

# **‘Little boxes all the Same’: Exploring and Contextualizing Paradoxes of Power in a Strategic Change Programme in a UK University**

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## **Abstract**

Drawing on the paradox literature, this article considers its relevance for those working in a UK University. First, through focusing on a strategic change programme that constituted the University, staff and students as ‘little boxes’, it empirically examines the paradox of *centralized empowerment*. Second, we argue that centralized empowerment is a manifestation of the wider neoliberal project confronting universities and its paradox of controlled freedom. Finally, we extend a critical understanding of paradox by exploring how power operates in simultaneously repressive and productive ways.

## **Key words**

Academics, Change, Critical, Empowerment, Neoliberalism, Professional Services Staff, Paradox, Power, Politics, Standardization, Strategy, Qualitative

## **Introduction**

**And the people in the houses**

**All went to the University**

**Where they were put in boxes**

**And they came out all the same**

**(Little Boxes, song: Malvina Reynolds, 1961)**

The neoliberal transformation of higher education (HE) has been widely critiqued in many countries and regions, including the UK (Bowes-Catton, Brewis, Clarke, Drake, Gilmour & Penn, 2020; Loveday, 2018; McCann, Granter, Hyde & Aroles, 2020; McCabe, 2019; Parker, 2014; Smith & Ulus, 2019; Soin & Huber, 2023), the Netherlands (Lorenz, 2012), Australia (Cannizzo, 2018; Kalfa, Wilkinson & Gollan, 2018; Ryan, 2012), New Zealand (Ruth, Wilson, Alakavuklar & Dickson, 2018) and the Nordics (Engwall, 2007; Kallio, Kalio, Tienari & Hyvönen, 2016). It refers to governance through market metrics and managerialism (e.g. Erickson, Hanna & Walker, 2020; Lorenz, 2012; van Houtum & van Uden, 2022) that attempts to ‘produce’ (Foucault, 1977, 1980) academics and professional services staff as neoliberal subjects that subscribe to a competitive, market-based and performance driven ‘monoculture’ (Mingers & Willmott, 2013, p. 1051).

The nature and perils of neoliberal reforms for *academics*, such as the ‘intensification and extensification of work’ (Gill, 2016, p. 45) and ‘extreme accountability’ (Boncori, Bizjak & Sicca, 2020, p. 53), have received considerable attention. Yet, the darker side of these reforms for managers, professional service staff and students also needs to be considered. We do so by focusing on a strategic change programme that included organizational redesign, centralization, standardization and a culture change in a UK University, which we call Centemp (pseudonym). We explore how it constituted the University, staff and students as ‘little boxes’ that are ‘all the same’ and examine the paradox that power is exercised *simultaneously* in productive and repressive ways (Foucault, 1977, 1980).

Paradoxes have been defined as ‘contradictory yet interrelated elements...that seem logical in isolation but absurd and irrational when appearing simultaneously’ (Lewis, 2000, p. 760). The primary concern of what Berti and Simpson (2021a) refer to as the “managerialist” paradox literature has been 'to shine new light' on the '*management*' of 'paradoxical tensions' (Smith, Erez, Jarvenpaa, Lewis & Tracey, 2017, p. 304; emphasis added). This approach tends

to regard paradox as a ‘technical challenge’ (Berti & Simpson, 2021a, p. 35), or a ‘puzzle to navigate’ (Lewis & Smith, 2022, p. 533), which inadvertently ‘downplay[s] issues of power’ (Fairhurst, 2019, p. 16) and ‘the politics of paradox’ (Gaim, Clegg & Cunha, 2022). Consequently, what has been referred to as the ‘dark side of organizational paradoxes’ is poorly understood (Berti & Simpson, 2021a), despite considerable evidence that paradoxes can be damaging for organizations and their staff (Cunha, Neves, Clegg, Costa & Rego, 2019). We therefore ask: how can a power-sensitive lens help us to better understand the development and operation of paradoxes in a strategic change programme in the context of neoliberal reforms within higher education?

We contribute to the critical university and paradox studies literature in three ways. First, we add to paradox studies by politicising paradoxes through relating them to the wider context and condition of neoliberalism. Second, we contribute to critical university studies (Fleming, 2021; 2022) by exploring a strategic change programme in a UK University and its paradox of *centralized empowerment*. Finally, we extend a critical understanding of paradox by exploring how power operates in *simultaneously* ‘repressive’ (e.g. Berti & Simpson, 2021a; Clegg, Cunha, Munro, Rego & de Sousa, 2016) and ‘productive’ (Clegg, 1989; Foucault, 1977, 1980; Knights & Morgan, 1991; Miller & Rose, 2008) ways.

The article is organised as follows. The next section elucidates our critical theoretical position in relation to the literature on organizational paradox. Then, we explore the neoliberal context in academia before introducing our qualitative research methods, case study and findings. Finally, we draw out our main contributions in relation to paradox and critical university studies in a discussion and conclusion.

### **Organizational Paradoxes in a Neoliberal Context**

Interest in organizational paradoxes has surged in recent decades (Cunha & Putnam, 2019) leading to concerns that scholars might be converging too quickly on a set of theoretical assumptions that overemphasize the benefits of paradoxical framing (e.g. Fairhurst, 2019; Cunha & Putnam, 2019). The mainstream paradox literature focuses on best-practice interventions, which has led Berti and Cunha (2023) to warn against an overly technical, instrumental and prescriptive approach towards paradox. The danger is that we neglect that paradoxes are bound up with the reproduction of power and inequality. Therefore, to counteract the overwhelmingly positive framing of paradoxes, we add to the calls (e.g. Cunha & Putnam, 2019) for more critically-orientated perspectives on paradox.

We seek to redress the tendency to ‘downplay issues of power’ (Fairhurst, 2019, p. 16) which has been described as ‘a major vacuum’ in the paradox literature (Cunha & Putnam, 2019, p. 100). As Fairhurst and Putnam (2024, p. 124) observe, the paradox literature ‘typically treats power as a “sometimes” focus’ despite ‘power infus[ing] paradoxical relationships’ (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2024, p. 107). It is important to note, however, that power has not been entirely overlooked in relation to paradox (see Berti, Simpson, Cunha & Clegg, 2021; Gruber & Trickett, 1987; Howcroft & Wilson, 2003). In a conceptual paper, Berti and Cunha (2023) observe that power relations can make latent tensions salient but also suppress them and Wenzel, Koch, Cornelissen, Rothmann and Senf (2019) illustrate how micro-level power struggles can maintain paradoxical tensions. While insightful, this literature, with notable exceptions (e.g. Schrage & Rasche, 2022), is mainly concerned with *local responses* to paradoxical tensions. It does not sufficiently explore how localised paradoxes develop and are entangled with wider political conditions that imbue how power operates in productive and repressive ways. We therefore explore organizational paradoxes in relation to neoliberalism - the constitution of ‘political, economic, and social arrangements within society that emphasize market relations, re-tasking the role of the state, and individual responsibility’ (Springer, Birch

& MacLeavy, 2016, p. 2). We consider how paradoxes develop through political actions, decisions and discourses (Putnam, Fairhurst & Banghart, 2016), which adds to our understanding of how ‘power’ manifests in specific ‘organizational tensions’ (Berti & Cunha, 2023, p. 862) and neoliberalism more broadly.

