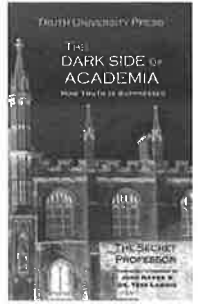


# Are universities a lost cause?

## *The Dark Side of Academia: How Truth Is Suppressed, by The Secret Professor*

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Reviewed by Brian Martin



In 2018, Professor E, a highly productive British management expert, was invited by a well-known media outlet to write an article about her research on leadership styles. The university manager above her requested that he approve such articles. She was told her article was not suitable as it might reflect on vice-chancellors.

That was bad enough but worse was to come. Professor E was manoeuvred out of her position on spurious grounds of financial exigency. Subsequently, two less-productive academics in her field, one of whom had been involved in easing her exit, were promoted to professor. This is the core story in *The Dark Side of Academia*. The author is anonymous, with the pseudonym The Secret Professor, who the reader is likely to assume is Professor E. Her story illustrates the sort of internal university machinations that are so common yet so seldom revealed.

The author, who I'll call E, reports no complaints about academia prior to this experience, but she has plenty more to say in this book. The next major part is on peer review. E goes into considerable detail challenging mainstream scholarly views on four matters: the Dead Sea Scrolls, Jacques Benveniste's research on the memory of water, climate change and the Great Barrier Reef, and the 1666 Great Fire of London. After this, the next target is universities as organisations influenced by vested interests where female professors are scarce on the ground. In conclusion, E argues that universities are so far gone that independent centres of learning need to be constructed in their place.

There is lots of good material in *The Dark Side of Academia*, but often the treatment is uneven or superficial. One major problem is that dissent is treated as truth, as the subtitle *How Truth Is Suppressed* indicates. On the peer review topics, such as the Great Fire of London, E assumes her view is the truth, and hence that defenders of the orthodox view are suppressing the truth. This is most startling in her discussion of climate change, with an appendix concluding with the claim that 'The wholesale adoption of policies to fight so-called man-made climate change has little basis in science.' This is a dissenting view, to be sure, but it hardly makes the case that truth is being suppressed. If the subtitle had been changed to *How Dissent Is Suppressed* and the argument made about the difficulties

faced by challengers to scholarly orthodoxies, E's arguments would be much more credible.

E's personal story is a running theme throughout the book, popping up in various places in later chapters as if to prove the viciousness and vacuity of higher education. A reader would be excused for imagining that E was traumatised by her treatment and extrapolated from being subjected to a serious abuse of power to indicting the entire academic establishment. But more is needed to back up such an indictment. E seems unfamiliar with the bulk of scholarship on paradigms, peer review, dissent, feminism, self-managing organisations and the politics of higher education, all of which could have been used to put her own experiences and analyses in context.

E points to examples of scholarship on esoteric topics to question why academics are not tackling more important questions, the same tactic used by politicians to discredit academic work, especially in the humanities. What we don't find in the book is an analysis of the driving forces behind academic specialisations and the choices of research topics.

*The Dark Side of Academia* shows signs of being prepared in a great hurry, with far too many mistakes, textual repetitions and typos. What is the reader to think about this statement? 'With first quarter GDP in Britain standing at 0.1 per cent in 2018 as compared with 2.6 per cent in the US, you would think that there would be much that universities could offer by way of advice'

The unfortunate thing is that sloppy writing and less-than-rigorous argumentation do an injustice to the important issues being covered. E targets several of the most serious problems with higher education and includes some telling examples, but the topics deserve a more penetrating treatment. The author might have been better advised to stick to her own story, which is definitely worth telling, accompanied by advice for others in similar situations.

There is a lesson for university administrators seeking to protect their organisation's reputation. When academics are badly treated, it's always possible they will be radicalised and outspoken. Some may even write exposés about the dark side.

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