The Neoliberal University and the Common Good

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Introduction

The intense “audit culture” and digitally enhanced monitoring of faculty’s production resembles the “pre-neoliberal” or “feudal university” as much as the neoliberal university (Cruickshank 2019). Is higher education no different from other institutions plagued by the neoliberal regime of economizing (Berman 2014 and Brown 2015)? That is, is it just one of many institutions that ought to be scrutinized in its adoption of and adaption to neoliberal practices (Mirowski 2011)? Alternatively, is there something more pernicious about the neoliberal invasion of higher education because particular values are being challenged and debased? Is neoliberalism “statist not only in the way it politically engineers the operation of market forces, but in terms of the oppressive use of state power” (Cruickshank and Abbinnett 2019, 276)?

These two sets of questions (one about the pervasiveness of neoliberalism, the other about what is unique about the university) could be supplemented by a third that asks about the label of neoliberalism: Is neoliberalism a rhetorical device that somehow distorts and hijacks some salient features of capitalist thinking when applied to higher education? In other words, is the neoliberal university simply about running the university like a business, or is it about deliberately losing sight of and undermining the “common good” (Scott 2019b)?

The cruel fact of the matter is that, indeed, the university is run like a business. Instead of rehearsing important (but somewhat obvious to the left) critiques of the application of neoliberal regimes into higher education, I wish to follow a case study that highlights how neoliberal ideology and vocabulary are weaponized to lay the responsibility for systematic failures at the feet of those who have no control over these failures. I think it is incumbent on us to pierce through the veil of the business discourse and expose outright anti-intellectualism (and the current fear of freedom of thought and expression) that it attempts to cover. However different, this effort is similar to those who unveiled the abuses of empirical science a century ago (Franz Boas and Stephen Jay Gould) for what they were in the hands of racists: a scandalous sham. The American experience draws attention to the unfulfilled German (Humboldt’s) dream (Gerber 2014, 31) of the university as a public good where solidarity, goodwill, and public service are expected; in short, a sanctuary for the life of the mind for the sake of the public. In what follows, I hope to illustrate the extent to which the current university system is different from its feudal past only in degree and not in kind.

Case Study

In a western state where weed is legal, water is scarce, and oxygen is sold in containers, a public-university chancellor is fond of sending occasional platitudes to faculty and staff; students, “customers” as they are called in this neoliberal university, are spared his homilies. This particular e-mail from the end of the last academic year opens, as PR handlers must have suggested, with a positive, upbeat tone: “Yesterday, we celebrated X’s graduation of more than 1,400 students. Every student who received a degree has a brighter future because our faculty and staff taught them, encouraged them, inspired them, supported them, and helped them develop their capabilities for the future. Thank you for your work and your
passion.” Effusive gratitude drips like too much maple syrup off a stack of pancakes. Yet the syrup is absorbed, and the real point of the e-mail comes to the fore: “As we celebrate their successes, I want to share my thoughts about two e-mails that I recently received, both of which were posted to open forums. I believe that we make the most progress when we share our thoughts in person, so I have reached out to schedule follow-up meetings with those who wrote me.”

Two issues spring from the page: first, academic “success” is presented as if students’ achievements are unrelated to faculty members who helped them; and second, the revelation, as irritation, that two “‘open forums’” (meaning “open letters to the chancellor”) were posted rather than having been shared “in person” (meaning private meetings). Is the impact of personal meetings with administrators greater than an open, transparent forum where everyone can chime in and the person in power must respond? Well, given that I was the one agitating (see below), I do have a dog in this fight. Not surprisingly, (business-speak) platitudes follow:

We will continue to face fiscal challenges as a result of both internal and external factors. We need to continue to commit to the mission of retention, graduation and success of our students. In the process of pursuing our mission, we will also create a financially sustainable future of our campus. We are looking at new budget models that will result in more decentralization. Our strategic plan has identified intentional revenue viability and optimization of resources and capabilities as two key areas for us to focus on in the next 10 years. I hold the administrative staff who report to me accountable for their performance, and they are helping us meet our goals. We have less administrative support than many other institutions, and I recognize the need for additional support in several areas across campus.

Neoliberal terminology abounds: “fiscal challenges,” “pursuing our mission,” “success,” “decentralization,” “strategic plan,” “intentional revenue viability,” “optimization of resources and capabilities,” “accountable for their performance.” Some of these terms have become routine when faculty are asked to contribute to their university’s mission or strategic plan, some are puzzling when we are supposed to translate “optimization” and “accountability” from financial discourse to academic (can we put a price on the value of a published book or essay? Is showing up on time to class sufficient? Can we assess the quality of the content of a lecture?), while still others are downright impenetrable: what does “intentional revenue viability” mean at the university? One could speculate that the administrative class is so remote from the academic class that it speaks only to others in its echo chamber, immune to and divorced from proper English. Had the said chancellor remained at the level of business-speak, perhaps we could ignore administrators. But, as is the fashion in this Trumpian-Johnsonian era, the personal takes over:

During the last two years I worked closely with faculty, staff and student governance bodies in realizing our mission. I am saddened by the comment that some of our campus citizens are afraid to speak up. This concern was never brought to me by either the faculty or staff governance leadership. Our shared governance bodies are active and
engaged participants as we develop our strategic plan, determine how we can thrive in a changing higher education environment, and build a community that honors our academic mission. Beyond the official work of the shared governance bodies, I value the input that you provide in countless other ways. I am eager to learn from you where we are succeeding and where we can improve. I need to understand your aspirations for the campus and your frustrations when we have not lived up to them. I welcome that dialogue. I respect your opinions and will continue to find ways to work together.

What prompts someone to switch from generalities to “I am saddened”? Should we advise the chancellor, as we do students under stress, to consult mental health professionals? Should we send notes of sympathy? And then, without missing a beat, the administrator fails to realize that “campus citizens are afraid to speak up” is directly related to, nay, is the reason for, “this concern was never brought up to me.” Really? First-year students learn in Critical Thinking courses how logical reasoning works (Begging the Question and the False Cause fallacy come to mind); the managerial class never took this course in their training, or if they did, they conveniently forgot its lessons. Then, some bogus claims about shared governance are made, despite evidence to the contrary. (On our campus Faculty Assembly is notified of budgetary decisions, for example, rather than being consulted along the process; on a national level, see Ginsberg 2011, Gerber 2014, and Scott 2019a.)

To round up the false claims about the “shared” part of governance, the chancellor uses locutions such as “I value the input,” “I am eager to learn from you,” “I need to understand your aspirations,” “I welcome that dialogue,” and his favorite, “I respect your opinions.” With this rhetorical outpour, one could think that this is a genuine gesture toward dialogue for sharing opinions and aspirations. Yet, we should remember the words uttered earlier about all dialogue being “in person,” perhaps one on one, to ensure control over the environment in which a dialogue takes place and with whom. I am sure I am not alone in having been summoned to the chancellor’s office (or the Provost’s or the Dean’s) and been reprimanded for inappropriate public displays and politely asked to stop such behavior. (In one such case, I was offered an annual stipend to become “part of” the administration.)

The e-mail ends with what requires no close reading but that, rather, elicits a distant chuckle. I quote it here to ensure accuracy:

When the fall semester arrives, I will work to make sure we are creating the opportunities for more conversations to occur. I will also continue to work over the summer and fall with the governance groups to determine how best to broadly engage in these discussions. If you have ideas about steps we should be taking, please let me know or let your respective leadership bodies know. I need and want your help. UCCS’s faculty and staff are the engine that drives us forward and makes our community thrive.
Thank you again for all your amazing work over the course of the year. I am proud of your accomplishments and look forward to seeing what we can achieve together. As a citizen of this campus for more than 27 years, I will continue to commit to a respectful and compassionate culture that I often talk about, and together we will build a stronger campus and a bright future for all of us.

The neoliberal, business-school model of the “sandwich” is in full sight here: start with something uplifting, continue with the reprimand, and end with something friendly and supportive. This is what managers are taught to say to subordinates, flattering them enough to be able to deliver devastating news.

What prompted this long and vapid e-mail? Over the years, state universities have suffered from declining state support caused by the lowering of taxes in the neoliberal states that still believes in “trickle down” economics (Gerber 2014, chapter 5). In the case reviewed here, state support for the university is around 10% (depending on the campus). The university is a state university by name only. The majority of the funding (over 70%, depending how calculated) comes from student tuition and fees and marginally from Indirect Recovery Costs (less than 1%), which is what universities receive as infrastructure subsidies from federal grants. Given the neoliberal rhetoric of students as consumers and the idea that the “customer is always right,” faculty are feeling administrative pressure to “service” their courses in a manner that guarantees the highest levels of retention and “success,” namely, by making courses easy enough for the lowest common denominator and inflating grades. The appeal of online courses is not lost on students whose schedules are overburdened by the demands of paid work and family needs. The rigor in these courses is suspect, and the “success rate” is higher than in courses offered on campus.

The neoliberal weapon of choice concerning student retention is the threat that when students don’t pay their tuition and fees, budgets are squeezed. “Loss” of student “revenue” is blamed on faculty, even if the reason for students leaving the university has nothing to do with professors or academic requirements: job transfer, family illness, military deployment, financial and personal hardships, or a low unemployment rate that offers higher wages and job opportunities. University managers are prone to spread doom and gloom predictions about the next academic year’s budget, refuse to hire tenure-track faculty, and heighten the precarity of current full and part-time instructors and lecturers. Department chairs feel the sword of Damocles as an ever-present peril to their positions of power when losing faculty lines and shrinking their departmental curricular offerings. Chairs then meet with their faculties and relate the imminent bad news of funding losses that translate into aspirational paralysis. (What about the chancellor’s request that faculty share their aspirations?) Having lived through too many meetings in which ominous predictions are forwarded, I decided to publish an open letter to the chancellor on the faculty and staff campus platform. Here it is:

Dear Chancellor X,

Now that all my grades are in, it’s time to reflect on my 33rd year at X. It is clear that the neoliberal university is here to stay, and you, as a former faculty and Dean of the College of Business, personify this trend, with “cost” centers and rewards, with a centralized budget process that leaves all the
power in the hands of the “C-suite,” and let’s not forget the constant use of the word “respect.”