Much attention has been devoted to the productive potential of paradox which ‘foster[s] generative, novel and creative opportunities’ (Lewis & Smith, 2022, p. 535). This is often seen as dependent on the development of ‘a paradox mindset as a key to unlocking the positive potential of tensions’ (Miron-Spektor, Ingram, Keller, Smith & Lewis, 2018, p. 27) and identifying ‘synergies between apparently contradictory elements’ (Lewis, Brown & Sutton, 2019, p. 490). Drawing on Positive Organizational Scholarship, Cunha, Simpson, Clegg and Rego (2021) have proposed a broader conceptualization of generative paradoxes as associated with promoting ‘mutually beneficial flourishing, thriving and wellbeing’ (Cunha et al., 2021, p. 17). This focus on the productive side of paradoxes is different from how the critical literature understands power as ‘productive’ (Foucault, 1977, 1980; Knights & Morgan, 1991; Miller & Rose, 2008; Rose, 1999). The latter attends to how ‘our sense of ourselves as distinct subjectivities is constituted’ (Clegg, 1989, p. 151) through power relations. It is this critical understanding of power as productive that we see as largely missing in paradox studies. Rather than generating ‘solutions’ (Cunha et al., 2019, p. 20), it offers an analytical approach. It therefore differs from a generative paradox pedagogy that seeks to ‘leverage organizational tensions in a manner that produces outcomes of collective thriving, wellbeing, and virtuousness’ (Cunha et al., 2019, p. 19), although we are sympathetic to such concerns. It also differs from conceptualisations of power as an enabling and constructive force (van Baarle, Dolmans, Bobelyn & Romme, 2024) that focus on practical interventions aimed at enhancing the power-to-act.

The emergent critical paradox literature emphasizes the destructive or ‘pathological’ (Berti & Cunha, 2023) potential of paradoxes, recognising that it is often not possible to cope or ‘thrive with everyday tensions’ (Miron-Spektor et al., 2018, p. 38). This strand of work foregrounds the experiences of disempowered organization members rather than ‘paradox savvy leaders’ (e.g. Waldman & Bowen, 2016, p. 316). Attention has been given to ‘pragmatic paradoxes’ (Berti & Simpson, 2021a; b) conceptualised as ‘managerially imposed’ (Cunha, Rego, Berti & Simpson, 2023, p. 453) ‘contradictory demands,’ such as a command to ‘take initiative’ (Berti & Simpson, 2021a, p. 252), or ‘double binds’ (Ashforth, 1991) where ‘one is exhorted to perform two acts, each of which precludes the other (e.g. ‘act spontaneously’)’ (Ashforth, 1991, p. 461). Pragmatic paradoxes have been described as resulting in impossible choices and therefore paralysing, producing ‘angst, fear and hopelessness’ (Cunha et al., 2023, p. 454). According to Berti and Simpson (2021b), these paradoxes are likely to occur in work contexts characterised by intense, difficult to escape, relationships where large power asymmetries create Catch-22 situations (see also Cunha et al., 2023).

Berti and Simpson’s (2021a) theoretical paper focuses on how organizational pragmatic paradoxes emerge from ‘power relations *restricting* actors’ capacities for enacting legitimate responses to tensions’ (p. 252; emphasis added). They discuss ‘oppressive power conditions’ (p.253); ‘constraints’ (p. 254) and power relations which are ‘preventing’ (p. 258), ‘curtailing’, ‘impeding’, ‘hindering’ and ‘inhibiting’ (p. 258). Others highlight practices understood as ‘entrap[ing] actors in vicious circles, creating absurdity’ (Berti & Cunha, 2023, p. 862). Although we agree that power operates in repressive ways, as Foucault (1980, p. 119) argued, ‘What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn’t only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things’. This makes power paradoxical – *simultaneously* repressive *and* productive, which is the focus of this article. This view of power has been acknowledged theoretically in paradox studies, hence power has been

referred to as ‘both enabling and constraining’ (Putnam et al., 2016, p. 139) and ‘enabling and restricting’ (Berti, Simpson, Cunha & Clegg, 2021, p. 102) but further theoretical exploration and empirical investigation are required.

A focus on repressive power is also evident in some accounts of Kafkaesque bureaucracy<sup>i</sup> which has been described as ‘very repressive’ (Hodson, Martin, Lopez & Roscigno, 2012, p. 271), where discipline denies (Nisar & Masood, 2019, p. 891) and makes ‘individuals conform’ (op cit, p. 892). Clegg et al. (2016) argue that Kafkaesque bureaucracies create conditions where one feels ‘trapped in a vicious circle’ (op cit, p. 158). Their empirical study refers to ‘significant restrictions to actions’ (op cit, p. 167) and information scarcity that ‘severely constrained available behavioural options’ (op cit, p. 167). Repression is also evident in our case study but it only partly elucidates the dynamics we observed.

The critical research into organizational paradoxes (e.g. Berti & Simpson, 2021a; b) challenges the assumption that staff are able to *freely choose* their responses to paradoxical tension. This chimes with critiques of neoliberalism, which regard it as a form of control through freedom that endeavours to produce subjects who believe that they have freedom of choice. As critics argue, the supposed freedom of neoliberalism is achieved through ‘an audit explosion’ that seeks to regulate ‘self-regulation’ (Clegg et al., 2016, p. 172). If successful, this self-regulation results in competition, enterprise, autonomy, individualism and choice becoming the guiding star through which individuals attempt to secure their sense of identity, meaning and purpose (see du Gay, 2000; Knights & Morgan, 1991). Rather than simply repressing individuals then, neoliberalism attempts to create ‘self-producing subjects who take responsibility for working on themselves, for enhancing their own value-creating qualities and for willingly engaging in productivity-generating activities’ (Vallas & Christin, 2018, p. 10).

Cunha et al. (2019, p. 843) have called for research into paradox to explore ‘positive and negative processes’. Bergstrom, Styhre and Thilander’s (2014) study of organizational

change in the Swedish Armed forces offers one example of such research but theoretically it adopts a different approach from ours. Bergstrom et al. (2014), drawing on Luhmann (2005), explore the processes of ‘paradoxification’ and ‘de-paradoxification’. They define the former as ‘organizational members’ articulation of what they regard as inconsistencies in any managerial or organizational change programme’ (Bergstrom et al., 2014, p. 390). ‘De-paradoxification’, by contrast, involves displacing or concealing paradox. Bergstrom et al. (2014) explored how organizational change impacted two military groups. One group engaged in de-paradoxification – it depicted their experiences as ‘positive’ (p. 395) - the other, in paradoxification, which framed their experiences as ‘negative’ (p.398). The ‘negative’ experience was argued to be beneficial ‘from the regimental managers’ perspective’ (p. 398) because it helped surface problems. Bergstrom et al (2014) cite Foucault’s (1980) argument that ‘power/knowledge relations also have a positive and productive side’ (op cit, p. 402) and to illustrate this, they argue that ‘sometimes soldier discipline can be productive in achieving important military goals’ (ibid). This ‘negative’ and ‘positive’ analysis of power contrasts with our analysis of how power operates in repressive and productive ways. It approaches power in a managerial way considering how power might advance or curtail organizational goals whereas, for us, the question is: how is power exercised in ways that produce and repress certain ways of being and acting.

In our study of Centemp University, a strategy of standardization and centralization was introduced, which appears antithetical to neoliberalism’s emphasis on choice and freedom. Yet, neoliberalism is about ‘changing actors’ orientations’ (du Gay, 2000, p. 174) and so producing subjects that are standardized in relation to market and business norms/logics ‘is not a foil to ‘enterprise’ nor to neoliberalism ‘but part of its constitution’ (ibid). In view of this, paradox is not only a condition and outcome of Centemp’s management strategy but also a condition and outcome of neoliberalism. At Centemp, senior managers pursued rationalities at



odds with each other and repressed what they purported to produce (see also McCabe, 2009), which elucidates the ‘wicked nature of paradox’ (Cunha & Putnam, 2019, p. 100). In this sense, paradox is ‘built-in to’ management’s designs but we do not regard this as a ‘carefully woven construction’ (Clegg et al, 2016, p. 170), nor a matter of functional stupidity (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012). We see it as integral to the controlled freedom of neoliberalism that is manifest in our case study in what we call *centralized empowerment*. As we argue, both neoliberalism and centralized empowerment are imbued with the tension between control and freedom. We now turn to the changing academic context to further explore this tension.

