



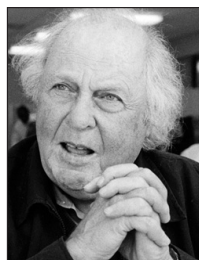
POLITICAL ECONOMY OF ACADEMIA

Where are current economic and cultural trends in higher learning taking us? How successfully have we been responding to what is often referred to as the "corporatization" of higher education? Why have anthropologists—in a field known for its introspection—not paid more attention to the dramatic political-economic transformations taking place in the universities in which we work? How will these trends affect future scholarship, fieldwork, and advocacy? These are questions AN, in collaboration with the Society for the Anthropology of Work, asked readers. A selection of responses follow in this commentary series guest edited by Angela Jancius.

The Conflicts of the Faculty

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The pursuit of disinterested knowledge by self-interested people: as a one-line review of the US research university, the formula will admit of some exceptions, but



Marshall Sahlins Photo courtesy Alan Thomas

to paraphrase Thorstein Veblen, its near-perfection should not be held against it. Veblen's *Higher Learning in America* (1957[1918]) remains the classic description of the perverse competition between universities acting like business concerns.

Capitalist Academics in America

Veblen was a strong partisan of the Germanic-Romantic ideal of the research university. In *Higher Learning*, he fired off the first salvo of its still-going but losing battle with the US spirit of capitalism. The book essentially transposed Veblen's well-honed opposition between matter-of-fact workmanship and predatory business to the differences within the academy between disinterested scholarship and the businesslike animus of the governing boards and their appointed university presidents.

The university, he said, "is the one great institution of modern times that works to no ulterior end and is controlled by no consideration of expediency beyond its own work." The position was radically antifunctionalist as well as antiutilitarian, holding that the university should serve no outside purpose lest it do disservice to itself. As an institution in itself and for itself, it also had to be by itself, inasmuch as any external finality would undermine the self-determination

of goals, methods, rhythms and other epistemological necessities by which knowledge is best acquired and imparted. But where the professoriate is in principle committed to the search for truth, the university directorate serves its own vanity by engaging the institution in a competitive struggle for notoriety with a view toward engrossing the traffic in merchantable knowledge at the expense of other universities.

To put the issues in Foucauldian terms, Veblen was speaking of conflicting regimes of truth—and of disciplinarity, too, in the double sense of academic subjects and controlling the inmates. Referring often to scholarly work as "the cult of idle curiosity," he intended a contrast not only to "practical utility" but to the whole bureaucratic apparatus of departments, faculty ranks, coursework scheduling, grades and credits that had lately been introduced into the academy on the mechanical model of commercial industry and with the analogous purpose of turning out a large and well-regarded product.

Here was an accounting system that treated all kinds of knowledge as so many abstract and equivalent units of academic bullion, the weight and value of each further diminished by the university's need to make a showing of the fullest possible stock on hand in the way of courses and electives—at least as much as the other department stores and often more than could be accommodated by the expertise of the faculty. Still, the bureaucratic order facilitated the surveillance of large numbers of youthful undergraduates even as it provided the administration with a ready statistical means of vaunting the university's output.

Granted, Veblen exaggerated, but in part because he was more prophetic than actual.

Pecuniary Rationality at Chicago

It was left to Robert Maynard Hutchins—in the homage he paid

to Veblen by naming his own critique *Higher Learning in America* (1995[1938])—to argue that money was the root of all academic evil. Of course universities need money, he said, but they ought to have an academic policy first and then try to finance it, rather than let finances determine their academic policy.

Hutchins was president of the University of Chicago when he wrote his sequel to Veblen, who for his part was attacking the businesslike policies of the university's first president, William Rainey Harper. And it was under the presidency of Hugo Sonnenschein in the 1990s that the university made the most dramatic moves toward academic capitalism.

COMMENTARY

An economist by trade, President Sonnenschein tirelessly belabored the faculty with facts, figures and diagrams showing that by comparison with so-called "peer institutions"—Harvard, Yale, Stanford, Princeton and Columbia—Chicago had the greatest number of liberal arts faculty, the fewest undergraduates, the most graduates (hence the highest faculty to student and graduate to undergraduate ratios), etc. All of these are advantages in terms of research and learning, of course, but precisely scholarly virtues were what was wrong with us. What was wrong was the higher costs of our virtues and their lower rates of return than the more rational financial strategies of competing firms.