Yet we, the faculty, are repeatedly threatened by budget cuts because of low enrollments. It was Adam Smith who wrote about the “division of labor” in capitalism, so how are you implementing this concept in your administration? We, the faculty, teach; you, the administration, “market” the campus and “sell” our expertise to students (“customers” in the neoliberal parlance). Why must the faculty suffer from the poor performance of your administration? We are evaluated on every course we teach, annually filling [out] reports, and then judged for meeting, exceeding, or being below “expectations.” What about your team of experts who cannot bring enough students to campus? Who should be judged for that “performance”?

I hope by now you have given up on the mantra of “retention,” as the majority of our students are first-gen, military, and minorities and therefore historically tend to have lower retention rates than those expected at Y, for example. Here, too, it’s not the faculty’s sole responsibility to make sure students stay here; which of your many administrators are judged for “solving” this “problem”?

Please stop threatening the faculty with budget cuts due to your administration’s failings, and thank us instead for the great job we are doing with a diverse student population.

Four things happened in response. First, I received numerous letters of support from faculty members, some of which recounted more egregious administrative behavior; second, many faculty members responded in person, fearing to put anything in writing on the campus e-mail platform; third, I was summoned to the chancellor’s office; and fourth, the chancellor wrote the e-mail I quoted above in response. I won’t go much further here in detailing the outcome of the whole incident except to explain below some of the ways in which the neoliberal rhetorical weapons should be redirected at those using them. Fine, you want to argue that the university should run like a business—however silly this very notion is: what does it really mean to you? Do you even know what you are asking? Incidentally, Larry Gerber reminds us that “business models of management of higher education” have reared their ugly head as early as the 1880s. One memorable quote should be cited here with regard to business mentality that “wishes very much, indeed, that a college could be carried on without professors, and has a vague notion that by some sort of improvement in organization this result may some day be attained” (2014, 29ff). The fact that Taylorism came right along to standardize, measure, and control all facets of human activity within the industrial sphere only added fuel to the fire of efficient management of higher education (Ibid. 47ff).

The Neoliberal University and Its Managerial Class

Two interconnected developments have determined the fate of the university as we know it today. The first is the neoliberalization of everything, and the second is the
professionalization of university management. Some critics of the current university system focus on the first (Brown 2015 and Scott 2019a), lamenting the loss of academic freedom and the soul of the mission of a sanctuary for the life of the mind (Van Alystyne 1993 and Sassower 2000); others suggest the loss of control by faculty and the takeover by professional administrators who treat the life of the mind as a business proposition (Ginsberg 2011 and Gerber 2014). I will briefly review both developments and argue that even if we set aside for a moment the inappropriateness of thinking of education as a business, the administrative class fails in its own proclaimed mission of caring for the university as a viable workplace or a pseudo-capitalist enterprise (since profit maximization is an irrelevant target for academic institutions of higher education). This means, as my case study illustrates, that administrators should account for (perhaps repent) their failure to emulate and promote the “best practices” businesses have adopted. This argument shifts the conversation from the individual failure of this chancellor or that dean to a more systemic and structural failure endemic to public institutions of higher education. (A separate argument can be made about private, Ivy-League universities and those aspiring to membership in their league whose endowments offer opportunities for business-like success that can easily transcend the limited financial aims of neoliberalism yet still wield authoritarian power with myopic disregard to the life of the mind.)

First, on the business-neoliberal transformation of higher education (so-called “academic capitalism,” Gerber 2014, 122). More critically articulate than most of her predecessors, Wendy Brown follows earlier critics who have taken to task the corporatization of the university. One of the first was Thorstein Veblen (1916) who mocked the “captains of erudition” for running universities as if they were corporations. What we call the latest neoliberal trend, then, has antecedents in the critiques of the Gilded Age of late 19th century America. To be sure, as I have argued elsewhere, Veblen’s critique of the pursuit of “esoteric” knowledge and the submission of university administrators to the pressures of the business world are prescient but singular (Sassower 2014, 92-5). The Gilded Age brought with it not only conspicuous consumption and the leisure class, as Veblen suggested, but a change in priorities and the establishment of a cultural hierarchy where the logic of capitalism reigned supreme.