### **The Neoliberal Academic Context**

The UK University sector, an early adopter of neoliberalism (Tzanakou & Pearce, 2019), has experienced a ‘deep, intensive and all-encompassing’ transformation (Maisura & Cole, 2017, p. 605) following decades of HE reforms. Neoliberalism is a ‘slippery’ concept (Holborow, 2013, p. 233) best understood as ‘a dynamic and unfolding process’ (Springer, 2010, p. 1025) that takes multiple forms in different contexts (Birch & Springer, 2019). In much neoliberal thinking ‘the market symbolises rationality in terms of an efficient distribution of resources’ that deems state intervention ‘undesirable because it transgresses that rationality and conspires against both efficiency and liberty’ (Munck, 2005, p. 61). The application of neoliberalism to universities, however, entails paradox because bureaucratic government intervention is necessary to simulate and regulate quasi-market conditions. As Capano and Pritoni’s (2020) analysis of twenty-five years of policy instruments in higher education in sixteen European countries reveals, governments have not only introduced competitive funding mechanisms, stringent teaching and research quality assessments but have also contributed to shifts in governance structures.

In the UK, the commodification of education, which was initiated in the second half of the 1970s (Radice, 2013), has accelerated over the past two decades. The 2004 Higher Education Act, which relaxed rules on awarding degrees, has opened the HE market to new providers and stimulated competition. The sharp reduction of direct public funding for teaching triggered by the 2010 Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance (known as the Browne Review) is often seen as ‘the tipping point in [the] neoliberal trajectory’ (Martini & Robertson, 2022, p. 6). The shift towards full fee tariffs for students, followed by the abolition of student maintenance grants for new students in 2016/2017 and their replacement with maintenance loans, has transformed students into customers. The introduction of the research excellence framework (REF, previously RAE) which links academic publications to government funding and the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) that ranks institutions according to bronze, silver or gold has intensified the importance of league tables. Together with the removal of caps on student numbers, these ‘significant driver[s] of change’ (Shattock, 2017, p. 391) have created the conditions for universities, staff and students to become competitors. The pursuit of ranking-based legitimacy produces winners and losers that compels universities to focus on short-term priorities at the expense of long-term benefits (Grolleau & Meunier, 2024).

The underlying logic of UK HE policy has been explored in Martini and Robertson’s (2022) linguistic analysis of government documents, which illustrates how government increasingly and systematically associates HE with competition, markets, individualism, efficiency, value-for-money and performance. Neoliberal interventions produce a paradoxical context where a “free” market is equated with efficiency and individual ‘freedom, autonomy and choice’ (Miller & Rose, 2008, p. 48) that is imposed through government regulation. Neoliberalism espouses ‘governing through freedom’ (Loveday, 2018, p. 156), which is an ‘indirect form of control’ (McNay, 2009, p. 56) that endeavours to enlist the freedom of others.

We understand this as the neoliberal paradox of controlled freedom that attempts to ‘produce’ subjects that regard themselves as free, whilst repressive and productive measures are introduced to secure conformity.

As academics, we have experienced the paradoxical pressures to perform that neoliberal regimes instil. Appointments, promotion and pay awards depend on navigating the competing demands of research, teaching and administration. Expectations of excellence in all areas create tension, continuous pressure and anxiety (Clarke & Knights, 2015) that impact lives within and beyond work (Smith & Ulus, 2019). The TEF and student feedback produce teaching orientated subjects limiting time for research just as REF, employment and promotion criteria forge a research focus that represses the time for teaching despite research being integral to excellent teaching. As a recent study by Jones and Floyd (2024) has worryingly argued, even women on maternity leave often feel compelled to sacrifice their maternity rights in order to maintain academic productivity. Individuals are produced and repressed through these dynamics, which demand individual responsibility and an enterprising display of self (see du Gay, 2000). It is important to note, however, that while many academics and senior managers, may feel ‘trapped’ and ‘compelled to conform’ (Grolleau & Meunier, 2024, p. 335), varied compliance and resistance practices are used to navigate managerial imperatives (Butler & Spoelstra, 2020). It needs to be understood that neoliberalism is not simply imposed because it is reproduced through our engagement with it. Järvinen and Mik-Meyer’s (2024) study of male academics in Denmark, for example, shows how scholars utilize stringent performance measures to advance their careers. Moreover, academics are not homogenous and there are multiple interpretations of ‘corporate academia’, as observed by Pianezzi, Nørreklit and Cinquini, 2020, p. 585). They purport that some academics, often those currently or previously in managerial positions, associate it with ‘a form of morality beneficial in reducing the “dirty politics”’, which existed in ‘traditional’ academia.

We can observe multiple paradoxes of neoliberalism in operation in academia for, as De Vita and Case (2016) suggest, the drive towards managerialism in UK Business Schools represses what is now ‘mainstream’ (op cit, p. 360) business thinking – the need for flat, flexible, decentralized, empowered, autonomous, agile business practices (see also Lorenz, 2012). Likewise, McCann et al. (2020, p. 434) assert that ‘metrics act as the very mechanism through which competition, and by extension markets, are created’ but they also repress freedom, creativity and innovation. Even in its own terms, therefore, neoliberal reforms reflect and generate paradoxes, producing inefficiencies through increased bureaucracy and ‘meaningless extra work’ (Kallio et al., 2016, p. 702).

Although broad labels such as neoliberalism powerfully reveal macro-level developments, we need to understand their complexity in operation. Many, including us, have benefited from the rapid expansion of universities as it provided employment and promotion opportunities. It is also important to be mindful of academic nostalgia (e.g. Mingers & Willmott, 2013) for the academic “past” was also repressive and discipline-bound. It was often male dominated, elitist (Jemielniak & Greenwood, 2015) and unfair due to ambiguous progression criteria (Pianezzi et al., 2020). The lack of metrics meant that accountability for poor performance could be evaded whilst the new metrics help those who perform, according to their criteria, to secure rewards and promotion. Nevertheless, the intensification of managerialism is also repressive due to the unremitting demand for change, a narrow understanding of performance, declining collective rewards, insecurity, casualization (Loveday, 2018) and work intensification that, for many, are turning academic work into a ‘mental health hazard’ (Erickson et al., 2020: 12; see also Smith & Ulus, 2019).

Neoliberal reform has to be interpreted and enacted, often through a ‘myriad of mundane interventions’ (Soin & Huber, 2023, p. 1147), by multiple layers of management, some of whom are academics who may support or oppose (all or some facets of) neoliberalism.

Although changes are not implemented uniformly they often take surprisingly similar forms, such as restructuring and redundancy (see McCabe, 2019; Parker, 2014) that produce new paradoxes. At the Open University, for example, change was justified on the basis of ‘improving student experience’ (Bowes-Catton et al., 2020, p. 388) whilst planned curriculum cuts, redundancies and closures seemed likely to repress it. Similarly, a change programme at Civic university was legitimised as being in ‘the interests of students’ but it had ‘deleterious effects’ (McCann et al., 2020, p. 442). It purported to improve ‘the metrics that govern modern university life’ but served to damage ‘reputational capital’ and ‘harm its research, publishing, funding and teaching strategies’ (op cit, p. 441). The wider audit culture, through which neoliberalism is implemented, is also paradoxical. Through engaging with it, (manager-)academics endeavour to produce institutions with excellent reputations (Loveday, 2021) yet, inadvertently, audit cultures also contribute to ‘the overall decline in health of relationships among staff and students’ (op cit, p. 915).

