

# Organizational Imperialism And The Dissonance Of Business Schools Teaching Business Ethics In The World Inc.

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**Abstract.** *This work polemically challenges those optimists who, in some way or other, are politically charged to uphold that business schools are salvageable. It presents uncensored arguments that amoral business schools have existed beyond their utility by abetting organizational imperialism. In “speaking out,” this work exposes the truth that many would repulse as it choruses those warnings from the gallant scholars of the past on the impending dissonance of business schools. This work alleges that teaching business ethics in the world incorporated is an enigma of the highest order, and at its core, business schools, enslaved by the politics of organizational imperialism, are now torn between continuing to cast their unreserved loyalty to the imperialists or surrendering to the command of stakeholders to stop producing corporate rogues and reforming the management education dynamically.*

**Keywords:** *Organization, imperialism, business ethics, world incorporated*

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“If we want to create positive societal impact, we must be teachers who care, who act courageously, and who choose to do good” (Sundararajan & Sundararajan, 2024)

This work polemically challenges the statement above. Fifteen years ago, the Dean of the business faculty assigned me to teach the newly installed module of Business Ethics, which I had only passing knowledge of. At that time many universities had just begun frantically incorporating business ethics into their undergraduate and postgraduate management programs. I was designated to teach the module because I had a law degree, a ubiquitous delusion that law graduates and lawyers are great defenders of morality. Since then, I have conducted countless lectures, graded an infinite number of students’ assignments, organized dozens of charitable events, and chaired many conferences relating to business ethics. But fifteen years later today, I reached a full cycle, from the zenith of a passionate teacher to now despairingly “speaking out” in this forum about the wastefulness of my yesteryear’s in teaching this module. Teaching business ethics in the context of an organization imperialism and the ‘world incorporated’ is a waste of time, a self-defeating dilemma, and an academic deception at best. The vacuum of power since the recession of socialism and the weakening of state sovereignty post-industrial revolution is substituted by the ‘world incorporated,’ guided by the political symbiotics of neoliberalism and utilitarianism (Bell, 2016), which we naively entrust to produce collective good. More powerful than governments, organizations harlot our trust, harm society despicably through their lies and acts of greenwashing and devise all sorts of tactics to satisfy their bottomless greed for profit. Their symbiotics of neoliberalism, utilitarianism and soft political command defeat any attempt to meaningfully teach business ethics. This work expresses the despair of a teacher who has dedicated significant time and effort to teaching business ethics within this symbiotic labyrinth. In this work, I will first offer an overview of the notion of organizational imperialism, paying premium attention to its soft politically imperialist features. Second, I illustrate how it has politically neutralized every effort to teach business ethics at business schools. Finally, I challenge the contemporary imperialism orthodox of business schools and demonstrate its impending dissonance. In conclusion, I proposed a fundamental shift that we urgently need to address our current predicament.

A medieval feudal lord would not have the slightest flicker; one day, their survival would depend on sovereign grants derived from taxes, nor their discretionary powers delimited to merely ceremonial duties.