Fritz Machlup offers the first systematic analysis of the “production of knowledge.” He suggests that among the different kinds of knowledge out there, “Intellectual knowledge” is the kind of knowledge that is supposed to satisfy “intellectual curiosity, regarded as part of liberal education, humanistic and scientific learning, and general culture; acquired, as a rule, in active concentration with an appreciation of the existence of open problems and cultural values” (1962, 20-22). But as much as Machlup promotes the business-minded approach to knowledge production, distribution, and consumption, he remains critical enough of the process: “It has been suggested that some of the growth in the production of knowledge may be an instance of ‘Parkinson’s Law,’ which implies that administrators tend to create more work for more administrators” (Ibid. 9-10). This sentiment echoes earlier warnings about the management class whose power rises by the middle of the twentieth century.

As much as higher education turned into a business or emulated a business model with a corporate mentality and presidents parading as corporate CEOs, it also became part of what President Eisenhower famously dubbed (in his farewell speech) the military-industrial complex. In this sense, one of the questions posed at the beginning of this essay (about a change in degree or kind) can be answered as a magnified degree of business-like institution,
one self-consciously so. As Philip Mirowski has documented (2011), the “complex” added the university system into its all-consuming and powerful orbit so that any pretense about the life of the mind become subservient to instrumental rationality. By the time Clark Kerr, the president of the University of California system, gives his infamous talk about the different “uses” of the university and labels it a “multiversity” in 1962 (1995), it seems that any hope for the academy as a sanctuary has evaporated. The role of higher education is to train skilled laborers for the marketplace, so that by the time the likes of Stanley Aronowitz concur that the university has become a “knowledge factory” (2000), we realize that as much as the university as business is vilified, it has been moving in this direction for at least a century in the US. Perhaps it’s not as “feudal” as mentioned above, but definitely an institution supported by and supportive of industrial elites.

Business cycles that move from “gilded ages” of excess and conspicuous consumption to depressions and recessions, only to reappear again more strongly than before and in different guises, remind us that the privileges associated with higher education (as a finishing school in previous centuries and as placeholders for the social elites that are granted a “gentleman’s C”) must come under attack time and again. Unlike Kerr, it seems that Veblen and Machlup (and eventually Paulo Freire and Henry Giroux, and later Aronowitz) were protecting the sacred mission of higher education rather than expecting it to be yet another business. To some extent, the relevant Marxian analysis of alienation and exploitation of the faculty, for example, could have been averted if the university had not become another factory or, more accurately, a skill-training assembly line. Indeed, the university has forever been under attack from all sides, from cynics and admirers alike; it remains at the crossfire of every political debate, whether higher education is explicitly mentioned or not, because it is ideas and ideals that are being debated, ways of thinking and living, ways of communicating and sharing knowledge.

The specter of neoliberalism engulfing the university is but another iteration of a loss of intellectual freedom, the inappropriate “economizing” of higher education, and the gutting of the soul of a liberal education. (See Garrett and Marx 2014 on the repeated crisis of the humanities, and Ophir 2014 on the misguided attempt to economize the “sciences of the spirit.”) The difference this time around might be the brazen and explicit pronouncements of neoliberal administrators about “bottom-lines” and “jobs” rather than enlightening future generations of citizens and leaders.

Both Stanley Fish, an apologist for the neoliberal university, and Wendy Brown, a staunch critic of anything neoliberal, deserve to be quoted at this stage. They represent opposing views in regard to how to “manage” faculty expectations about their roles within and outside the university. Joan Scott (2019a), citing the history and importance of the American Association of University Professors in the fight for academic freedom as part of the mission of higher education, is perhaps the most thoughtful voice in this discourse in addition to Gerber (2014). Despite their fundamental differences, Fish seems to agree with Brown (though he doesn’t refer to her), that “in the neoliberal universe, ethics reduces to calculations of wealth and productivity” (2009, 2).
Citing economists like Ronald Coase, Fish follows the tradition of the economic analysis of law expounded at the University of Chicago Law School (Richard A. Posner is the leader of this group, just as Milton Friedman was the leader of the Chicago School of Economics). The guiding principle of this school is wealth maximization and the cost-benefit analysis that reduces decision-making to a monetary calculus: this is true of calculating pollution (if the factory adds more wealth than the costs associated with downstream illnesses, then it should be allowed to pollute), and the cost of human limbs and life (in meat processing facilities where fatalities are valued according to a numeric scale). That means, continues Fish, that “values like morality, justice, fairness, empathy, nobility and love are either abandoned or redefined in market terms” (Ibid).