Through these contextual changes, academia has been reshaped but we need to better understand how neoliberal paradoxes are entwined with and play out at the organizational level. We will now explain our research methods and introduce the case study.

### **Methodology and case organization**

This article focuses on a strategic change programme at Centemp University - an established, mid-sized, university located in the North of England. It involved significantly reducing the numbers of its schools through mergers and restructuring and standardizing academic and administration support structures and systems. All professional services staff, as well as middle and senior academic staff (from Head of Department and Programme Director upwards), received ‘at risk’ letters. They were invited to apply for new roles which, in many cases, were their old, now downgraded, roles. Certain posts were eliminated and job descriptions were

standardised, often reducing task variety. The responsibilities of academic leadership roles, such as Department Heads and Programme Directors, increased, while their corresponding workload allocation decreased. The restructuring was referred to as a ‘tsunami’ by professional services staff, while lower level academics were generally less affected.

The research arose ‘serendipitously’ (Cunha et al., 2019, p. 833) through a senior manager at Centemp, a former student, who drew our attention to the strategic change and facilitated access to the University. To protect the anonymity of our participants and the case study, we have withheld or modified some details. We adopted a case study research strategy for its potential to enable context-sensitive theorising (Piekkari, Welch & Paavilainen, 2009; Thomas & Myers, 2015) where context becomes an integral part of the explanation (Welch, Paavilainen-Mantymaki, Piekkari & Plakoyiannaki, 2022). Data were collected two years after the hand-over date of the new organizational structure. This allowed for distance from the immediate experience and reflexivity, which was important as many of the participants experienced it as traumatic, but it precluded using observation as a method of data collection.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection consisted of individual and small group interviews with fifty-seven individuals and document analysis. Thirty-nine one-to-one and five small group interviews were conducted. Interviewees were recruited from across the University including academics, professional services staff, senior managers and twelve staff who left following the restructuring (see Table 1 for an overview of data sources). Initially, interviewees self-selected in that they volunteered in response to recruitment posters and, subsequently, others were recruited through snowball sampling. Interviewees included senior managers actively engaged in the strategic change design and those on the receiving end of the strategy. The median staff

tenure of interviewees was ten years. A wide range of participants ensured that we avoided narrowly focusing on the ‘winners’ or the ‘losers’ of change (Buchanan & Dawson, 2007).

Individual interviews	Small groups		Documentary sources
Academics	7	1 SGI (3 staff)	The business case
Professional Services Staff	9	4 SGI (15 staff)	Manager Briefing: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Project overview and update</li> <li>- HR briefing</li> <li>- Supporting people through change</li> </ul>
Academic leavers	6	-	Manager questions and responses
Professional Services Staff leavers	6	-	De-briefing meetings report
Executives	11	-	HR and Trade Union Review Report based on eighty interviews with a cross selection of staff
Total per method	39	5	Project Review Assessment Two staff surveys results
Total 57			

Table 1: Overview of data sources

Due to the sensitive nature of the research, participants, except for senior managers and leavers, were offered a choice between individual and small group interviews. The professional services staff tended to opt for small group interviews, while academics and leavers preferred individual interviews. Individual interviews lasted on average 75 minutes whereas the small group interviews 120 minutes. They were conducted face-to-face and all but three interviews were recorded and fully transcribed. In the three instances when participants did not wish for the interview to be recorded, detailed notes, with verbatim quotes, were written. Interviews

followed a semi-structured protocol with questions focused on the organizational context, participants' organizational history, experiences of the strategic change programme, its rationale, the change process, key moments and outcomes. Access to a range of documents (see Table 1) was negotiated which were explored to deepen understanding of the change programme.

As academics studying another University our positionality was complex and liminal. We were not 'strangers in a strange land' nor were we exactly 'studying the familiar' (Berger, 2015). Openness was facilitated because we were not required to provide a report and we carefully guarded the anonymity of participants.

### **Data Analysis**

Analysis entailed a careful bricolage of iterative analytical moves (Pratt, Sonenshein & Feldman, 2022) to build a deep understanding of the 'complex and holistic nature' of the data (Reay, Zafar, Monteiro & Glaser, 2019, p. 8). Following the 'unfolding internal logic' (Locke, Feldman & Golden-Biddle, 2022, p. 279) of our study, we developed our analytical process using a series of moves 'grounding the phenomenon up close ... and from afar' (Sætre & van de Ven, 2021, p. 686). While we sought to safeguard 'procedural rigor', we were primarily concerned with 'interpretive rigor' and so followed 'redirections, clues, and new avenues of inquiry' (Mees-Buss, Welch & Piekkari, 2022, p. 406). We adopted an iterative, abductive process of movement between data and theory - an increasingly common alternative to traditional inductive case study theorizing (Welch et al., 2022).

We commenced with data familiarisation by deploying analytical moves aimed at building our understanding of the organizational context, the rationale for the strategic change programme, its trajectory and outcomes. To this end, we (re-)read our notes and transcripts and collected and reviewed further documentation. Next, to develop a more fine-grained account



of change and its different interpretations, we progressed with iterative rounds of open and thematic coding using Nvivo software (NVivo12). We developed codes from the data and focused on the trajectory and evaluations of the strategic change. While re-reading transcripts and coding, paradoxes emerged as important framing devices for our participants and so we turned our ‘analytical gaze’ (Mees-Buss et al., 2022, p. 414) to them.

The next stage of the analysis entailed zooming in on the identified tensions. We followed Cunha and Putnam’s (2019) recommendation to stay open to different types of tension. We thus examined all passages containing ‘linguistic cues for discursive contradictions’ (Engeström & Sannino, 2011, p. 377) which indicated tensions, strain, mixed messages, contradictions, dilemmas and inconsistencies. Our concern was not to provide a list of paradoxes, although this was helpful in the early stages of the analysis, but with discovering patterns as a ‘clue for identifying [core] oppositions’ (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2019, p. 921). This allowed us to discern core tensions which cut across the interview and documentary data, namely between references to empowerment/autonomy *and* centralization/standardization, which we conceptualised as the paradox of centralized empowerment. This is distinctive because scholars (e.g. Berti et al., 2021) have presented each aspect (centralization and empowerment) as related to separate regimes and paradoxes. Seeking to open up our data, we closely re-read interview transcripts and documents, looking for possible ‘omissions, hidden agendas and biases’ (Mees-Buss et al., 2022, p. 407). We were struck by the similarities between the empirics and the neoliberal paradox of controlled freedom (e.g. Loveday, 2018, McNay, 2009). Our interpretation was that we were observing a manifestation of that paradox, which prompted us to extend and contextualise our ‘analytical gaze’ (Mees-Buss et al., 2022, p. 414).

In documents and interviews with senior managers, we focused on the concern to produce a commercial orientation/subjectivity along with a culture of empowerment. This

emphasis on enterprise and autonomy chimed with neoliberalism and so we re-read the data looking for ‘neoliberal keywords’ (Holborow, 2013, p. 229). To ensure nuance, we also considered the ways in which this productive exercise of power might repress, coincide with or contradict the extant culture. In line with qualitative content analysis (Krippendorff, 2018), we paid attention to how language was used to construct the strategic change programme, how events were portrayed, while remaining attuned to potential inconsistencies within and across texts (see also Berti, 2017; Putnam et al., 2016). This allowed us to trace ‘wider sociocultural influences on paradoxes’ (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2019, p. 918) and thus to politicise paradox.