A state would never have envisaged they are powerless to resist globalization and that their colossal military is insignificant against the trade war. Our world has seen an evolution of powers, shifting from the central subjugation of individual and state authority to the rise of the society of organizations (Drucker, 1992). Organizations are now more powerful than ever as they hold the key to innovation, access to rare resources, and the power to destabilize the community. But ‘world organization incorporated’ is more than a physical pluralism of autonomous organizations. It is the unobtrusive manipulation of organizations’ logic and values on the way we think, act, and respond, an “odorless” political ideology—a radicalism that idealizes competition as a mandatory condition for human relations (Monbiot, 2016). “Organization” and “imperialism” pair instinctively. In the earlier centuries, organizations played significant roles in expanding the British Empire by escalating international trade to many continents in Asia. The Chartered East British India Company and their international trades with Malacca, led to the invasion and formation of Malaya, a gem of the former British Empire. In the twenty-first century, organizations transposed to becoming colonizers, tacitly encroaching on society through three distinct trajectories. First, powerful organizations politically infiltrate and colonialize the government and economy. They fund political campaigns, intrude into governmental policies, and scaffold corporatocracy. Second, more fearful than the first, organizations manipulate the mental state of their subjects. Powerful marketing strategies and their God-like cult branding command apostolic consumers and usher a new generation of consumer slavery. Large organizations shrink national sovereignty. The fall of the Iron Curtain and the Cold War never ended through militarism, but by the infiltration of capitalism into the Soviet Union. McDonald’s entry in Moscow symbolizes the end of the Soviet Union, a triumph for the United States of America, and a radical transformation of the former socialist state. Unsanctionable influx of information, news, and propaganda further threatens national security, as nations scramble to sanction TikTok. While history rarely records unopposed imperialism, humanity has warmly welcomed organizational imperialism. The Russians’ disappointment in McDonald’s “de-arching” following the Ukraine invasion hints it all. In the past, monarchs surrendered their sovereignty under the pressure of democracy. The birth of the nation-states saw the rise of powerful governments chartered by jealously defended boundaries. But the spread of information, rapid globalization, and international trade led to the loss of Westphalian sovereignty. Organizations advocate for favorable policies and their infiltration into the very fabric of society renders it almost impossible for both the states and society to untangle. The eulogies of national sovereignty attribute their downfall to the global facades of the World Bank, the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, and other equally powerful organizations. The new imperialists are also immune to moral accusations. Facebook resolved its Cambridge Data Analytic scandal simply by relisting its stocks under its new brand, ‘Meta.’ Just like British Petroleum renaming itself to ‘Beyond Petroleum,’ these corporations elude liability simply by rebranding or them simply “pay off” to dodge moral blame. Organizational imperialism is on a rampage. Bakan (2012) labelled organizations as “sharks,” “exterminators,” a “killing machine,” designed to amass profit at all costs. We have an upraised generation of corporate psychopaths without conscience and obsessed with satisfying their infinite corporate lusts. They know no empathy or remorse, are addicted to bottomless self-desire, are blind to moral obligations, and are oblivious to righteousness. Their amoral disposition means that they account only for the laws of men. It is against this backdrop that academics and scholars are tasked to reverse this calamity. Teachers and the operators of business schools are blamed for having taught capitalism so eloquently that we have become an associate, if not, the perpetrator of this tragedy (see Parker, 2023; Teck, 2023; Giacalone, 2009). The century-old AACSB, the longest-standing, most prestigious, and highly respected specialized accrediting international body, charged that business schools are not fostering values of humanity among students. In 2018, AACSB began its two-year journey to reimagine business accreditation, which culminated in the enthusiastic adoption of the 2020 business accreditation standards aimed at reemphasizing accreditation criteria, paying premium to the positive societal impacts business schools generate. The reformers envisioned the new legitimacy of business schools through creating collective merit by realigning research with public needs (Schlegelmilch, 2024). Those who gallantly charge us with this moral duty are perhaps oblivious that business schools themselves are imbecilically part of imperialism. We are asked to contest the entire political labyrinth of the system. But organization imperialist is formless, odorless, as it commands a world of kamikaze factions,