Once singularly figured in dollar signs, the university was reconfigured accordingly. The failings of our virtues were compensated by an increase in undergraduate enrollments and a decrease in graduate fellowships. Then there was the growth of the academic demimonde of part-time lecturers, "temp" instructors in language courses, TAs and graduate students doing stand-alone courses. Generally

low paid and without supplementary benefits, this adjunct faculty has become noticeable enough at Chicago in recent years, although not as much as in the country at large in which some 70 percent of all faculty are adjuncts.

These were prosperous years, when the university's endowment increased from about one billion to over three billion dollars. But the administration lowered the annual payout rate from the endowment, apparently more than once, reducing it to an abnormally low percentage—which meant that, all things taken together, instead of using the endowment to grow the university, the university was being abused to grow the endowment. Logically and categorically, the university powers-that-be considered the endowment as a "capital fund"—the increase of which would be the principal goal of a capitalist corporation.

The administration even contracted for a Taylorite efficiency study by Peat-Marwick & Co., one of the conclusions being that the "middle managers," meaning the academic deans, were not sufficiently devoted to the profitability of their units. Above all, however, the size of the endowment relative to that of other universities—forget the operating budget—became a fetishized obsession of the administration, and our place in the national endowment standings was as closely watched and continuously reported as Ohio State University's or University of Michigan's rank in the national football polls.

Serving Society's Interests

In relation to the longtime drift toward academic capitalism at Chicago and elsewhere, the Veblenian ideal of a university for itself has seemed utopian even to sympathetic commentators and simply crackpot to the large contingent of educational realists. All the same, the idealist sentiments of the ivory tower lingering in the professoriate have proved to be a more realistic

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defense of the institution's independence than any of the functionalist invocations of service to the society at large—which stands to reason, given the enterprising nature of that society.

The people who complain about the politicization of the university by the professors in the late 20th century forget that in the first place it was the university that politicized the professors. In the period 1940–90, marked by hot and cold wars, substantial government funding committed higher learning to the nation-state as constituted: that was the “social” it largely served, and the US military and political interests were the “good.” The politics of the Cold War having been insinuated into nearly every cranny of the academy and practically every subject matter, Foucault, who indeed saw power in everything, was as an idea whose time had come.

For all its pedagogical politics, the Cold War gave impetus as well to the advancing academic capitalism insofar as large government subsidies were acquired through the enterprising grantsmanship of individual faculty, even as ideologically the Cold War was all about the defense of free enterprise. As if by an invisible hand, the university's promotion of private gain, including its own participation in it, became its service to the public good.

Nothing so much sealed the partnership with corporate business as the congressional passage of the Bayh-Dole Act of 1980 allowing universities to patent and license the saleable products of publicly funded research—which the public could then pay for again when the prod-

ucts reached the market. The act set off a boom in intellectual property rights (IPRs) whose profits are currently being divvied up between the lucky institutions, entrepreneurial faculty researchers, and the private corporations with whom the universities and professors enter into business arrangements.

We who would protest against the university's capitalization of IPRs are just as protective of our own scholarly ideas. We have our own IPRs, IPRs in concepts, or perhaps just the clever names we invent for matters of common knowledge. Let the plagiarist beware. Indeed let anyone beware who does not pay a sufficient royalty in abject citation of our brilliant and original contributions to the subject about which they are now presuming to say something of their own.

The Politics of the Disciplines

We are into the politics of the disciplines: specifically, the competitive dynamics that Gregory Bateson called schismogenesis, of which he distinguished symmetrical and complementary forms. As Bateson observed in *Naven* (1958), the symmetrical form is like an arms race in which each side attempts to top the other by doing more of the same—“anything you can do I can do better.” Thus, the department store mentality discussed by Veblen: the idea that the university should strive to have the fullest possible stock of academic goods, the effects being the accumulation of disciplines in the institution and of subspecialties in the disciplines.

Complementary schismogenesis is a Hegelian process of competition by negation: developing an antithetical form of the other, which difference itself is endowed with value. So in academia, closely related disciplines tend to develop as negotiations

of one another. If sociology takes “society” as its intellectual object, anthropology has “culture”; if their methods are quantitative, ours are qualitative; if they study “us,” we study the other peoples; etc. From this follows what might be called Veblen's Law of Interdisciplinary Relations: to the extent disciplines overlap in subject matter, they are unlikely to cooperate.