In a neoliberal mode, Fish uses the economic model for analyzing the university, explaining along the way the three strategies universities have been using to cope with decreased state support (raising tuition, research partnerships with industry, and hiring part-time “transient and disposable workforce” (Ibid. 4)). For him (as would be true for Brown), all the recent transformation of an already business-like institution, suggest that “universities have embraced neoliberalism” (Ibid.). Though my focus here is not on academic freedom per se, it’s worth noting that within this university model, Fish advocates a narrow conception of academic freedom, one limited to the guild’s interests. One wonders, as Robert Reich reminds us (2007), what happened to the old saying, “What’s good for General Motors is good for the country”? Has such an alignment of American culture and higher education been limited to the military-industrial-academic complex? Has the university become insulated from (even if still dependent on) the state?

By contrast to Fish, who defends his own entitlement within the neoliberal university and finds it appropriate to conceptualize and legally analyze legal questions in economic terms, Wendy Brown casts a larger conceptual net. In her argument, the conversion of the political into the economic has become both pervasive and pernicious (2015, 17). In her words: “neoliberal reason... is converting the distinctly political character, meaning, the operation of democracy’s constituent elements into economic ones” (Ibid. italics in the original). Brown’s lament is about the loss of “liberal democratic principles” that “hold, and hold out, ideals of both freedom and equality universally shared and of political rule by and for the people” (Ibid. 18). The stakes of the neoliberal transformation of contemporary nation-states are high because neoliberalism features a level of “plasticity” that makes it difficult to pin it down (Ibid. 21). (I would argue that this conundrum is true also of capitalism in general as an economic system whose adaptive mechanisms defy some of the narrow critiques of orthodox Marxism.)

Brown explains that critics of neoliberalism usually focus on four elements or effects of this economizing mindset: 1) “intensified inequality” 2) “crass or unethical commercialization” 3) “ever-growing intimacy of corporate and finance capital with the state” 4) “economic havoc” (Ibid. 28-30). What is pernicious about the neoliberal mind-set in the present context of higher education is the fact that “neoliberal rationality disseminates the model of the market to all domains and activities—even where money is not the issue—and configures human beings exhaustively as market actors, always, only, and everywhere as homo economicus” (Ibid. 31).
Turning the university into a skill-acquisition assembly line (or a knowledge factory) is one thing, but thinking of students and faculty only in financial terms and treating them exclusively as reference points in a spreadsheet is quite another. Brown extends Berman’s notion of economizing (2014) and suggests that what’s unique about the neoliberal trend now is its enlarged—perhaps all-encompassing—domain and its “diffusion and multiplication” (2015, 32). In contrast to the classical notion of homo economicus, the neoliberal version is “more termite-like than lion-like” with a touch of “soft power” rather than confrontational and abusive oppression (Ibid. 35). It’s the softness of the touch that turns it deadly. One day you think you are a good citizen of the university, the next day you realize that your productivity is assessed by rubrics and matrices unknown to you. In short, you have gently turned from a scholar and teacher into an ant or a bee, a termite, as Brown avers.

The dehumanization of actors and participants (in universities and everywhere else) who are now considered “human capital” takes place on five parallel registers: 1) The individual has internalized this sense of self-worth and is approached and treated as such by everyone else (including the state). 2) Inequality is the medium of competitive relations and the political premium originally given to equality disappears. 3) “When everything is capital, labor disappears as a category as does its collective form, class.” 4) When the political is transformed into economic terms, notion of citizenship and public goods and the commons disappear as well. And 5) “liberal democratic justice concerns recede” (Ibid. 37-40).

As we can see from juxtaposing the apologetic position of Fish about the economic charaterization of the university to the critical posture Brown takes, we have sharper tools with which to address the carcass we now call the university. Are we simply nostalgic when we invoke the Greek ideals of the agora or the more modern and German ones of Humboldt? Isn’t Scott correct in claiming that “the neoliberal privatizing ethos has undermined belief in a common good and, in consequence, eroded public faith in the mission of higher education” (2019a 10)? Perhaps we should admit the ongoing tension between the aspirations of some faculty within the academy and the realities superimposed by administrators.

Second, on the rise of the administrative class or the “all-administrative university,” as Benjamin Ginsberg (2011) calls it. Perhaps in this context, John Kenneth Galbraith deserves credit for his overall cultural critique about the “affluent society” that is reminiscent of Veblen’s views more than a century ago. Galbraith argues, “The security of tenure of corporation executives is remarkably high. So is their remuneration” (1958, 103). The unusual association of “tenure” with the security enjoyed by corporate executives rather than faculty members suggests that the unique status of tenured professors is not that unique.

Unlike tenured professors, whose tenure is supposed to protect them when speaking truth to power or when promoting unpopular ideas, this protection is hijacked here by corporate America for the sole purpose of “security,” perhaps even immunity from scrutiny and accountability. Galbraith continues: “Certainly these bear no resemblance to the insecurity of the fortunes of the business entrepreneur of the competitive model” (Ibid.). The comparison is not with faculty members, but rather with entrepreneurs whose risk-taking (high risks, high rewards) has been the symbol of the unique opportunity afforded in Western
capitalism. Does this mean that the managerial class takes no risks? Does it mean that in its conformity and conservative operations within the confines of corporate culture (take cover, blame someone else or economic conditions outside your control, and the like) the managerial class escapes the potential devastating results suffered by entrepreneurs who fail?