intoxicated by its allure. There is no simple antidote, and it is not about deploying the best pedagogy or writing the best teaching slides, nor is it about immersing students in countless hours of lectures. Despite AACSB's reforms, we see a steady corrosion of business ethics only to show nothing has changed. I have written approximately 1500 words explaining the notion of organization imperialism and "world incorporated". Adhering to the word count of this journal, I have approximately another 2500 words (I hope it is adequate for me "speaking out"), to explain why teaching business ethics is futile and this is not the case of David and Goliath. Scholars who harbor hope that business schools can reclaim their former glory (Floyd et al., 2013) through a shift in pedagogical emphasis (see Jaganjac et al., 2024) are notoriously naïve. The arguments are complicated, or they wrote it complicated (see Parker & Jary, 1995), but I will present my version bluntly without jargon. At its inception, universities and higher education are the guardians of knowledge and the metaphysical mediators between men and God and to epistemologically align human knowledge and truth that underpins all forms of life (Lanford, 2019). But working in a sacrosanct institution has always eluded me. Instead, what I saw is the new generation of McUniversities pathologically addicted to all sorts of rankings, seduced by inflating figures in publications and research, and reaping profits from their systemic conveyor belt of "manufacturing" graduates. Vice-Chancellors' role and the CEOs' duties are more strategic than academic, as every year they eagerly await the release of the global university rankings to secure their continued employment (Teck, 2023). Monies are spent on supporting research papers that are mostly redundant, archived in those digital libraries, or published in prestigious journals that few will ever read. Despite paying tuition fees, students' interests rank lowest, served with outdated amenities, obsolete libraries, and barely functioning lavatories. Institutions sell their programs through eloquent marketing pitches as each institution contests for their portion of the cake. Competition is cutthroat, and institutions resort to aggressive tactics of giving free tuition and other irresistible freebies to secure enrollment. Educators and others reading this will find this all too familiar, and I suspect this trait is acclimatized across most institutions. They measure everything in monetary terms, and their ranking system ultimately determines the most important performance. We are not surprised to see doctoral candidates passing their defense with ease as they should "graduate on time" (see Taylor, 2024). Student attrition is an academic transgression because we lose profit, as academics are asked to reconsider their grades. Wages are suppressed and the faculty exploited, as they retaliate by leaving final exams unmarked (Walker, Volger & Collins, 2010). ESGs are a facade, solely to boost their rankings and to feign sustainability (Gazi et al., 2024). McUniversity is deplorable, desolates the nation, and threatens national security. The excellence of education has fallen, and this crisis is already gaining traction in Malaysia, where I currently reside. Recently, Dr. Siti Mastura, a member of parliament, and unfortunately, a doctoral graduate from a premier university in Malaysia, gave the most foolishly derogative political speech in Malaysian history (Mok, 2024). She, in one instance, equated Lim Guan Eng (former Chief Minister of Penang), Lim Kit Siang (veteran member of parliament), and Teresa Kok (member of parliament) with the late communist leader Chin Peng. Communism is banned in Malaysia, and in the court proceeding, the court held Dr. Mastura acted with malice and ordered to pay a compensation of RM825,000 in damages to the three plaintiffs. This is not a paper on politics, but it is a stark reminder of how an imperialized education system corrodes the quality of education. How could a PhD graduate utter this blasphemy? The incident questioned the quality of PhD graduates, as the Minister of Higher Education pledged to tighten the selection criteria for doctoral candidates, which I think is already too late. Can institutions produce any ethical business graduates and moral businesspersons when they are the driving force of capitalism. Can we expect honorable graduates from a dark academia? (see Fleming, 2019). There is, I think, no need for jargon and theoretical fuss, as the crisis is plain to see. Instead, writing this in theoretical jargon strips the thrill of perceiving from a layperson's perspective. Watchful institutions should be aware of the steadily declining student enrollment. People are beginning to realize the uselessness of an academic degree, which they think they are better off indulging in the gig economy. Is this just a trend in Malaysia? I doubt so. I assure you too, that organizational imperialism has made deep inroads into the theories of business ethics. Imperialists proselytized that an organization's only duty is to maximize shareholders' profits (Friedman, 1971) and that bluffing is a norm in business, as it is in a poker game (see Carr, 1968). After all, an organization is ranked only by the consequence of their actions, and putting it in simplest terms, an act is ethical if it produces more pleasure than pain for

