

Beyond the Swindle of the Corporate University: Higher Education in the Service of Democracy

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Thinking is not the intellectual reproduction of what already exists anyway. As long as it doesn't break off, thinking has a secure hold on possibility. Its insatiable aspect, its aversion to being quickly and easily satisfied, refuses the foolish wisdom of resignation. The utopian moment in thinking is stronger the less it ... objectifies itself into a utopia and hence sabotages its realization. Open thinking points beyond itself. -Theodor W. Adorno

In spite of being discredited by the economic recession of 2008, neoliberalism, or market fundamentalism as it is called in some quarters, has once again returned with a vengeance. The Gilded Age has come back with big profits for the rich and increasing impoverishment and misery for the middle and working class. Political illiteracy has cornered the market on populist rage, providing a political bonus for those who are responsible for massive levels of inequality, poverty, and sundry other hardships. As social protections are dismantled, public servants are denigrated and public goods such as schools, bridges, health care services and public transportation deteriorate, the Obama administration unapologetically embraces the values of economic Darwinism and rewards its chief beneficiaries: mega banks and big business. Neoliberalism – reinvigorated by the passing of tax cuts for the ultra rich, the right-wing Republican Party taking over of the House of Representatives and an ongoing successful attack on the welfare state – proceeds, once again, in zombie-like fashion to impose its values, social relations and forms of social death upon all aspects of civic life.[\(1\)](#)

With its relentless attempts to normalize the irrational belief in the ability of markets to solve all social problems, neoliberal market fundamentalism puts in place policies designed to dismantle the few remaining vestiges of the social state and vital public services. More profoundly, it has weakened if not nearly destroyed those institutions that enable the production of a formative culture in which individuals learn to think critically, imagine other ways of being and doing and connect their personal troubles with public concerns. Matters of justice, ethics and equality have once again been exiled to the margins of politics. Never has this assault on the democratic polity been more obvious, if not more dangerous, than at the current moment when a battle is being waged under the rubric of neoliberal austerity measures on the autonomy of academic labor, the classroom as a site of critical pedagogy, the rights of students to high quality education, the democratic vitality of the university as a public sphere and the role played by the liberal arts and humanities in fostering an educational culture that is about the practice of freedom and mutual empowerment.[\(2\)](#)

Memories of the university as a citadel of democratic learning have been replaced by a university eager to define itself largely in economic terms. As the center of gravity shifts away from the humanities and the notion of the university as a public good, university

presidents ignore public values while refusing to address major social issues and problems.(3) Instead, such administrators now display corporate affiliations like a badge of honor, sit on corporate boards and pull in huge salaries. A survey conducted by The Chronicle of Higher Education reported that “19 out of 40 presidents from the top 40 research universities sat on at least one company board.”(4) Rather than treated as a social investment in the future, students are now viewed by university administrators as a major source of revenue for banks and other financial institutions that provide funds for them to meet escalating tuition payments. For older generations, higher education opened up opportunities for self-definition as well as pursuing a career in the field of one’s choosing. It was relatively cheap, rigorous and accessible, even to many working-class youth. But as recent events in both the United States and Britain make clear, this is no longer the case. Instead of embodying the hope of a better life and future, higher education has become prohibitively expensive and exclusionary, now offering primarily a credential and, for most students, a lifetime of debt payments. Preparing the best and the brightest has given way to preparing what might be called Generation Debt.(5)

What is new about the current threat to higher education and the humanities in particular is the increasing pace of the corporatization and militarization of the university, the squelching of academic freedom, the rise of an ever increasing contingent of part-time faculty and the view that students are basically consumers and faculty providers of a salable commodity such as a credential or a set of workplace skills. More strikingly still is the slow death of the university as a center of critique, vital source of civic education and crucial public good. Or, to put it more specifically, the consequence of such dramatic transformations has resulted in the near death of the university as a democratic public sphere. Many faculty are now demoralized as they increasingly lose their rights and power. Moreover, a weak faculty translates into one governed by fear rather than by shared responsibilities, and one that is susceptible to labor-bashing tactics such as increased workloads, the casualization of labor and the growing suppression of dissent. Demoralization often translates less into moral outrage than into cynicism, accommodation and a retreat into a sterile form of professionalism. What is also new is that faculty now find themselves staring into an abyss, either unwilling to address the current attacks on the university or befuddled over how the language of specialization and professionalization has cut them off from not only connecting their work to larger civic issues and social problems, but also developing any meaningful relationships to a larger democratic polity.