Galbraith’s answer is the following: “Individual decisions of corporate management may still turn out to have been wrong. But in the large, diversified corporation—in contrast with the small and more specialized firm—such decisions are rarely fatal” (Ibid.). In short, Galbraith argues that first, there is a managerial class that has replaced the entrepreneur class, second, that this new class of managers enjoy security and high remuneration (regardless, as we see today, of the success of its charge), and third, that big business forgives and absorbs poor decisions without the fatalities that accompany small entrepreneurship. Admittedly, Galbraith is not focusing here on the university system nor on its faculty, but the use of the term tenure and the emphasis on managers (rather than entrepreneurs or shareholders) suggest a cultural transformation of our understanding of how and why large institutions operate the way they do.

Benjamin Ginsberg seems to know (without directly quoting) the genealogy of critiques of the university system and the rise of the managerial class. His study focuses, with personal anecdotes and citation of cases reported in the Chronicle for Higher Education and the AAUP, on the “decline of faculty governance” of their institutions and the takeover of administrators. He is correct to suggest that “power on campus is wielded mainly by administrators whose names and faces are seldom even recognized by students or recalled by alumni.” (2011, 4) I should add that faculty members are also ignorant of powerful administrators whose are not readily accessible (having layers of middle managers to filter complaints). On some level, this should not ring alarm bells, since students, faculty, and alumni rarely care about building maintenance and budgetary subtleties. Ginsberg, though, is correctly alarmed that “professors lack much power even in areas in which they have a strong interest, such as the appointment of senior administrators, the development of new programs and curricula, and the definition of budget priorities” (Ibid. 5). Here, too, he is correct.

My own AAUP Chapter has challenged our top administrators to explain why their attention is always diverted from established programs in the humanities, for example, to the latest shiny object, such as cybersecurity or sports nutrition. The claim that new opportunities have presented themselves does not explain refusing to consult with and getting faculty involved in the establishment of new programs. Instead of sharing information ahead of time and sharing decision-making processes with faculty, decisions are made behind closed doors and the faculty is informed post hoc in what direction the university is moving. And almost always, some token morsels of financial bribing are thrown to the faculty in the form of small grants and awards related to the new programs. By contrast, the faculty’s own initiatives require lengthy justification and an uphill battle to prove financial viability and student demand.

For every example Ginsberg provides in his book, anyone in the academy can add one of their own, from presidential searches that disregard faculty input to the appointment of administrators who lack academic credentials but have those commonly associated with corporate leadership: MBAs. Ginsberg is careful to concede that faculty do have Assemblies
and Senates that are supposed to represent the interests of faculty and share governance with administrators. But they, too, lack power. They remain, like faculty committees, solely advisory. Administrators can ignore them. More often than not, their votes and contributions potentially fall on deaf ears (Ibid. 15ff). The power shift would be less alarming if the faculty had made a Faustian wager that would absolve them from budgetary drudgery for the sake of curricula and research freedom, but this is wishful thinking. If any bargain was made, it yielded incompetency on the part of administrators, what Galbraith had said about corporate managers: they ensured tenure without accountability or consequences. When budgetary problems arise, faculty bear the brunt and not administrators. In large public universities, where more than seventy percent of courses are taught by full or part-time instructors without the possibility of tenure, all one needs to do is cut classes or offer reduced wages.

It’s sadly fascinating to note the trends reported in Ginsberg’s book (and in The Chronicle of Higher Education) about the inverse relation of part-time faculty and administrators: increase in part-time faculty correspond to decrease in part-time administrators (Ibid. 19ff). The growth in university enrollment has yielded higher rate of growth in administrators compared to faculty (Ibid. 25ff), and an even greater rate of growth in staff positions (Ibid. 28ff). For Ginsberg, the shift in the power relations in the academy over the past few decades parallels that in health care, where professional hospital managers, for example, dictate policies that are not always in the best interest of patients or do not always conform to best practices advocated by physicians and nurses (Ibid. 67).

Overall, university administrators “can be found ignoring their nominal responsibilities in favor of shirking, squandering, and stealing, three classic ways in which managers sabotage the organizations they serve” (Ibid. 69ff). Ginsberg’s long list of such cases, once again, draws from academic institutions but could be extended to cover other institutions where the managerial class has usurped the power of those who should be making decisions for the benefit of their “customers.” Incidentally, under the general rubric of stealing or corruption come some subsections dealing with “theft, insider dealing, and academic fraud and plagiarism” (Ibid. 87ff). I won’t enumerate here all the ways in which the incompetent “all-administrative university” operates in general or the particularities of this or that university, nor will I follow the details offered by Ginsberg. Instead, I wish to summarize his salient arguments.