There was also a strong emphasis on centralization and standardization in the strategic change programme, which links with coercion and repression (Berti & Simpson, 2021a). We thus used a repressive understanding of power as a ‘sensitizing concept’ (Locke et al., 2022, p. 271) that connected with staff in our study feeling ‘trapped’, ‘powerless’ and ‘having no choice’. This rubbed up against the simultaneous emphasis on empowerment and the attempt to produce more commercially-orientated, responsible, neoliberal subjects. Yet, it coincided with du Gay’s (2000) analysis, which emphasises the standardization of subjects through enterprise and a commercial orientation. Moreover, we were also conscious that this attempt to exercise power did not exist in a vacuum and so we paid attention to how it connected with other practices, for example, endeavours to promote autonomy. We connected the tensions and contradictions to Foucault’s (1977,1980) theorising of power that has been taken up in studies of neoliberalism (McNay, 2009), innovation (McCabe, 2000) and the enterprise discourse (du Gay, 2000). Rather than focusing on paradoxes of ‘control’ *or* ‘autonomy’ (Berti et al., 2021), it alerted us to the need for a more complex and nuanced understanding of power, when exploring the development and operation of organizational paradoxes. We therefore re-read our data on the paradox of centralized empowerment through a power-sensitive lens. In doing so, we sharpened our focus on the paradoxes of power and concentrated on how power operates

in simultaneously productive and repressive ways. In the next section, we present the organizational context before unpacking the paradoxical operation of power in relation to the paradox of centralized empowerment.

### **The Findings in Context**

The official rationale for the strategic change programme drew heavily on the neoliberal themes of competition, market logic and efficiency. It included mixed messages (Putnam, 1986) for, on the one hand, it was presented as determined by external forces whilst, on the other, it was cast as the free choice of senior managers who ‘wanted to change things ... [even though they]...could have left things as they were’ (Sam, senior manager). Through ‘Manager Briefings’, it was asserted that the University was ‘in a strong position’. Documents highlighted healthy student numbers and applications, financial performance and improved ranking in University league tables. Most staff had long tenure and recalled earlier, small-scale restructuring and efficiency programmes, that were limited to individual schools or departments and so the scale and pace of the strategic change programme shocked many. Indicative of processes ‘going awry’ (Elliott, professional services), the large number of staff who were allowed to take voluntary redundancy ‘caught senior managers by surprise’ (Elliott, professional services) as ‘suddenly ... there were fewer people than positions’ (Liz, professional services).

Despite claims that the University was performing well, echoing neoliberal government discourse, change was deemed imperative for organizational survival due to ‘Increasing competition between universities across the world’ (‘The Business Case’). Other cited drivers were the changing funding regime and anticipated cuts, which appeared to produce ‘survival anxiety’ (Cummins, 2002) amongst the University’s senior managers. Representations of a

threatening context can be understood as an attempt to legitimise change and thus generate support whilst repressing opposition to change. As a senior manager observed:

[The strategic change programme was about] getting hold of the University, giving it a big shake, so that it was prepared for what was coming down the track..... the University was probably not fit for purpose. .... Given what was coming, that was very dangerous. (Robert)

In Robert's account, the strategic change programme was necessary to prepare the University for a more competitive world, which fits with a neoliberal logic. The 'Restructuring Outline' document, however, referred to an earlier educational ethos for it claimed that the strategic change programme would 'put academic values at the heart of the institution' and 'strengthen departments while building critical mass to improve research'. This can be understood as productive of 'traditional academic values' even as a new business orientation threatened to repress them. Senior managers pointed to the private sector as a role model of organizational design highlighting the need to 'look at your *business* and structuring in a way that helps you best meet your *business* objectives' (Grace, emphasis added). These contradictions seem likely to hinder the exercise of power in terms of infiltrating people's 'actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives' (Foucault, 1980, p. 39). It is important to note that not all senior managers agreed with this 'business' rationale. Specifically, one was highly critical of the intervention and questioned its basic tenants. As he explained, change was introduced: 'so [that the senior managers] could say that they had restructured, because so many other Universities were doing that at the time' (Alex). This suggests that isomorphism was a crucial driver for change (see also Grolleau & Meunier, 2024).

The strategic change programme was thus paradoxically presented as reflecting a ‘business’ solution to problems that did not yet exist and as necessary to transform the University that was purported to be successful. In what follows, we explore how it generated what we call the paradox of centralized empowerment.

### **The Paradox of Centralized Empowerment**

The neoliberal paradox of controlled freedom refers to government interventions and management actions that attempt to produce neoliberal subjects that exercise their freedom in ways that align with a more competitive, enterprising, empowered, customer-focused and flexible way of being and acting (see du Gay, 2000; Miller & Rose, 2008; Rose, 1999). We will now explore how at Centemp, this paradox was manifest in attempts to promote empowerment whilst introducing centralization/standardization.

#### ***Empowerment: the first dimension***

Empowerment was an official organising principle of the strategic change programme that was pursued through: a cultural shift towards distributed leadership (Denis, Langley & Sergi, 2012) and structural reconfigurations that sought to promote devolved responsibility. Documents and senior managers, with the exception of one who was critical of the change programme, consistently referred to it as ‘enabling’ and ‘empowering’ individuals, schools and departments. This productive exercise of power, however, also sought to restrict or repress actions that might contravene strategic objectives. The aim was to produce leaders that contribute ‘to the strategy of their school’ (Sam, senior manager) but in prescribed ways that did not ‘challenge what was being said by the senior managers’ (Alex, senior manager). The concern to secure compliance and produce subjects that aligned with the corporate strategy was

also evident when staff were required to re-apply for their jobs. Hence, in job interviews, they were required to ‘quote the University strategy and demonstrate it’ (Liz, professional services). Nevertheless, the appeal to empowerment was not mere ‘rhetoric’ (Howcroft & Wilson, 2003, p. 14) as it sought to enrol the freedom of academic and administrative leaders so that they acted in support of the strategic change programme:

It’s about *empowering* academic leadership. ... I did want the Senior Leaders in the institution to be at every level *taking responsibility*... for their areas and *to be coming up with ideas* and programme development, etc ... I wanted to move to a structure in which people were *enabled to do things* ... Also, it was very important to me to have Heads of Academic Departments who were... *leaders* [emphasis], putting the academic research and student experience at the heart of the way in which we organise ourselves... (Sam, senior manager, italics added)<sup>ii</sup>

These remarks suggest that empowerment sought to reinforce, at least partially, a traditional educational ethos given the emphasis on ‘academic research’ and ‘students’. They also highlight a preoccupation with distributed leadership. Distributed leadership refers to devolving and dispersing leadership responsibility across levels and people (Denis et al., 2012) and, at Centemp, it was presented as a cultural shift of ‘power to the departments’ (e.g. ‘Manager briefing document’). It was pursued through a series of structural reconfigurations, for example, expanding the University senior management team (Vice Chancellor and Pro-Vice Chancellors) to include academic Deans. It also entailed increasing the scope, nature and focus of core academic management roles. The role of Head of Department became ‘far more upward-facing ... [with] far more emphasis on business management of Departments’ (Richard, senior manager). Similarly, the role of Programme Director was also ‘substantially

expanded' (Denise, academic). Distributed leadership was mandated by the most senior leaders in the University and HR guidelines enforced it:

In the old system there was too much power in the hands of too few people... leadership didn't extend far enough, ... there was a... *dictate* from the beginning that nobody was to have a deputy (Richard, senior manager, emphasis added)

Through removing deputy positions it was thought that those in positions of authority would be forced to 'empower' others. The discourse of empowerment as a key driver and underlying principle of change was challenged by staff. They saw 'cutting costs' (Lucy, academic) as management's main priority. Indeed, one senior manager revealed during their interview that a 'million pounds [was taken] out of support structures .... through reduced grades and ... reduction in full-time equivalent staff' (Arthur). The impact of these changes was experienced as limiting staff flexibility (Roxy, professional services) and innovation as they coincided with a more autocratic approach:

What came across from my interview [for a senior post] was a notion of management that I'm completely at odds with. It seemed to be about: "Could you be hard and authoritarian and make things happen downwards, but then compliant upwards? ... (Jaxon, academic).