Taken to extremes, the differentiations theorized by Bateson achieve distinctive forms. Beyond the negation of the other, complementary schismogenesis at the limit becomes a claim to uniqueness against all and any others: the staking-out of an uncontested niche. As impelled by a careerist spirit, such is the progressive tendency toward segmentation—or perhaps better said, fragmentation—within the disciplines. A study by Clark and Neave in the early 1990s reported that mathematics had over 1,000 journals covering 62 major topics and 4,500 subtopics.

One effect of such extreme specialization may be early “burn out,” inasmuch as the problems of the narrow subfield are soon exhausted. Another career response, which I am exemplifying at the moment, is to leap-frog to dilettantish speculation in an altogether foreign field about which your disciplinary colleagues probably know even less than you do.

The good news is that a lot of interdisciplinarity is happening by diffusion, without the necessity of institutionalizing it in academic entities. Besides globalization and Foucault, think of all the intellectual forebears, concepts, topics, methods and theories du jour that are now widely circulating through the humanities, the social sciences and beyond: postmodernism, antipositivism, identity, subjectivity, symbolic capital, culture, ethnography, Walter Benjamin,

critical theory, subaltern, Marx, Marxism, neo-Darwinism, feminism, structuralism, poststructuralism, constructionism, deconstructionism, etc., etc. These diffused traits are interestingly indigenized and hybridized by their encompassment in different disciplinary traditions. What effectively mediates this process is *intradisciplinary* competition. Because the object is to differentiate oneself from one's immediate colleagues by going outside the disciplinary box, a premium is put on imports at once novel and in vogue, which also implies that transdisciplinary fashions are likely to be short lived.

The bad news is that the competitive xenophilia risks hollowing out the disciplines themselves, while filling the institutional spaces between them with a clutter of centers, institutes, committees and programs that are in effect only pseudodisciplines. Taken together with utilitarian and political pressures on the disciplines, the external unions driven by their internal divisions are entangling the research universities in a Byzantine web of interstitial academic entities.

Although some good might come from this institutional involution, surely all that clutters is not gold. The university is in need of reform, if not revolution. It will not come from boards of trustees and captains of erudition whose main qualifications and functions consist of raising money, for which purpose they are prepared to treat the intellectual organization of the university as the pecuniary means of a business enterprise. ■

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Corporatization and Phantom Innovation in University Marketing Strategies

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As a “middle-level manager” (an associate dean in arts and sciences) at a large state university, I want to comment on some implications of the market-

ing of degrees “more as a ticket toward higher earnings, than as a pathway toward intellectual development,” in the words of the AN Call for Papers for this series.

First, this is a feature of contemporary life at elite as well as nonelite institutions. But it may

perhaps be nostalgic to consider this a *new* feature of university life. In US society, higher education has always had multiple, often contradictory goals. The intellectual development of students was never more than one among other, equally important components of the

institutional “mission,” with career mobility and social development being the two most obvious others. Moreover, anthropologists should understand the tension between intellectual and career goals as a rather obvious transformation of a deep cultural dichotomy, that



Richard Handler

between the ideal and the practical, or the cultural and the economic. Corporatization may be particularly virulent at the present moment, but

it is hardly a new state of affairs.

Second, it's not clear to me that all institutional "stakeholders" want to hear current administrative discourses that stress the marketability of educational credentials. In my work both as an administrator and as an undergraduate advisor, I'm continually surprised by the many parents and students I meet who *don't* want to evaluate educational choices in terms of market outcomes. This may be truer of elite stakeholders than of those from nonelite backgrounds. And it may be the case that private institutions have more room to maneuver around this issue than do state-supported ones, which must respond to legislators concerned with local labor markets. Still, in my opinion, institutions have been too quick to resort to the language of the market to justify their intellectual work. And we haven't done enough to explain to the public the ways in which

innovation is built into university teaching and learning.