First, it is indisputable that the increase in administrative positions (and pay) has been much higher than that of faculties. Second, that this increase has compounded the concentration of power in the hands of semi-anonymous administrators. Third, faculty’s loss of power has demoralized its members. And fourth, it seems impossible to turn the tide on this process. The upshot is not only a recognition that the neoliberal university is here to stay and that power had shifted from faculty to administrators, but that in the name of transparency and accountability, productivity and competition, as Cruickshank (2019) argues, a regime of surveillance and auditing is upon us (different in the UK and the US). The logic of measurement defies the logic of teaching and research. So-called impact studies and audits are symbols of control and biopower in the Foucauldian sense and have little to do with the reasonable and warranted reporting to which publicly funded institutions and their leaders ought to submit.
The University’s Failures to Be Neoliberal

Instead of continuing the lamentation over the interconnected loss of power and academic freedom because of the onslaught of the neoliberal spirit so prevalent in the American and British contexts, I wish to be more specific about administrative failure and the demise of the academy as a sanctuary for the life of the mind understood here in terms of curiosity, thoughtfulness, reflection, scholarship, and creativity. My argument, in short, is that not only is the neoliberalization of the university ill-conceived, dangerous, ruinous, and pernicious (as so many before me have exhaustively documented), but that it fails in a particularly hypocritical fashion. The neoliberal university isn’t even fulfilling its own pretense of being run like a business. I will proceed by offering a few emblematic examples that, I suspect, could be found in many other public universities across the country.

First, know thy product.

Any corporate leader, however incompetent, at least knows what is produced or serviced by their corporation. The CEO of General Motors knows what cars are produced and where, knows what goes into the supply chain of the production line, and what future plans are in place in each division and plant. Not so at the university. Our chancellor and president, both business-trained (but no entrepreneurs), would be hard pressed to explain the difference between anthropology and sociology, political science and economics. They would be baffled by what philosophy, as a discipline, is about, and how it differs from religious studies and psychology. In short, the basic knowledge expected of corporate managers is not expected of spreadsheet mavens, captains of erudition, as Veblen mocked them, at the university. Their ignorance is widely accepted as a way to distinguish between the expertise of professors and managers. But what is it that the university is “selling”?

On our campus, the mantra is jobs rather than enlightenment or good citizenship or the “common good” about which Scott (2019b) speaks. Obsessed with “productivity” (Gerber 2014, 141) rather than promoting their “brand” (reputation that depends on faculty scholarship), administrators consolidate power, threaten faculty, and subsidize online delivery platforms. The idea that the university is a knowledge factory, with an emphasis on knowledge (curious and practical) and not on the assembly line of that factory, escapes our top administrators. Therefore, “branding” and “reputation,” crucial for business success, are lost on them: they rarely celebrate the publication of books and articles, offer minimal funding for conference attendance, offer only about external research funding, a great portion of which is allocated for administrative support. PR campaigns usually focus on the new athletic facility and not on the reputation of faculty and their research; marketing rarely involves faculty members with whom students will study.

Second, product quality matters.

While corporate managers are expected to ensure the quality of their products and optimal conditions for their production, our university Regents (elected positions) have not visited classrooms (except for one of the nine who has taught at one campus) or met the assembly-line workers (professors, instructors, lecturers, and teaching assistants), just as top administrators rarely leave their offices to sit in on a class or come to a department meeting.
Not only are they ignorant of the “products” under their charge, they remain ignorant about the conditions under which they are produced. One exception worth mentioning is the lack of classrooms to “serve” student “demand” to meet when it’s convenient (given work schedules and family needs). In perfectly borrowed business language, administrators hide behind a “professionally commissioned study” that indicates a 70% “utilization” of classrooms as an excuse not to build more of them (measuring use 24/7, an unreasonable timeframe that includes hours where no one can be expected to attend a class).

My retort to this silly neoliberal discursive move has been twofold. First, this is too high a percentage, and second, it’s irrelevant because it’s like a landlord saying that a one-bedroom apartment is only 33% (eight hours a day) used when a tenant sleeps there and therefore could be rented to two other tenants who could sleep there for the other, unutilized 67% of the time. If students are “customers,” and if the customers have only certain preferences for when they can attend classes, the university should heed their “demand” (which is “inelastic”). The response on my campus is the increase of online offerings with heavy “subsidies” and “incentives” (in the form of new laptops and stipends).

Third, without sales there is no business.

