

Academic Vampires

Written by Eduardo De La Fuente

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EDUARDO DE LA FUENTE, NOV 28 2010

One of the many things ailing the present university – and the list is long – is the emergence of what we might term vampire disciplines. These new disciplines are parasitic on existing bodies of knowledge and tend to justify themselves in terms of critique, deconstruction, contextualism, discourse analysis and other approaches that don't add very much to the total sum of knowledge a society or civilisation possesses about itself.

Originally, vampire disciplines found their homes within the humanities and social sciences. But they are quickly spreading to areas as diverse as law and architecture, terrorism studies and geography. Indeed, any discipline with some version of the “critical studies in . . .” genre has probably been infected by the vampire virus. And, if your discipline is still a vampire-free zone, expect the vampire advanced guard to come knocking on your door to convince you that your students majoring in transport logistics need to take a unit in “transport and society” or in “transport cultural identities”.

The presence of the word “and” in a unit title should alert you the possibility that the unit being proposed is a vampire unit.

The lack of a sense of humour on the part of the proponent, or their inability to explain in words understandable to the man or woman on the street what the field is about, also make it likely that you are dealing with an academic vampire.

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Artist's impression of an Academic Vampire.

So how did academic vampires become so powerful?

First of all, academic vampires recognise the power of ritual incantation. They subscribe to the view that if you state, over and over, that “knowledge is socially constructed” or that “any aspect of the world is shaped by class, gender and race” then this will become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Second, there is the vampire trick of saying, “Well, there is no proof that the world is real or that real effects take place.” This rhetorical gesture is rife in fields such as media studies. Whenever a hapless psychologist or early childhood development researcher goes public with their latest empirical findings on the effects of playing computer games on a child’s cognitive development, the media studies ghouls can’t wait to line up and appear on television to denounce such research for its value assumptions and reassure parents who let their children watch whatever they want that there is no definitive causal link between what you watch on the tube and what kind of adolescent or adult you turn out to be.

Third, academic vampires have appropriated for themselves the moral and institutional superiority that comes with

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being inter – or, in the current jargon – post-disciplinary.

They would have you believe that they are intellectually promiscuous and happy to nibble on anybody's neck. In truth, however, academic vampires are an insecure and wary lot who want to know where their supply of blood is coming from.

Thus, if a cognitive scientist, biologist, theologian, ethicist or person with practical experience in the field in question walks into the room the academic vampire scurries away lest the person in question (someone who actually knows what they're talking about) recognise them for that they are: an academic who fails to cast a personal reflection.

Many conservative critics subscribe to the view that academic vampires have proliferated since the 1970s due to the hegemony (in itself, a vampire concept) of Marxists, poststructuralists, feminists and post-colonialists.

While I can understand their frustration with the contemporary university, I think such critics are confusing symptom with cause. What we have experienced in the past three decades within the university is an incredible failure of nerve. Because the vampires seemed younger and more attuned to the times it was easy to relent and give up insisting that the study of art history ought to be about paintings or that science is about verification and explanation.

Paradoxically, the emergence of the academic vampire phenomenon is linked to the self-confidence of societies that have benefited greatly from non-vampire productive activities. Western societies now feel so secure in economic and techno-scientific matters that they can assume that more knowledge is always better than less.

As a society, we feel we can pat ourselves on the back because we are able to offer university education to a larger proportion of the population irrespective of the outcomes or tangible benefits to either the society or individual in question. Universities reinforce this worldview. They are happy to promulgate the view that playing semantic, theoretical and ideological games before you finally grow up, is fine. Why settle for an apprenticeship in an industrial setting when you can sleep in and wing tutorials by pretending you've read the unreadable piece of cultural theory that has been set for class this week?

But universities like to walk on both sides of the street and chew gum at the same time. Thus, over time, they have found ingenious ways to masquerade their role in sustaining youthful decadence by promulgating the illusion that university study contributes, if nothing else, to "generic skills" such as the "ability to think critically" or "high-level written and verbal skills". In short, it doesn't matter what you learn or whether you learn anything at all. For your university fees, you are guaranteed to earn a significantly higher income than your peers who don't go to university and you are given the promise that you will acquire generic skills that, in all probability, you should have acquired in high school or would have acquired in your normal workaday life. Both cases point to the phenomenon of the university as finishing school for young adults who are still maturing.

Let me state that I am not opposed to values such as playfulness, disinterestedness or even dissent being central to what university life is about. Even intellectual and cultural decadence is capable of producing things of passing or temporary merit. For example, there is a certain conceit associated with being able to understand and master Jacques Derrida's theoretical terminology. We might say that deconstruction and other forms of poststructuralism are the contemporary academic equivalent of Herman Hesse's fictional glass bead game. But, if universities are to produce either long-lasting or truly innovative intellectual products, it will probably require more than clever intellectual games. And, in contradistinction to the present faddishness of many academic disciplines, it will probably also mean tapping into the vast reservoirs of human knowledge and creativity that previous intellectual cultures had produced in relation to art, science, economy, religion, philosophy, and so on. Not for nothing was the Renaissance based on rediscovering and reinterpreting rather than merely imitating the artistic, philosophical and scientific classics of the Ancient world.

Ironically, academic vampire disciplines have proliferated in the era of auditing and so-called greater accountability. I think this is no coincidence. Let me explain why: vampire academics love the smoke-and-mirrors quality of the contemporary university.