This brings me, finally, to the issue of "phantom innovation." Top administrators believe they must create innovative programs to garner financial support from alumni, donors, tuition-paying parents, charitable foundations and grant agencies. Here, I think, the current version of corporatization manifests itself with a vengeance. The corporate world does indeed trade in a discourse of innovation, and institutions of higher education are coming to depend increasingly on corporate money. (This is especially true in the case of public institutions, in which declining state support has triggered fundraising campaigns on a scale, and imbued with a sense of urgency, unknown two decades ago.)

The cruel irony, however, is that the everyday processes of innovation (in teaching, learning, writing and research) at the heart of our institutions are rendered invisible in the business of pitching innovation in an apparently corporatized world. At my institution, for example, we suffer from a worsening student-faculty ratio. Yet, we are told by "central development" (the chief fundraisers) that raising money for what we already do isn't productive.

Instead, top administrators dream up "innovative programs" aimed

at students, parents and donors, pandering to their job-market anxieties and stoking their fantasies about "community" as the heart of the educational experience. What we get, then, at one end of the spectrum are special undergraduate "experiences," like seminars for younger students ("your child will be taught in a small-class setting by a world-famous professor"), undergraduate research and a plethora of study-abroad programs; and, at the other end of the spectrum, new degree programs, like five-year programs in which students earn both a bachelor's degree in the liberal arts and a professional master's degree.

COMMENTARY

Sometimes good programs emerge from such top-down attention to innovation. But more often than not, what results is phantom, or second-order, innovation. Remember, the intellectually useful innovation that occurs routinely in our institutions does not count as innovation. The second-order packaging of our ongoing work in ways that seem new is the coin of the fundraising realm. And often these second-order programs make little sense to faculty, who can sometimes be enticed with research funds, course releases or

overload pay to join in the experiment, but who rarely see them as central to their work. Moreover, broad faculty discussion is rarely solicited in the development of such programs, and even rarer are serious conversations about their *intellectual* (as opposed to fundraising) potential.

Such second-order programs would be unnecessary if we had enough faculty and classroom resources in the first place. We would not then need special seminars or brightly advertised undergraduate research programs, because good teaching, mentoring, learning and researching would be able to occur, routinely, and at a humane scale. One of the intensely frustrating things about middle-level managerial work in institutions of higher learning is that we spend far too much time responding to upper administrators' fantasies about innovation, time that would be much better spent teaching students and helping faculty create intellectual innovation organically, from the bottom up. ☐

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Effective and Efficient

Productivity, Industrial Discipline and Higher Education

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US institutions of higher learning are a formidable sector of the economy, valued in the billions of dollars and cited routinely as a key component of US economic competitiveness (eg, the World Economic Forum's *Global Competitiveness Report*). It is therefore unsurprising



Ben Passmore

that "business" practices seem to be encroaching on much of the

academy's activity.

This is not a new issue. Thorstein Veblen viewed the advent of business practices and organizational styles as a serious threat to higher education, going so far as to compare in *Higher Learning in America* (1918) the assignment of credits and grade levels to the systems used to administer prisons. The influence of business on academia returned as a major debate in the 1950s, and has continued since that time, more or less uninterrupted.

Hence, the issue isn't whether corporate practices within the academy are new but, rather, what the current forces are that influence the shape of these practices today.

Given that the "market" has become philosophically understood as the only effective con-

trolling factor in how goods and services are distributed, there has been a resulting general reduction and privatization of public services such as education. Policymakers argue that education is a private benefit and therefore high tuition costs are more than made up in lifetime earnings. Students are "investing" in their futures and the individual should bear the cost. Most features of higher education have been insulated from the worst extremities of this trend by arguing that our mission is economic and community development, a point that has resonance with corporate and government interests.

However, the logic of the market as the driver of efficiency remains and there has been inexorable pressure to involve "marketlike" devices in university operations and approaches. This involves the review of all processes with goals which might include privatizing or outsourcing, establishing

detailed routinized accountability systems, or adopting specific strategies from other organizations (eg, hospital systems). This has led to a broad pattern of rationalization of all institutional processes—from food service to academic program review—to optimize productivity.

COMMENTARY

For example, beginning in 2003, the University System of Maryland's Board of Regents formed an Effectiveness and Efficiency (E&E) workgroup. Its explicit goals were to "optimize the use of system resources" and "to change the way the system does business so it can deal effectively with its fiscal, enrollment demand, and personnel challenges." As part of the E&E work, a set of academic initiatives were developed which have

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