjuncture (see Thompson, 2026 and Achcar, 2022) both within and beyond academia alongside the motifs discussed in this call and engage in the spirit of creative construction and destruction, or oblivion even.

Please submit your paper abstract to djwats@essex.ac.uk by **1st December 2026**.

Abstracts should be no more than 500 words and unstructured, but should outline focus, methods (if appropriate), contribution and their fit with the stream.

Potential stream participants can contact stream convenors with any queries at djwats@essex.ac.uk; y.nishat-botero@bham.ac.uk; benjamin.richards@northumbria.ac.uk.

We also ask anyone submitting to confirm whether they are able to travel to Lancaster, UK for the conference or if they can participate online only. The convenors will decide on the stream format once we know the number and type of submissions, so the stream may be in-person only, hybrid or online – depending on submissions.

We aim to communicate decisions to submitting authors by the end of **January 2027**.

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