the majority, a notion readily dished out in business ethics textbooks without reserve and without challenge. I am as baffled as students why organizations deserve this moral break (see Konrad, 1982) and escape condemnation each time they could prove pleasure above pain, as those textbooks we biblically exalt give no clue nor repulse to this moral refuge that shelters organizations' hideous immoral actions (Dierksmeier, 2023). The dominance of organizational imperialism warrants its own ethics ecosystem, distinguished from the ethical norms of the general community. It triggers axioms such as "anything goes" and "business is business," as each time I teach, I am reminded of those morally immune imperialists. Why, then, should we continue to teach business ethics if the imperialists have politicized its principles to merely an "add-on," an "accessory," and the icing on the cake in business courses? Why are imperialist organizations like Nike Inc. unscathed in their sweatshop dispute just because they justify their actions by highlighting the pleasure derived from the exploitation? I had cold sweat each time a student asked this: "If business must act ethically, why has the Malaysian government not banned Lynas Inc.?" Let me give some perspective: Lynas Inc. is an Australian Inc. plant that recycles rare earth in Kuantan (a state renowned for tourism in Malaysia). Lynas is sensational because the opposition leveraged it as the key political agenda in the 14th Malaysia General Election that toppled Barisan Nasional (BN), the longest-ruling government in Malaysian history. Using the slogan "Bersih" (meaning clean), the protestors campaigned aggressively against Najib's government. It escalated into weeks of chaos, bordering on a riot, with the authorities injuring many with tear gas and incarcerating them. The protest was successful, leading to the overthrow of the previous government. But once the new government came to power, a different story emerged. Not only did they not revoke Lynas's license to operate, they extended it. Peruse the response below: I think the government under the leadership of Prime Minister Anwar (Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim) truly understands the *importance of rare earth in the 21st century....* in electric vehicles, wind turbines and new energy fuels...There is *opportunity* in Malaysia to *develop upstream resources* and also *towards* developing downstream capabilities...this government is very focused on doing both because it will contribute to the economic wellbeing of all Malaysians and Lynas is a key part of that [Emphasis added] (New Straits Times, 2024). Anyone reading is likely to share my anguish. Utilitarianism dominates the world organization, and it alone determines what is ethical and what is not. When every organization and even government makes decisions based on balancing pain and pleasure, business ethics become "boneless". We achieve nothing by teaching business ethics, knowing very well they are merely silhouettes of organizational imperialism. Educators very well know the eloquent tales presented in textbooks are a far cry from the 'dog-eat-dog' world in business reality. Companies employ and reward graduates for the skills like critical thinking, profit maximization, and problem solving they acquired in school, but employers do not hire someone based on their ethical prudence, nor do they employ one to counsel them on morality. In actuality, the few moral principles they were taught in school swiftly vanished under the capitalist system, driven by the urge to maximize profits, stay ahead of competition, and devise ruthless tactics to outwit their competitors. Eventually, business graduates must accomplish their corporate objectives and be rewarded according to the profit they make for the organization rather than how honorably they can counsel their superiors on moral principles. No wonder "ex-convicts and MBA grads have similar ethical standards" (Steams & Borna, 1998). Dierksmeier (2024) ornately blamed the ambiguity in textbooks and their tales of ethics for misleading students to imagine the world of ethics as the "best case scenario," which in fact is a "nightmare on elm street." I do not agree. It is not the inadequacies of business ethics textbooks, but the extremely overarching capitalism taught in every other module of a management program that drowns the sacrosanct of the business ethics module. After all, human resource management is not about employee welfare but how to leverage them strategically. Operations management is ultimately on reducing costs. Marketing is marginally connected to conveying a product's value, but manipulating consumer behavior (see Parker, 2018). I know all too well business ethics is an insignificant module and it really means nothing to teach ethics amidst the amorality of other modules. The small little corner of business ethics is impotent to make any real reforms!. I, and perhaps other teachers of business ethics, are accountable for endorsing the contemporary orthodoxy of business schools, their alter ego of corporate running dogs, and solidify their role as the "Devil's Advocate" by incessantly teaching business ethics to students in a condition we know does not permit it to thrive. But business schools joined the bandwagon of competing in all sorts of rankings and believing that the quality

of a business school can be well represented numerically—a self-defeating fallacy, a treason to the moral DNA of business schools (see Mourkogiannis, 2014). Business schools will remain “dysfunctional” (see Colombo, 2023) and morally crippled if they choose to defend their status quo. However, business schools have chosen to adopt a bipolar approach, walking on both worlds. They persist in offering their courses in their current form, employ comparable, if not more aggressive, marketing strategies, and strive to achieve the highest rankings while maintaining the healthiest EBIDTA possible. But the increasing prominence of ESG and SDG on a global scale has displaced amoral business schools into a perilous situation, and as they navigate the unfamiliar terrain of moral demands, business schools inevitably implement sporadic ethical practices they had little prior knowledge of. They implement the most archaic forms of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), confusing ESG with the essence of morality. Institutions chant praises when they planted 50 seeds of trees, or when they harvested a few gallons of rainwater, or when they gave occasional free meals to orphans, or as they organized a press release boasting of the small little corner dedicated to collecting recyclable materials. Yet they found a new rat race to compete on producing the most eloquent ESG report and pride themselves on having done some good for the community, which they conveniently coined as “university social responsibility” (Vasilescu et al., 2010). But business schools remain solidly imperialist, spreading turbo capitalism like wildfire. Module contents are unabridged as institutions continuously oil their operations to ensure they operate at maximum efficiency. I stand in disbelief that an organization of intellectual dexterity would seek a childish resort, indicating just how grossly they misjudged their impending demise and how deeply the imperialism orthodox is fixated in business schools. I question, what good is new wine in old wineskin?