Despite appeals to empowerment, the independence and autonomy of schools was seen as a problem that needed to be repressed. Although senior managers asserted the imperative to 'get rid of the idea that there is the imperial centre and the [schools] are outposts of empire' (Sam), paradoxically concern was also expressed that schools 'were very independent' (Grace, senior manager). The Business School, in particular, was seen as 'out of control' (Isabella) and

‘do[ing] what it wanted’ (Richard, senior manager). Although empowerment implies freedom and ‘autonomy’ (Berti et al, 2021), at Centemp, it coincided with centralization, which is consistent with du Gay’s (2000) critique of enterprise.

### ***Centralizing Control: The second dimension***

The change programme sought to produce a new business orientated culture or a ‘corporate environment’ (Grace, senior manager), which rubs against reinforcing an educational ethos. This was pursued through the centralization of control that entailed three processes: (1) responsabilization of managers and academic leaders, (2) centralizing decision-making and (3) standardization.

First, responsabilization was manifest in making senior (academic) managers part of the central university leadership team and rendering them responsible for ‘achieving Key [University] Performance Indicators’ (‘Assessment’ document). In the words of a senior manager, ‘it is difficult to move things along in the University, unless the senior academic leaders are sitting at the top table’ (Sam). The aim was to create ‘a harmonised University’ (Richard, senior manager) and responsabilization was understood as an important means to achieve this. Richard refuted that senior managers were trying to ‘*box people*’ in but staff described the changes as a ‘cookie-cutter’ or ‘McDonaldized approach’ (Denise, academic). It was evident that responsabilization was repressive as it sought to limit empowerment and autonomy so that ‘a maverick Dean [wouldn’t] be able to go off and do something that didn’t look like the rest of the University’ (Sam, senior manager). Staff expressed concerns about the contradictions of responsabilization as senior academic leaders now enjoyed ‘less autonomy and had to defer to the central decisions’ (Will, academic) rendering them more ‘compliant’ (Jaxon, academic). Attempts to produce responsible, empowered subjects were simultaneously



repressive as they enforced compliance. Indeed, in many senior manager interviews, it was revealing that control and responsibility were used interchangeably. The remarks of Michelle, a professional services manager, hint at these tensions:

There wasn't enough control at a senior level, so moving Deans into the [Central] Management Team was to *make them take more responsibility*.... although, at the same time, we've been centralising, so in many of the processes they actually have *less* control.

Second, the centralization of decision making and processes sought to produce compliance and, in doing so, generated new barriers to empowerment. The centralization of admission systems, for example, was experienced as repressive, creating 'feelings of impotence, resignation, despair' (Ed, academic). It prevented staff from 'adequately looking after [their prospective] students' (Nick, academic). The creation of committees, such as the Business Development Group, promoted centralized decision-making in relation to new initiatives. Whilst facilitating senior management control, it curtailed empowerment. The committee sought to foster a business approach and repress initiatives deemed incongruent with this logic:

If somebody *wants to do something new*, they have to come through the Business Development Group, otherwise we don't recognise it and don't support it. That way [we] *keep a handle* on what people are trying to develop *and we can stop people* developing things that are wasting everybody's time. (Grace)

The third means of centralizing control was the standardization of structures, processes, staff and students. It repressed the autonomy and diversity of the old University structure, which

was often criticised for creating ‘huge disparity between what was happening in one part of the University and in another’ (Nicole, senior manager). In the words of another senior manager:

we wanted to turn [the structure] into something which was a lot more systematic ... evening out ... schools with different budgets, different focus, making them more ... market-facing. (Robert)

The attempt to standardize was equated with ‘efficiency’ and ‘equality’ (Nicole) and yet it hindered autonomy, flexibility, decentralization and empowerment (see De Vita & Case, 2016). To produce a ‘market-facing’ university (Robert) requires that it is differentiated from its competitors and meets the needs of customers [students]. Yet, standardization at Centemp, sought alignment with the approach followed by other universities. A ‘commercial’ logic was pursued in the belief that this is what is ‘happening in lots of other Universities [that] have completely centralised’ (Isabella, senior manager), which is again indicative of isomorphism. To standardize, schools were merged and departments moved to create ‘evenly sized’ units, irrespective of course variations or customer [students] needs. It was purported that standardized management and administrative structures would deliver ‘consistency, fairness and transparency’ (Sam, senior manager). This resulted in staff ‘keeping[ing] [their] heads down, trying desperately to get on with jobs, to conform to all these projects ...conform to regulations and procedures ... rather than being excited about developing new things’ (Will, academic). Standardization, therefore, served to repress empowerment, autonomy and innovation producing compliant subjects, at least on the surface.

Standardization was understood to support ‘a consistent and equal, or at least equivalent, student experience across all activities of the University’ (Arthur, senior manager). This pursuit of standardization in the name of ‘a consistent student experience’ was often

criticised by staff because different schools and programmes operated in different contexts and served different “customers” or students that did not fit into standardized boxes. Through efforts to produce ‘neat and tidy’ structures and processes (Jaxon, academic), repression dominated for ‘the different ways of working in [schools] which provided super support for students and academics were all stripped away’ (Bettina, professional services).

The commercial logic emphasised the need to be ‘market-facing’ and improve “customer” [student] experience but standardization enforced box-like structures and practices. This impacted upon students because irrespective of their needs, staff were no longer able to provide tailored and ‘focused support’ (Amanda, professional services). The endeavour to standardize was also applied to staff and their jobs, notably through uniform job descriptions for professional services staff and academics in senior leadership roles. The standardized job descriptions were presented as a means to ‘improve the effectiveness of the support systems’ (‘Staff Briefing’) and yet some senior managers acknowledged that ‘there [was] a lot of feeling that ... the restructuring was trying to pigeonhole people’ (Richard). This box-like approach was justified on the basis of fairness:

[Standardised job descriptions] looked more efficient because *you stopped* people spending money concocting posts for no reason, you could get some consistency. *It's turning the people thing into a bit of mathematics .... it's the basic parity ...* It was about being *fair* to staff and *equalising* workloads. (Peter, senior manager; emphasis added)

The introduction of standardization sought to repress deviation and it forced staff and students into ‘little boxes’ in the name of consistency, efficiency and fairness which were often disputed by the staff. Hence generic job descriptions were understood as failing ‘to capture the full range of activities involved in posts’ (‘Review of the Restructure of Administration’ document)

and obfuscating that ‘some people do more than others’ (e.g. Karen, professional services). Standardization was often experienced by professional services staff as preventing them from ‘getting the job done’ (Simone). The strictures imposed by standardized job descriptions were evaded by middle managers, who advised staff to ‘ignore them’ (Karen, professional services). A preoccupation with ‘marshalled replication ...to the right image, to the right shape’ (George, academic) led some staff to feel as if they were being ‘bundled up and put on the shelves’ (Lianne, professional services staff), ‘feeling bruised and battered’, ‘repressed’ and ‘assimilated into something that [they] don’t understand or agree with’ (Denise, academic).

## **Discussion**

This article has contributed to critical university (e.g. Fleming, 2021; 2022) and paradox studies (e.g. Berti & Simpson, 2021a; b). It has done so by adopting a power-sensitive lens to explore paradoxical tensions and their darker implications for those who work and study in a UK University going through a strategic change programme.

