



## Kittens are Evil II: little heresies in public policy

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*"The more efficient you are at doing the wrong thing, the wronger you become" -  
 Russell Ackoff*

The Kittens are Evil books were developed out of a series of seminars at Newcastle University, which were dubbed 'Little Heresies', because each of the speakers challenged aspects of conventional thinking about the design, management, and delivery of public services. Listening to many of the seminars, it was always striking how each of the 'heretics' were explaining and evidencing problems with public management that the audience *knew* to be true, because anyone who worked in public services had lived experience of the negative outcomes created by standardisation, or targets, or silo-based services. Perhaps more puzzling was trying to understand what kept in place a paradigm that was clearly sub-optimal – often delivering poorer services, higher costs, and worse outcomes.

This second instalment of the *Kittens* series arrived in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic and the heresies contained within it were written at a time when lockdowns were still in the realm of dystopian fiction, and the Chief Medical Officer wasn't yet a household name. In the foreword to this edition, Anton Hemerijck cites the 2007/8 financial crisis as an example of a time when the unthinkable suddenly became necessity, and the pandemic followed a similar dynamic. Policies once outside the realm of imagination – legally-mandated closing of swathes of the economy, millions of people placed on state-funded furlough – became a practical reality almost overnight. The editors of this volume of *Kittens* saw hope that any return to 'normal' after the pandemic would be met with people making demands for improved conditions '... for themselves, their families, their communities, and society as a whole'. Here in 2022, it's far from clear that the pandemic will be the catalyst for the sort of sweeping reforms that the *heretics* seek. While crisis can precipitate the collapse of old orthodoxies, such change is never guaranteed to be benign or socially beneficial.

In her excellent review of the original *Kittens are Evil*, Emily St Denny noted that 'the defining property of a dominant orthodoxy is its mundane invisibility'. The 'dominant orthodoxy' in this case was New Public Management (NPM) and its application to public services in the UK and elsewhere. The essays in this new volume, no less heretical than the original, are more diverse in the orthodoxies they target. While the essays from Mark Adam Smith (on standardisation), Catherine Hobbs (on performance management), and the late Richard Davis (on measurement) are all logical sequels to the original book, there are new areas of interest. Stephen Lock proclaims the death of the organisation as we know it, while Vincent Richardson and Alan Peyton propose a state monopoly on money creation as a means to ensure economic stability.

*Kittens are Evil II* retains the format that made the first edition so accessible – eight short heresies, all written with a clarity that enables a general reader to understand them, but each delivered with a polemical style that feels like the spiritual descendant of the 18<sup>th</sup> century pamphleteers.

In the heresy I most recognise from my own work, Mark Adam Smith takes on the consequences of standardisation as '... the Japanese Knotweed of logics. It is hard to dislodge, spreads quickly, and is everywhere'. For Smith, in trying to exert control over public services, we have constrained their ability to respond readily and appropriately to the variety of circumstances that service users represent. This is a paradigm that is reinforced by the move towards digital public services, which by definition require codification of customer journeys. It is what I've previously dubbed 'Taylorism with Wi-Fi' - managers, armed with digital productivity tools, monitoring that the 'correct' processes are followed, rather than the best outcomes achieved for the public.

Catherine Needham's heresy, 'Death of the Professional: The future is generic' asks the reader to rethink our concept of public service roles and skillsets, with a new focus on generic skills – engagement, analysis, empathy – partially supplanting the more technical proficiencies required in the past. As Needham notes, to follow this path we would also need to think again about the scale of public services, which would be another heresy to tackle in itself. This last point in

Needham's heresy exemplifies for me the scale of the challenge; I can readily imagine many or most of the proposals being adopted in any number of local areas, but I struggle with how they would work their way through the centralisation of UK government and become a new orthodoxy in themselves. In his heresy, Peter Wright explains that particular difficulty, describing how even proposals with an excellent evidence base often fail to influence government policy.

In perhaps the most radical of the offerings in this edition, Vincent Richardson and Alan Peyton explain how, prior to 2007, 97% of the money in the UK economy was created by banks and that this model leads to the creation of property/stock market bubbles, and boom-bust cycles in the wider economy. This essay reminded me of the moment I learned about money creation as an A-Level economics student. Tellingly, we were taught about it as though it was completely uncontroversial and with no discussion of any alternative model. Here, Richardson and Peyton propose an alternative (a sovereign or positive money model) and cite a range of noted economists and policymakers who support this radical change. Of all the heresies suggested in either of the two books, this is arguably the one that would have the most revolutionary impact, which probably also means that it is the least likely to actually happen.

Like its predecessor, the essays in this edition of Kittens are well-written, thought-provoking, and profoundly relevant to the challenges facing public services today. Perhaps my only criticism of the Kittens series is that the format – short, punchy essays, which is undoubtedly a strength – also precludes any detailed discussion of the vital question of 'how?'. Dominant orthodoxies are almost definitionally resistant to radical change, and enjoy widespread, if often unspoken, support among the powerful. If there were already an executable roadmap to the changes outlined in this book, the old orthodoxies would already be gone and the whole thesis of the series would be redundant. Perhaps then, the act of writing (and reading) the heresies *is* an actionable first step. If 'mundane invisibility' is part of what helps orthodoxies endure, then by identifying and critiquing them, we're following the advice of Donella Meadows, who said that to make radical change you need to 'keep pointing at the anomalies and failures in the old paradigm ... loudly and with assurance from the new one'. The authors and editors of Kittens are Evil II have certainly done so and for that they deserve our gratitude.

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