I challenge the opening remark of this paper, derived from an article piece gallantly published on the AACSB website. The authors charged that the faculty could spawn a new generation of ethical leaders if they acted responsibly and brought valuable learning experiences into classrooms. This, in turn, they claim, snowballs into community and cultural happiness and a fruitful nation. Readers should decide for themselves if this envisioning is plausible in the current controversy and/or conspiracy that business schools are embroiled in. This work never intends to comfort readers with palliative remarks, as I believe there is an intense urgency for anyone in power to implement real change. I have not minced my words, nor do I believe I ought to in a “speaking out” platform. Any reader would expect an author at the conclusion to wield their magic and offer brilliant suggestions and be like a knight in shining armor to save the day. You will be dismayed that I, nor anyone else, have any tricks up our sleeves to suggest, let alone resolve the mess we are in now. Business schools are beyond reform, and simply rearranging their syllabus, conducting CSR projects, or donating large sums of money to charity will not make any difference. But I too cannot leave this section vacant, as readers will be equally frustrated. During the Covid-19 pandemic, we witnessed the fullest distortion of neoliberalism, with imperialists praying for government aid (Teck et al. 2022). The world condemns and witnesses in horror how paternalism destroys freedom as China enforces military lockdowns and obsessive isolation. But the raging virus transforms even the most ardent democrats and imperialists into autocrats, imposing their own liberty-defying lockdowns. No previous disasters in history have so fundamentally undermined democracy and defied its capitalist objectives. A week after China's shutdown, the French authorities prohibited all social events and limited public movements. Other countries follow suit. Italy conducts its own lockdowns, and India implements the greatest sanction in history, preventing its 1.3 billion residents from leaving their homes. At the peak of the epidemic, New Zealand reimposes statewide lockdown for a single Delta infection. In a pandemic of this magnitude, we see a rapid decline in neoliberalism and the return of infantilizing paternalism (Marneffe, 2006). In short, the pandemic is capable of “resetting” organizational imperialism, and reinstating state sovereignty (Schwab, 2020). Covid-19 is not the first, nor will it be the last. With “Disease X” now lingering at the brim of disaster (see Tahir et al., 2021), I am thrilled to see how organizational imperialism and the unchallenged orthodox of business schools that support them would survive another onslaught of apocalypse as organizations find their strategies useless, their financial strength weakening, and as the world comes to a standstill, they have little choice but to abandon their pride and seek the refuge of the state once again. The world is healing itself, and, in the process, they are purging those culprits that ushered this desolation. There is an expiry for everything, from the food we eat to the water we drink, the clothes we wear, and our very own lives, which we so treasure. Likewise,

organizational imperialism and those institutions that flank their conquest will soon expire as the utilitarian pleasure they offer dwindles. The onslaught of mass-produced corporate swindlers and Hitlerian imperialism is already causing frustration and anger among stakeholders who are up in arms to retaliate. I have much to lose and little to gain from writing this piece. My employers may mistake me as a mutinous employee, my colleagues may view me as an outcast, and others may criticize me for wishing for another great reset. "Speaking out" provocatively is seductive, but consequences follow. Some will find my work intriguing, but others will be utterly offended. But, unlike Dr. Mastura, I am not speaking with malice but out of an honest concern for the prospect of humanity, the moral actualization of business schools, and the urgent necessity in taming the "world incorporated." I am not malicious because I am writing as an insider, someone who is victimized by this systemic exploitation.

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