Our first contribution is to the paradox literature and a critical understanding of paradox. We have elucidated, theoretically and empirically, how power operates in *simultaneously* repressive and productive ways. This adds nuance to our understanding of paradox because to date, paradox scholarship has tended to focus on the productive operation of power approached from a managerialist perspective, which is understood as aiding organizational functioning. Alternatively, and more critically, power has been analysed as a repressive force in relation to paradox (Berti & Simpson, 2021a). Our study has added complexity to this critical understanding by considering how power also operates in productive ways that is evident in attempts to produce particular types of subjects (Clegg, 1989; Foucault, 1977, 1980; du Gay, 2000; Knights & Morgan, 1991; Miller & Rose, 2008). Endeavours to exercise power in productive ways have, by definition, implications for what is repressed and vice versa. As we

have seen, additional complexity, nuance and paradoxes arise through this insight that the exercise of power is paradoxical and, in relation to specific regimes, may be exercised in contradictory ways whereby empowerment is fostered whilst centralization restricts it or education is extolled whilst a business orientation inhibits it.

A critical understanding of power contrasts with literature that discusses how paradoxes can be beneficial for organizations or are ‘constitutive’ (Cunha et al, 2021) through creating ‘generative, novel and creative opportunities’ (Lewis & Smith, 2022, p. 535). As critical scholars have argued, paradoxes are often approached as ‘technical’ problems (Berti & Simpson, 2021a, p. 35), which risks casting them as politically neutral occurrences that merely require smarter management. By contrast, our concern has been to elucidate how paradoxes are imbued with, and reproduce, extant power relations and hierarchical inequalities. In our case study, paradoxical tensions reflected political decisions associated with the launch and content of a strategic change programme. This programme simultaneously drew on competing academic and business discourses and espoused empowerment along with centralization and standardization. Power, exercised through discursive appeals to humanistic values (equality, parity, fairness) and devolved academic leadership, sought to produce subjects that embraced a business logic, which was presented as consistent with academic values. In this way dissenting voices were to be repressed, while centralization and standardization were imposed that stifled efforts to enhance empowerment. We can observe then that power operates in relation to paradox in simultaneously repressive (e.g. Berti & Simpson, 2021a; Clegg et al, 2016; Hodson et al, 2012; Nisar & Masood, 2019) and productive ways. We agree with Fairhurst and Putnam (2024, p. 106) that ‘power and paradox are inseparable’ but argue that the complexities and subtleties of this dynamic have been obscured by focusing critically on repressive power or, from a managerial perspective, on the constitutive/generative operation of power.

While recognising the managerial opportunities that some organizational tensions generate, the critical literature on paradoxes has highlighted the dangers of a belief in the mastery of paradoxes (Gaim et al., 2021) and the perils of over-estimating the benefits of a paradoxical framing in all settings (Cunha et al., 2017). This literature has, however, mainly considered ‘pathological’ paradoxes (Berti & Cunha, 2023), also referred to as pragmatic paradoxes (Berti & Simpson, 2021a; b). These have been conceptualized as ‘managerially imposed’ (Cunha et al., 2023, p. 453) ‘contradictory demands’ (Berti & Simpson, 2021a, p. 252). Our study has shown how paradoxes can be destructive through organizational changes that reflect the wider neoliberal context and this goes beyond the established focus in the paradox literature on manager-subordinate relations. It has further pointed to the danger and cost of paradoxical tensions for different groups of organizational members (academics, professional service staff, managers, students) thereby illustrating that paradoxes might pose greater problems than typically considered, which supports Gaim, Clegg and Cunha’s (2021) critique of the idealization of paradoxical framing.

Second, through politicising the context, emergence and operation of paradoxical tensions, we have responded to calls to address the scarcity of work on power (e.g. Cunha & Putnam, 2019; Fairhurst, 2019) in relation to paradox. Fairhurst (2019, p. 16) has observed that ‘paradoxes are always tied to particular circumstances’, yet the political circumstances within which organizations operate are rarely considered in studies of paradox. Recent work has highlighted the political nature of *responses* to paradoxes (e.g. Gaim et al., 2022; Huq, Reay & Chreim, 2017; Wenzel et al., 2019). Our study adds to this work by revealing how organizational paradoxes are enmeshed with both localised politics and the wider political context of neoliberalism. Rather than approaching paradoxes as a natural reflection of tensions in the environment, through forefronting neoliberalism, we have politicised our understanding of both the environment and paradox.

In a theoretical contribution, Berti et al. (2021) assert that managerial regimes have been ‘transitioning’ (op cit, p. 116) ‘since the 1970s and 1980s’ (p.108) from the ‘paradox of control’ towards the ‘paradox of autonomy’. First, the ‘paradox of control’ refers to the exercise of ‘hard power’ or ‘power-over’ that is repressive and ‘coercive’ (p. 106) which they associate with bureaucracy and technological control. It is paradoxical because its successful enactment ‘as a mode of control highlights the need for greater autonomy’ (p: 116). Second, the ‘paradox of autonomy’ refers to the exercise of ‘soft power’, ‘power-to’, ‘culture management’ that emphasizes empowerment, ‘post-bureaucracy’ and ‘self-surveillance’ (p. 107). It is argued that this is paradoxical because, if successful, it generates the need for more control. In terms of this dichotomy, Berti et al. (2021) assert that ‘organizations have tended to favour control over autonomy’ (p.106) and yet we need to be clearer for, as they acknowledge, both are regimes of control.

As critical scholars have argued, empowerment is about control for ‘The promise of empowerment is to give employees more power to use their judgement and discretion in their work, thereby encouraging them to utilize their skills and experience for the benefit of the organization’ (Howcroft & Wilson, 2003, p. 15). Empowered employees are therefore to employ their autonomy in the service of management and this is redolent of neoliberalism. Empowerment was linked to ‘repression’ by Howcroft and Wilson (2003, p. 9) but it is also bound up with attempts to produce employees that comply with what Berti et al. (2021, p. 109) refer to as the ‘status quo and productivity agenda’. We do not therefore see ‘control and autonomy’ as ‘constantly competing for dominance’ (Berti et al., 2021, p. 112), because autonomy coexists with control. Empowered employees are not autonomous in the sense of being free of power because they are constituted, in part, through productive and repressive exercises of power. We say, in part, because power is not simply done to them. Employees retain autonomy – their ability to exercise power. We do not agree therefore that there are

‘those with power and those without’ (Berti et al., 2021, p. 113) because from a ‘relational’ (Foucault, 1982) understanding of power, power is not a possession ‘in the hands’ (Gruber & Trickett, 1987, p. 362) of a given group that they can ‘give’ (Howcroft & Wilson, 2003, p. 15) or take from others.

In addition to the paradoxes of control and autonomy, Berti et al. (2021) refer to a third scenario of ‘power-with’, which refers to ‘co-determination’ and ‘participative management’ (op cit, p. 115). This would be an important step toward greater democracy but, as Howcroft and Wilson (2003, p. 11) point out, pluralism is ‘a managerialist approach’ (op cit, p. 11) that is enmeshed with ‘achieving increased productivity and compliance’ (op cit, p. 12). In Berti et al.’s (2021) third scenario then, power would continue to be exercised in repressive and productive ways that reinforce the ‘status quo and productivity agenda’ (Berti et al., 2021, p. 109).