As faculty no longer feel compelled to address important political issues and social problems, they are less inclined to communicate with a larger public, uphold public values, or engage in a type of scholarship that is available to a broader audience.(6) Beholden to corporate interests, career building and the insular discourses that accompany specialized scholarship, too many academics have become overly comfortable with the corporatization of the university and the new regimes of neoliberal governance. Chasing after grants, promotions and conventional research outlets, many academics have retreated from larger public debates and refused to address urgent social problems. Assuming the role of the disinterested academic or the clever faculty star on the make, these so-called academic entrepreneurs simply reinforce the public’s perception that they have become largely irrelevant. Incapable, if not unwilling, to defend the university as a democratic public sphere and a crucial site for learning how to think critically and act with civic courage, many academics have disappeared into a disciplinary apparatus that views the university not as a place to think, but as a place to prepare students to be competitive in the global marketplace.

This is particularly disturbing given the unapologetic turn that higher education has taken in its willingness to mimic corporate culture and ingratiate itself to the national security state.⁽⁷⁾ Universities now face a growing set of challenges arising from budget cuts, diminishing quality, the downsizing of faculty, the militarization of research and the revamping of the curriculum to fit the interests of the market. In the United States, many of the problems in higher education can be linked to low funding, the domination of universities by market mechanisms, the rise of for-profit colleges, the intrusion of the national security state and the lack of faculty self-governance, all of which not only contradict the culture and democratic value of higher education, but also makes a mockery of the very meaning and mission of the university as a place both to think and to provide the formative culture and agents that make a democracy possible. Universities and colleges have been largely abandoned as democratic public spheres dedicated to providing a public service, expanding upon humankind's great intellectual and cultural achievements and educating future generations to be able to confront the challenges of a global democracy. As the humanities and liberal arts are downsized, privatized and commodified, higher education finds itself caught in the paradox of claiming to invest in the future of young people, while offering them few intellectual, civic and moral supports.

If the commercialization, commodification and militarization of the university continues unabated, higher education will become yet another one of a number of institutions incapable of fostering critical inquiry, public debate, human acts of justice and common deliberation. Such democratic public spheres are especially important to defend at a time when any space that produces "critical thinkers capable of putting existing institutions into question" is under siege by powerful economic and political interests.⁽⁸⁾

Higher education has a responsibility not only to search for the truth regardless of where it may lead, but also to educate students to make authority and power politically and morally accountable. Though questions regarding whether the university should serve strictly public rather than private interests no longer carry the weight of forceful criticism as they did in the past, such questions are still crucial in addressing the purpose of higher education and what it might mean to imagine the university's full participation in public life as the protector and promoter of democratic values.

What needs to be understood is that higher education may be one of the few public spheres left where knowledge, values and learning offer a glimpse of the promise of education for nurturing public values, critical hope and a substantive democracy. It may be the case that everyday life is increasingly organized around market principles; but confusing a market-determined society with democracy hollows out the legacy of higher education, whose deepest roots are moral, not commercial. This is a particularly important insight in a society where not only the free circulation of ideas is being replaced by ideas managed by the dominant media, but critical ideas are increasingly viewed or dismissed as banal, if not reactionary. As Frank Rich has pointed out, the war against literacy and informed judgment is made abundantly clear in the populist rage sweeping across the country, a massive collective anger that "is aimed at the educated, not the wealthy."⁽⁹⁾ Democracy places civic demands upon its citizens and such demands point to the necessity of an education that is broad-based, critical and supportive of meaningful civic values, participation in self-governance and democratic leadership. Only through such a formative and critical educational culture can students learn how to become individual and social agents, rather than merely disengaged spectators, able both to think otherwise and to act upon civic commitments that demand a rethinking and reconstituting of basic power arrangements

fundamental to promoting the common good and producing a meaningful democracy. It is important to insist that as educators we ask, again and again, how is it that higher education can survive as a democratic public sphere in a society in which its civic culture and modes of critical literacy collapse as it becomes more and more difficult to distinguish opinion and emotive outbursts from a sustained argument and logical reasoning. Equally important is the need for educators and young people to take on the challenge of defending the university as a democratic public sphere. Tony Morrison gets it right in arguing:

If the university does not take seriously and rigorously its role as a guardian of wider civic freedoms, as interrogator of more and more complex ethical problems, as servant and preserver of deeper democratic practices, then some other regime or ménage of regimes will do it for us, in spite of us and without us.[\(10\)](#)

Defending the humanities, as Terry Eagleton has recently argued, means more than offering an academic enclave for students to learn history, philosophy, art and literature. It also means stressing how indispensable these fields of study are for all students if they are to be able to make any claim whatsoever on being critical and engaged individual and social agents. But the humanities do more. They also provide the knowledge, skills, social relations and modes of pedagogy that constitute a formative culture in which the historical lessons of democratization can be learned, the demands of social responsibility can be thoughtfully engaged, the imagination can be expanded and critical thought can be affirmed. As an adjunct of the academic-military-industrial complex, higher education has nothing to say about teaching students how to think for themselves in a democracy, how to think critically and engage with others and how to address through the prism of democratic values the relationship between themselves and the larger world. We need a permanent revolution around the meaning and purpose of higher education, one in which academics are more than willing to move beyond the language of critique and a discourse of both moral and political outrage, however necessary to a sustained individual and collective defense of the university as a vital public sphere central to democracy itself.

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Such a debate is important for both defending higher education as a public good and funding it as a social right. Most importantly, such a debate represents a crucial political intervention regarding an entire generation's sense of the future and their role within it. Students are not consumers; they are first and foremost citizens of a potentially global democracy and, as such, should be provided with "the full range of human knowledge, understanding and creativity - and so ensure that [they] have the opportunity to develop their full intellectual and creative potential, regardless of family wealth."[\(11\)](#) As neoliberal ideology is enlisted to narrow the parameters of the purpose of higher education, it increasingly limits - through high tuition rates, technocratic modes of learning, the reduction of faculty to temporary workers and authoritarian modes of governance - the ability of many young people to attend college, while at the same time refusing to provide a critical education to those who do. Not enough faculty, students, parents, and others concerned about the fate of young people and democracy are mobilizing both in and outside of the university, willing and able to defend higher education as a public good and critical pedagogy as a moral and political practice that builds the capacity of young people to become engaged social agents.

Central to any viable, democratic view of higher education is the necessity to challenge the notion that the only value of education is to drive economic progress and transformation in the interest of national prosperity. We must also reconsider how the university in a post-9/11 era is being militarized and increasingly reduced to an adjunct of the growing national security state. The public has given up on the idea of either funding higher education or valuing it as a public good indispensable to the life of any viable democracy. This is all the more reason for academics to be in the forefront of a coalition of activists, public servants, activists, and others in both rejecting the growing corporate management of higher education and developing a new discourse in which the university and particularly the humanities, can be defended as a vital social and public institution in a democratic society.

If academics cannot defend the university as a public good and democratic public sphere, then who will? If we cannot or refuse to take the lead in joining with students, labor unions, public school teachers, artists, and other cultural workers in defending higher education as the most crucial institution in establishing the formative culture necessary for a thriving democracy, then we will turn the humanities, liberal arts and the larger university over to a host of dangerously anti-democratic economic, political, cultural and social forces. If liberal learning and the humanities collapse under the current assaults on higher education, we will witness the emergence of a neoliberal state, and the civic and democratic role of higher education, however tarnished, will disappear. Under such circumstances, higher education and especially the humanities, will enter a death spiral unlike anything we have seen in the past. Not even a shadow of its former self, the university will become simply another institution and vocational program entirely at odds with imperatives of critical thought, dissent, social responsibility and civic courage.

Defending the university means more than exhibiting a combination of critique and moral outrage. It means developing a critical and oppositional culture and collective movement within the university and joining with social movements outside of its now largely segregated walls. Reaching a broader public about the social and democratic character of higher education is crucial, especially since a large part of the public has given “up on the idea of educating people for democratic citizenship”[\(12\)](#) and viewing higher education as a public good. There is more at stake here than the deep responsibilities of academics to defend academic freedom, the tenure system and faculty autonomy, however important. The real issues lie elsewhere and speak to preserving the public character of higher education and recognizing that defending it as a democratic public sphere is largely about creating the crucial pedagogical conditions for developing a generation of young people willing to fight for democracy as both a promise and a possibility. Walter Benjamin once wrote, “He who cannot take sides should keep silent.” If academics want to prevent the further colonization of higher education by a phalange of anti-democratic forces extending from corporate power brokers and mega-millionaires to right-wing ideologues and the vested interest of the military-industrial-academic complex, they cannot afford to be either silent or distant observers. The stakes are too high and the struggle too important. Time is running out for reclaiming higher education as a democratic public sphere and a place for teachers and students to think critically and act responsibly. The militarized culture of neoliberalism is completely at odds with the pedagogical conditions necessary for imaginative risk taking, dissent, dialogue, engaged scholarship, faculty autonomy and democratic modes of governance. Higher education is one of the few spaces left where democratic identities, values and desires can be created. If the future of young people matters as much as democracy itself, this is a struggle that needs to begin today.

