

What's Left of the Academy? Leadership, Intellectuality and the Prospects for Mass Change

Steve Fuller, University of Warwick, interview with Mike Neary, University of Lincoln

In late 2015, Mike Neary, a distinguished leftist British educator who developed the concept of “student as producer” (i.e. knowledge producer), contacted several leading UK academics concerned with the future of the university to answer a set of questions, answers to which are excerpted and discussed in his chapter, “Academic Voices: from public intellectuals to the general intellect,” in the forthcoming edited volume: Richard Hall and Joss Winn, eds. *Mass Intellectuality: Democracy, Co-operation and Leadership in Higher Education* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016). What follows is Steve Fuller’s complete answers to Neary’s questions, which are published with permission of both Fuller and Neary.

What is the current state of academic leadership in higher education?

Generally speaking, academic leadership has never been especially strong, except in the United States, where even state universities have historically had considerable autonomy and wealth—and often have been expected to exert leadership in the larger society (e.g. the ‘land-grant’ and ‘extension’ universities, which were used as vehicles of regional development in the 19th and 20th centuries). In contrast, European university leaders have tended to be normal academics promoted, *a la* the Peter Principle, to their level of incompetence. Indeed, until recently, top managerial posts at European universities have been often ceremonial or rotated on a regular basis among eligible professorial staff.

It has been only since the 1960s, when university-building came to be conceptualized as part of a long-term national building strategy (often called ‘industrial policy’) that the need for ‘academic leaders’ in the proper sense becomes evident—and the absence of such leaders equally becomes evident. This tendency became more acute in the post-Cold War period, as universities were increasingly seen as central to the emerging ‘knowledge economy’, which was focussed on innovations and skills directly transferable to the marketplace.

However, what’s been lacking in this recent demand for academic leadership is any sense that there is a kind of leadership that is distinctive to the university because of the sort of institution that it is. Again, there have been several insightful books published on this topic by American university presidents (I recommend especially those by former Harvard president Derek Bok). But there’s nothing comparable in Europe, and especially UK, where one might have expected some developed thinking from former Vice Chancellors of Oxford and Cambridge—or even the LSE, each of which has played a unique role in projecting the image of Britain on the world stage.

My own view is that the university as an institution is doomed without academic leaders who defend the university as a distinctive institution on its own terms—which is to say, not simply a set of revenue streams from tuitions, grants and patents, but as an organic unity dedicated to systematic inquiry as a public good. The only people

with the knowledge, authority and power to defend this ideal are not the rank-and-file academics but the university's senior administrators. For this reason, I have supported the idea that any aspiring to run a university should receive academic certification. It should not be possible—as has happened both in the US and the UK—for someone to slip into a chief executive post at a university simply on the basis of having run a large corporate R&D division.

What is the role and nature of the public intellectual?

The “public intellectual” is a term of art invented by academics for what would normally be called simply an “intellectual.” By distinguishing “public intellectual” from “intellectual,” an academic can say in good faith that s/he is “always already” an intellectual—but maybe not a public one! I think this way of putting things is a distraction from the fact that academics in their normal academic work don't normally have much impact on the public, which in turn goes very much against the “Enlightenment” function of intellectuals. Academics like to portray “public intellectuals” as vulgarizing, parasitizing and even ‘dumbing down’ academic ideas. In fact, closer to the truth is that academics shore up their own authority by making ideas of potentially wider public import more difficult to access by coding them in technical languages and sophisticated discourses that exceed that which is necessary for their effective application. However, these anti-public moves are endemic to the academic condition, in which colonization (of fields of inquiry) and discrimination (of inquirers) are the normal modes of self-assertion, as routinely witnessed in the various forums in which “peer review” operates.

These tendencies are exacerbated by the increasing separation of research and teaching as academic functions—in the extreme case, as embodied in non-overlapping sets of people. Even at the level of postgraduate training, students are never given instruction in pedagogy or even encouraged to think that it is the cornerstone of the academic's public function—that is, to use the classroom as the crucible for remastering elite, esoteric forms of knowledge as vehicles of mass empowerment. A regulative ideal of teaching as a public intellectual function is that it should never be as difficult for students to grasp and make use of what is taught as it was for the teacher. Put another way: A big part of a student's academic freedom lies in his or her not having to repeat all the steps taken by the original researchers and their academic followers, which in turn leaves the student space and time to develop his or her own ideas.

This point about the public intellectual role of teaching feeds into a larger point about what Thorstein Veblen called the “learned incapacity” of academics—namely, their increasing inability to communicate across different media.

What are the reasons for the apparent culture of conformity among academics?

I think that academics are conformist only in effect, not in intention. Academics are more than happy to express what they regard as anti-establishment opinions. That really hasn't changed. What's changed is their mode of behavioural expression beyond reciting a few well-worn mantras. An increasing number of academics simply adopt what Albert Hirschmann would call an “exit” strategy—they care more for their discipline or, more to the point, their research network than the university that

employs their labour and affirms their status. On the surface, this behaviour may look conformist because it does little to stop the inertial tendencies (call it “new public management”) that these academics nominally oppose. However, it amounts to a radical disengagement with the university as an institution.

The presence of academic “unions” is a mixed blessing in this context. Unions are really designed to protect labour, whose default status in the logic of capital is simply a factor of production. While this arguably captures the status of the increasing proportion of academic teaching and research staff on short term contracts, it does not capture the self-understanding (or the legal arrangements) of academics in regular “tenured” posts. Indeed, the default rhetoric of such academics when criticizing their university is to appeal to its failure to secure their consent before acting—as if they were part of the institution’s governing structure. However, for nearly all practical purposes, collegial consent is a courtesy, especially in a world where universities are entangled in ways which interest academics only intermittently, as demonstrated by the perennial difficulty in staffing academic committees.

In short, even before neo-liberalism, academics have had a passive aggressive attitude towards the university: They think they should be running the place, while lacking enough interest in its total operations to put in the relevant effort. To be sure, the current neo-liberal order has provided more incentives to encourage academics in this attitude, especially with regard to the fixation on research, which typically takes academics beyond their campus. But truth be told, these incentives amount to glorified nudges.

What is the current state of the student movement and what we might learn from student protests?

I don’t think there is any longer a “student movement” in the strict sense of a unified class consciousness, which one might have associated with the student movements of the 1960s. The very idea of a student movement presumes that students have a recognized and significant role in university governance. This idea made most sense when universities were treated a self-governing communities consisting mainly of those who populate the campus at a given time. However, while universities still strive for corporate autonomy, the boundaries of this corporate entity has extended, which has diluted the significance of students as an organized class.

This is part of the Janus-faced legacy of universities becoming “multiversities”—in Clark Kerr’s resonant phrase—over the past two generations. On the one hand, it has served to open the door to many more constituencies, including both big business and the academically disenfranchised. This has had a major effect on student consciousness. Students are nowadays more affiliated to their pre-university identities (including the aspirational ones) than any university-specific identity as ‘students’ with a common self-understanding. In this respect, student protests these days are more likely about not getting value for money from their tuition fees than some more principled view of what a university that speaks on their behalf should be doing.

In this political context, the cleverest thing for a student activist is to try to tie larger social justice issues to personal economic ones. Thus, “disenfranchisement” becomes recoded as “squandering talent” or even “human capital.” Truth be told, this is not as

far from the original Humboldtian conception of the university as people might think, since Humboldt regarded the modern rebirth of the university as key to Germany catching up with the more advanced powers of Europe, France and Britain.

Contact details: S.W.Fuller@warwick.ac.uk; mneary@lincoln.ac.uk