Our third contribution is to the critical university literature (Fleming, 2022) through our application of a critical power and paradox lens to the study of a strategic change programme in a university. We have explored the neoliberal paradox of controlled freedom and how it played out as centralized empowerment. The change programme purported to respond to the demands of neoliberalism, and yet it was more congruent with Fordism (centralization of processes and decision-making and standardization) (see Lorenz, 2012). This finding resonates with Bowes-Catton et al.’s (2020) study of a change intervention at the Open University and their argument that there is a ‘remarkable lack of understanding’ (op cit, p. 394) among some<sup>iii</sup> senior university managers of the wider neoliberal project with its emphasis on a customer-focus, flexibility, choice, responsibility, empowerment and autonomy. It appears that contradictory ideas are being implemented *as if all* universities are and ought to be *the same* (see Lorenz, 2012, p. 616). Nevertheless, this should come as no surprise for, as du Gay (2000) argued, neoliberalism and its Taylorist/Fordist precursors (standardization, centralization) are



not actually opposites because power is exercised through neoliberalism to produce a standardized way of being whilst repressing alternatives.

Loveday (2021), after Cummins (2002), refers to the ‘survival anxiety’ of senior managers. This helps to explain the initiation of organizational changes due to the anticipation of future dangers and hierarchical pressures to improve organizational performance. The remarkable similarity in the change programmes Universities adopt (e.g. Bowes-Catton et al., 2020; Erickson et al., 2020; Hay, Parker & Luksyte, 2021; McCabe, 2019; McCann et al., 2020) suggests that the default strategy is to homogenise universities (Grolleau & Meunier, 2024) by approaching and constituting them, their schools, staff and students as ‘little boxes’ that are ‘all the same’. Hence restructuring programmes typically involve job losses, closing or merging departments, standardizing and centralizing, whilst espousing a business logic, empowerment and the importance of students as “customers” (e.g. McCann et al., 2020). We therefore argue that management thinking and action prior to, during and after change requires scrutiny and accountability not least because of their unclear benefits.

In contrast to literature that focuses solely on academics and the changing nature of academic work (Bristow, Robinson & Ratle, 2017; Clarke & Knights, 2015; McCann et al., 2020; Parker, 2014; Soin & Huber, 2023), we have focused on a strategic change programme involving academics and professional services staff. This has highlighted similar experiences between these two groups that tend to be presented in opposition to one another (see Kallio et al., 2016, p. 696), which could provide the basis for solidarity in the future, as McCann et al. (2020) suggested.

Finally, future studies might adopt and further develop a power-sensitive perspective on paradox by shifting attention from best-practice interventions and local responses to investigating the political context and consequences of their emergence and operation. While we have illustrated how organizational paradoxes are interwoven with sector-level changes and

enmeshed in local politics, more work is needed to unpack the subtle and often knotted effects of the simultaneously repressive and productive operations of power. We see the complexities of the dynamics of power and paradox as fertile ground for future research. The University sector appears to be a particularly promising setting for future critical explorations of paradoxes. What happens, for example, if universities try to ‘go beyond the template forced on them by rankings’ and seek to ‘reaffirm their singularity’ (Grolleau & Meunier, 2024, p. 337)? What tensions arise and operate in this scenario? How might the paradoxical operation of power affect attempts to secure managerial control and how does it influence the dynamics of consent, compliance and resistance? How can critical perspectives on paradox help us unpack the struggles that arise within management, and other organization members, in relation to pursuing a business and/or education orientation or empowerment versus centralization logic? More broadly, what other novel insights can we gain by challenging the positive framing of paradoxes and remaining attuned to their politics?

## **Conclusion**

This article has empirically explored the concurrent exercise of productive and repressive power in a University. We have used these concepts analytically to explore how power is exercised irrespective of the particular regime. By exploring paradox through a political and power-sensitive lens, our analysis of the neoliberal paradox of controlled freedom, and how it manifests as centralized empowerment, extends a focus on the ‘organizational dimensions’ (Cunha et al., 2019, p. 842) of ‘organizational power’ (Berti & Simpson, 2021a, p. 258). Just as there is no outside of power relations, there is no outside of the organizational paradoxes discussed by Clegg, Cunha & Cunha (2002). Berti and Simpson (2021a) argue that ‘organizational pragmatic paradoxes’ are a ‘widespread actuality’ (op cit, p. 256) or ‘common organizational occurrence’ (op cit, p. 257). This implies that paradoxes, whilst pervasive, are

episodic and this is similar to Ashforth's (1991) analysis of Catch 22s but, for us, neoliberalism encompasses paradox that plays out in various forms and so there is no paradox-free space.

Our analysis of productive and repressive power and the neoliberal paradox of controlled freedom helps to elucidate the circumstances in which paradox is widespread. Our approach is distinct from Alvesson and Spicer's (2012) theory of 'functional stupidity' - the 'inability and/or unwillingness to use cognitive and reflective capacities in anything other than narrow and circumspect ways' (op cit, p. 1201) because for us paradox in organizations is imbued with wider inequalities and the paradox of neoliberalism. It cannot therefore be managed through localised 'reflexivity' that questions 'dominant beliefs and expectations' and 'inter-subjective reasoning and dialogue' (op cit, p. 1204). We agree with Berti and Simpson (2021a, p. 267) that since the 1980s, inequality has increased concurrent with the rise of neoliberalism and so in contrast to how Alvesson and Spicer (2012) present functional stupidity, our focus on controlled freedom, centralized empowerment and paradoxes of power is intended as a source of critique and not 'an important resource that organizations should cultivate, maintain and engineer' (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012, p. 1216).

Finally, a discourse of competition, markets, customers, choice, autonomy, freedom and responsibility is often espoused in Universities as a means to produce neoliberal subjects and yet, as our case indicates, senior managers can engage with it in paradoxical ways. Indeed, at Centemp, they repressed choice, autonomy, empowerment and devolved responsibility through centralization and standardization forging the University, its staff and students as 'little boxes'. Profound paradoxes resulted for academics and professional service staff whose freedom was regulated in an irregular way. Moreover, students were ill-served through standardization because it often worked against their needs. Nevertheless, there is hope in paradox because it reflects that power is exercised in flawed and contradictory ways. This

undermines and hinders the exercise of power rendering outcomes uncertain whilst ensuring that the possibilities for resistance remain.

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<sup>i</sup> The literature on Kafka is complex and nuanced. Unfortunately, it is beyond the scope of this article to explore his work in greater depth.

<sup>ii</sup> Although we did not talk to students, our respondents frequently alluded to them in relation to the change programme, and it is their interpretations that we are basing ours upon.

<sup>iii</sup> It is problematic to homogenize university managers. In our case, there was at least one senior manager who was a stern critic of Centemp's change programme. Cassell (2024) has pointed to the dangers of presenting 'negative stereotypes of Deans' and we agree. Nevertheless, we must also explore the role of senior managers involved in neoliberal reforms and our case focuses on a broader range of senior managers than just Deans.

## **Author Biographies**

Sylwia Ciuk is a Reader in Organisation Studies at Oxford Brookes Business School, UK where she also acts as the Deputy Head of the Doctoral Programmes. She is a sociologist and linguist by background. Sylwia carries out culture- and power-sensitive studies of organisational change, especially the translation of practices (e.g. values, leadership) across languages and cultures. She is also interested in language diversity, linguistic inclusion and interlingual translation in multinational organisations. Sylwia's work has been published in a range of journals such as *Human Relations*, *Management Learning*, *British Journal of Management*, *Work, Employment and Society* and the *Journal of Global Mobility*.

Darren McCabe is an independent researcher. He is interested in the cultural conditions of work including power, resistance and subjectivity. He is author of *Power at Work: How Employees Reproduce the Corporate Machine* (Routledge, 2007) and *Changing Change Management: Strategy, Power and Resistance* (Routledge, 2020). He has worked for a number of UK Universities and is Emeritus Professor in Organization Studies affiliated to Lancaster University.