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Indeed, it was one of the high priests of vampirism, French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard, who gave theoretical legitimacy to the logic of the system in question. Lyotard argued, in *The Postmodern Condition*, first published in 1979, that in the absence of universally shared values such as truth, beauty or morality, the only binding principle for evaluating postmodern knowledge would be “performativity”. Performativity appeals greatly to academic vampires. They don't mind that what is produced, or deemed to be valuable, in academe is of little actual consequence in the real world.

What matters is not whether your article on postcolonial accounts of Western discourses about terrorism helps to reduce the actual incidence of terrorism or helps to explain its causes; what matters is how many of your colleagues cite that article you have published in a peer-reviewed, high-ranking journal. Academic vampires seem to find sufficient reward for their labours in being promoted. And they derive a certain perverse pleasure in being able to make the system work in their interests.

Academic vampires also love the culture of performativity, as it allows them to assume faux radical postures without taking any risks. They love phrases such as the politics of culture, the politics of knowledge, the politics of identity and the politics of representation.

Such phrases make their research sound important and help to perpetuate vampire empire building. Having established that a field, no matter how apolitical, has a political dimension, vampires are on their way to colonising the discipline.

Academic vampires also seem to thrive in brutalist sarcophaguses that might have been apt for the Soviet politburo or IBM circa 1953, but which no self-respecting 21st-century knowledge worker would be caught dead in.

Academic vampires also follow the zombie logic that more paperwork signifies greater quality and a greater level of customer satisfaction will follow.

Bureaucratic logic triumphs over responsiveness to clients or market conditions. I doubt that Apple pays as much attention to customer satisfaction surveys as public universities do. And, certainly they wouldn't emphasise this kind of data over the design of its products or the kind of experience customers have when going into an Apple store. I recently found myself gushing to a young salesperson processing my purchase at a hyper-minimalist, uber-contemporary new Apple Store : “How can anybody resist spending money in this shop?” Has anybody recently heard a university student say: How can anybody resist learning, or being inspired by ideas, at a university campus like this one?

No doubt, some university chief executives and middle management will think to themselves, as long as the student enrolments and the research grants continue rolling in, what's the problem? Others will say that vampirism is more acute in arts faculties and that if civil engineers continue to be trained to build roads correctly and those attending medical school still learn about anatomy, then the university faces no immediate moral or legal challenges. Why not stick with the status quo?

In any case, a growing number of academics entering upper and middle university management are themselves vampires. It's not just deans and heads of

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"What is left of the humanities and the social sciences seems to be engaged in an increasingly vociferous fight over an ever-decreasing cake." Comment in response to Eduardo De La Fuente's editorial.

departments who subscribe to vampire ideology. In Britain, where performative-vampirist culture has been around much longer than in Australia, even the odd vice-chancellor is a self-identified vampire academic. In Australia, vampires are also making their presence felt within research funding bodies and in the formulation of the research assessment exercise framework.

What then might cause the system to be free of academic vampires? There is a good chance that the system will crash and burn (to mix my metaphors) when it runs out of red, juicy blood to feed on. The vampire university will only survive as long as the institutional and environmental conditions that allowed it to flourish continue to stay in place.

On the demand side, it's only a matter of time before students start to question "credentialist creep", especially, if it means universities force them to take vampire subjects as part of their degrees.

On the supply side, things will change when a number of senior vampires reach retirement age; and when many of the would-be vampires toiling away as part-time or casual academic labour realise that academe is not quite as glamorous as the tenured vampires made it out to be.

For those impatient for the vampire system to collapse, let me suggest a couple of personal strategies for coping with widespread vampirism in universities. One would be to undertake some reconnaissance and identify knowledge areas that have some natural resistance to the vampire phenomenon.

At some point, theology has to be about God, the divine or the sacred; in the final analysis, art history has to be about things called paintings, sculptures or, for argument's sake, let's say multimedia artworks; and, philosophy finds it hard to escape entirely considerations of logic, epistemology and things like metaphysics and aesthetics.

Then there are disciplines where there is enough exposure to daylight so that vampire tactics lose some of their magic and dark powers. Try telling students paying for an MBA and juggling assignments with work commitments that reading Michel Foucault on governmentality is good for them!

Interestingly, the fields of marketing and management studies seem to be experiencing something of a rapprochement with the traditional humanities. Ethics and aesthetics are quickly emerging as hot topics in fields such as branding, organisational dynamics and also studies of entrepreneurship.

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Of course, if one is still feeling unsafe, one could always resort to more old-fashioned methods for repelling vampires. Academic vampires seem to be allergic to anything that requires lots of training, especially things that might be deemed to be part of high culture and, are generally, repulsed by economists and anything that is perceived as propping up capitalism.

So, if you are worried about the presence of vampires in your university workplace, can I recommend you let it be known to your departmental colleagues that you are considering taking up Latin or Old English, are thinking of making a pilgrimage to the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam to contemplate some Rembrandts, or that you recently finished, and enjoyed a great deal, reading Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*. There are methods other than garlic or crucifixes to keep vampires away.

***Eduardo De La Fuente** teaches in the school of English, communications and performance studies at Monash University, Australia. Dr. De La Fuente's latest publication is 'Twentieth Century Music and the Question of Modernity' (New York: Routledge, 2010).*