Footnotes:

1. Some useful sources on neoliberalism include: Lisa Duggan, "The Twilight of Equality." (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003); David Harvey, "A Brief History of Neoliberalism," (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Wendy Brown, "Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics," (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Alfredo Saad-Filho and Deborah Johnston, eds., "Neoliberalism: A Critical Reader," (London: Pluto Press, 2005); Neil Smith, "The Endgame of Globalization," (New York: Routledge, 2005); Aihwa Ong, Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); Randy Martin, "An Empire of Indifference: American War and the Financial Logic of Risk Management," (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Naomi Klein, "The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism," (New York: Knopf, 2007); Henry A. Giroux, "Against the Terror of Neoliberalism," (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2008); David Harvey, "The Enigma of Capital and the Crisis of Capitalism," (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); and Gerard Dumenil and Dominique Levy, "The Crisis of Neoliberalism," (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011).
2. See, for example, Stanley Aronowitz, "Against Schooling: For an Education That Matters," (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2008); Christopher Newfield, "Unmaking the Public University," (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008); and Ellen Schrecker, "The Lost Soul of Higher Education," (New York: New Press, 2010). One of the most extensive compilations analyzing this assault can be found in Edward J. Carvalho and David B. Downing, eds., "Academic Freedom in the Post-9-11 Era," (New York: Palgrave, 2010); and my forthcoming, Henry A. Giroux, "Education and the Crisis of Public Values," (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2011).
3. See Isabelle Bruno and Christopher Newfield, "Can the Cognitariat Speak?" E-Flux No. 14 (March 2010). Online at: <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/view/118/>. See also Christopher Newfield, "Unmaking the Public University," (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008).
4. Ibid.
5. For an interesting critique of this issue, see the special issue of The Nation called "Out of Reach: Is College Only for the Rich?" (June 29, 2009).
6. This argument has been made against academics for quite some time, though it has either been forgotten or conveniently ignored by many faculty. See, for example, various essays in C. Wright Mills, "The Powerless People: The Role of the Intellectual in Society" in C. Wright Mills, "The Politics of Truth: Selected Writings of C. Wright Mills," (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 13-24; Edward Said, "Humanism and Democratic Criticism," (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); and Henry A. Giroux and Susan Searls Giroux, "Take Back Higher Education," (New York: Palgrave, 2004).
7. On the university's relationship with the national security state, see David Price, "How the CIA Is Welcoming Itself Back Onto American University Campuses: Silent Coup," CounterPunch (April 9-11, 2010). Online at: <http://www.counterpunch.org/price04092010.html>. See also Nick Turse, "How the Military Invades Our Everyday Lives," (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2008); and Henry A. Giroux, "The University in Chains: Confronting the Military-Industrial-Academic Complex," (Boulder: Paradigm, 2007).

8. Cornelius Castoriadis, "Democracy as Procedure and Democracy as Regime," *Constellations* 4:1 (1997), p. 5.
9. Frank Rich, "Could She Reach the Top in 2012? You Betcha," *New York Times* (November 20, 2010), p. WK8.
10. Toni Morrison, "How Can Values Be Taught in This University," *Michigan Quarterly Review* (Spring 2001), p. 278.
11. Stefan Collini, "Browne's Gamble," *London Review of Books*, Vol. 32, No. 21 (November 4, 2010). Online at: <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v32/n21/stefan-collini/brownes-gamble>.
12. David Glenn, "Public Higher Education Is 'Eroding From All Sides,' Warn Political Scientists," *Chronicle of Higher Education* (September 2, 2010). Online at: <http://chronicle.com/article/Public-Higher-Education-Is/124292/>.

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