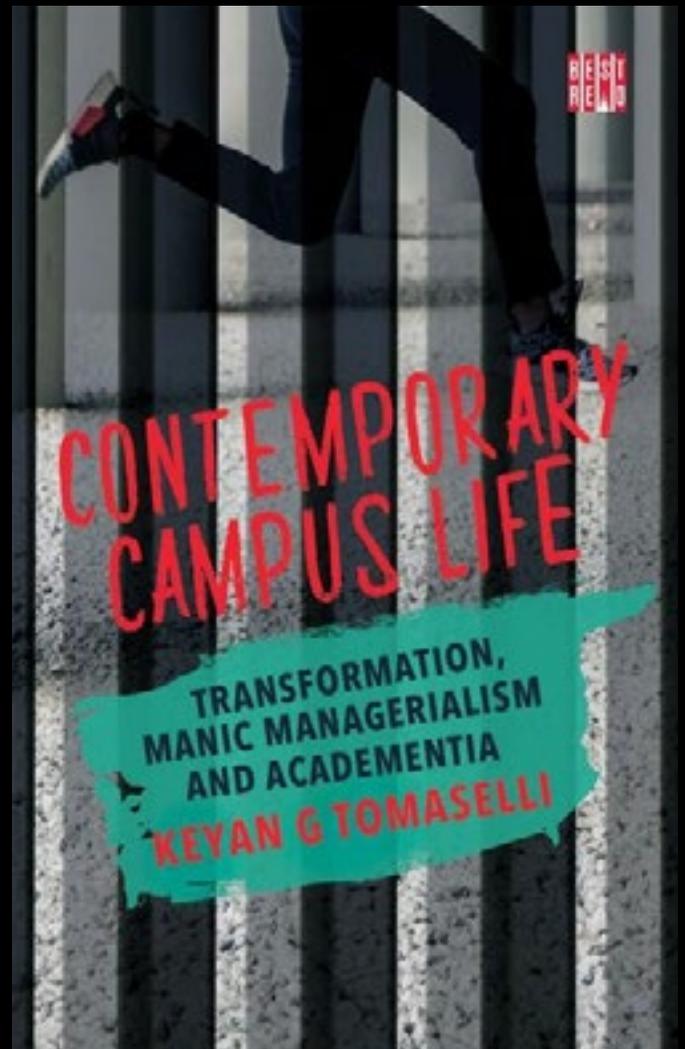


**Book Review:**

# Contemporary Campus Life: Transformation, Manic Managerialism and Academentia

– by Keyan G. Tomaselli



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By Donal P. McCracken

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It is with a certain hesitation that one opens a new book about the work experience written by a former colleague. Flicking nervously to the index I am relieved to see my name is not mentioned, only moments later to be mortified on flicking through his 244-page apologia to see my name up in lights. So, we shall start with a shoddy index. That and the 1970s drab brown cover do not speak well for a good read. Then the acknowledgements contain this ominous paragraph: 'These chapters are constituted and rewritten from columns published in UKZNdabaOnline, with others from UKZNtouch, SUBtext, Wits Review, the Sunday Times and some other published and original materials. The first of these he wrote as the Griot, the oral storyteller of African communities. The chapters have been edited, updated and the original ideas elaborated on and offered here in essay form, rather than as columns.' So, the 1970s are pushed back to the 1950s when in South Africa the common if quaintly outdated practice of selected published columns actually sold books. A quarter of a century ago I recall advising a celebrated journalist and broadcaster not to even think of such a retrograde step. And yet, like some remarkable madcap Grand Design, Tomaselli has succeeded where others have failed. The book is a success.

Contemporary Campus Life: Transformation, Manic Managerialism and Academedia is a cry of anguish against the scourge of 21st-century university managerialism, where lip service is paid to clever window dressing, endless numbing box-ticking and to, at times, sinister bean-counting, all packaged in aspirational tones which brooks opposition — producing a pastiche of former Soviet exuberance where 'this month 300 happy workers produced 400 new tractors.' The result of this sustained and intellectually suicidal approach, not just in South Africa, has been that the professoriate have been relegated to a tame and minor role in universities leading in turn to their too often abrogating their sacred trust and entering their offices, closing their collective doors, and, in the words of the statesman William Pitt, 'Tending their own gardens'.

I had another colleague once who gained a Commonwealth Scholarship and went to Edinburgh University to study for his doctorate under the eminent and daunting historian D.B. Horn (1901–1969). On entering the great man's wood-panelled study the cantankerous Scot asked what his research topic was. This was a study of an 18th-century Scottish nobleman and diplomat (not a topic that would land one a

tutorship in a South African university these days). When informed, he merely said, 'Well, Laddie, you know where the archive is in High Street, then go there.' And that was the sum total of his supervision.

Though Tomaselli is noted as a meticulous supervisor, one suspects that he is not unsympathetic to the notion of self-help and minimal administration. Apart from efficiently and effectively running his own postgraduate unit for several decades, he certainly avoided the managerial rat race, and as such cannot be accused of hypocrisy in this peroration against Mammon and Byzantinism in the academy. And being at heart a theorist it is difficult to question the logic within this volume, even if the word academedia somewhat sticks in the gullet. But, unlike most of my students, Tomaselli realises that there is a nexus between theory and reality, and where, as Arthur Quiller-Couch eloquently enunciated, the imperative for the faculty of action is subordinated to the faculty of knowledge. And that is the point of the book. The system just does not work, or at least if it does, it should not be called a university.

There was a time when much of the mining industry in South Africa was run (after the days of the enigmatic and now unpopular Mr Rhodes) by historians. Fat hope of that happening in this age of tunnel-focused education and manic managerialism. In *The Idea of a University*, published in 1854, Cardinal Newman speaks of 'the deficiencies and the irregularities of knowledge' within leadership and 'the eccentricity of opinion and the confusion of principle which they exhibit'. What he would have written about such leadership in 2021 one shudders to think.

In a deceptively mild and humorous manner, Tomaselli's book systematically dissects the mindset which dominates university management practices and beliefs, and which is now self-generating and promoting. It is focused on South Africa, but it is a universal tale of bowing the knee to rankings; the mystical god Science who employs all its worshippers; political and cultural correctness (though the index being so poor I cannot definitively promise to his use of the phrase); and the regimented and monitored office regime.

It is a well-written book in somewhat satirical vein, which also flows well and makes a convincing point — one, sadly, which I fear will have no impact on the juggernaut which has relegated intellectualism (as distinct from popularism) in universities to a tame and minor role.