Tuition and fees in public universities are the main source of revenue since state support has dwindled. The failure of campus administrators to attract new students is then blamed on poor student retention by faculty (discussed above). The other side of this coin is that when faculty are teaching, they are rarely acknowledged—in person or financially—for their contributions. If student tuition is the main source of revenue, and if this revenue is tied to course enrollment, protect this stream of revenue and those who ensure its continuity. The simple arithmetic that my chapter of the AAUP has calculated suggests that every student pays around $1,000 per three-credit hour course. This means in extreme cases, that when precariously employed instructors (one-year contracts that may or may not be renewed) teach some 300-800 students annually, they contribute some $300,000 - $800,000 in revenue. When paid between $40,000 to $60,000 annually, the surplus is astounding! You need not be a Marxist to acknowledge this exploitation. Exploitation turns quickly into alienation when these highly qualified professionals (most with terminal degrees in their fields) are not only poorly paid but are threatened by loss of employment (the reserve army of qualified and unemployed professionals is growing every year). Add to this the simple fact that this surplus is used to pay administrators who produce no income streams of their own and whose salaries are tenfold, and no wonder frustration and alienation set in.

Sales are associated with growth, and growth is the engine that keep corporations in business. For those who still find the for-private sector to be the model for growth, with its online delivery of instruction and its less-than-qualified instructors (Gerber 2014 146), I should hasten to add the following data points. Established in 1976, the University of Phoenix had its peak enrollment in 2010 (around 600,000) with a stock price of around $60/share (Apollo Group, Inc.) and by 2015 it had less than half as many students (around 247,000) with a stock price of $26/share. Is this a success story? Is this really the goal of the model of education as business? One can find many other so-called institutions of higher education, like Corinthian Colleges (founded in 1995), that have disappeared from the
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Educational landscape after being sued for fraudulent marketing. Gerber correctly notes that despite the ongoing discredit and failure of market capitalism in the US, especially the recent Great Recession and the bailout of large private banks by the public sector, “the unalloyed market model is still widespread in American Society” (2014, 165).

Fourth, competition.

Corporate America is clear that competition should be applied among firms but not within firms. Internally, cooperation is encouraged, as seen from high tech giants like Google, Facebook, and Apple. Environments conducive to communication and interaction offer ample natural light, free or subsidized food, and a variety of games. On our campus, the reverse is the case: hardly any “competition” for students and resources with other universities in our peer-group (let alone R1 institutions) because of inferiority complexes that date to the inception of the campus as a commuter college, and fierce internal squabbles between colleges and departments for a shrinking financial pie.

Deans of colleges battle with each other for tenured lines, office spaces, and classrooms, while administrators berate their “cost centers” as failing to support themselves. From parking to instruction, every university sphere is considered a “cost center” whose revenue must cover its costs no matter the pedagogical reasoning behind small studio courses, for example, or writing intense English courses. The College of Letters, Arts, and Sciences, by far the largest on campus by a factor of five to ten, contributes more than 60% of the campus revenue while receiving about 40%. One could perversely argue that Marx’s principle of “from each according to his ability and to each according to his needs” is practiced in this context by neoliberal hacks. More troubling is the fact that at Deans Council meetings, each college is represented by one dean with one vote regardless of size and budgetary differences. Power, once again, is dispersed so much that any resistance must be coordinated in advance, a possibility unlikely to occur in a “zero-sum game.” Does the CEO of GM treat all divisions alike? Aren’t different resources allocated to different plants in light of their production schedules and engineering needs?

Fifth, division of labor (productivity).

I mentioned this above in my letter to the chancellor, so I will only add a few comments in light of Ginsberg’s charge of administrative incompetence and Gerber’s charge of the usurpation of power in the name of productivity. The point is not so much that administrative incompetence affects the whole university but that more specifically it invades teaching and research (with a burdensome reporting regime). When non-tenured faculty fail, they are dismissed (because of poor student evaluations or lack of publication). What criteria of evaluation do administrators have? Have any been dismissed for failing to assist faculty and students? Only one top administrator recently admitted to our AAUP Chapter meeting that the university can run without administrators but not without faculty or students. From my vantage point, it’s difficult to see any “added value” for expensive administrators the way it’s easy to see the enthusiasm and success of great teachers and researchers. Adam Smith’s division of labor was not as simple-minded as neoliberals have seen fit to appropriate it. He adds an important caveat to his idea and admits (in the section on “Education of the Youth”) that “in the progress of the division of labour . . . the man whose whole life is spent in performing a few simple operations . . . becomes as stupid and ignorant as it is possible
for a human creature to become” (1935, 734). Against this horror of one's “dexterity” being gained at the expense of one’s “intellectual, social, and martial virtues,” Smith recommends that the “government takes some pains to prevent it” (Ibid. 735).

I can continue to enumerate all the business-like terms and labels associated with neoliberalism in general and modern corporate culture in particular. Instead, suffice here to assert that university administrators only fashion themselves as corporate professionals for the sake of high salaries and the security of their own positions and weaponize an outdated vocabulary of productivity and bottom-line success out of context. Not only do they apply the wrong terminology to a sanctuary whose “waste” is at its core (libraries full of books that are not resold for profit, laboratories that are supposed to teach students how to think rather than how to turn a profit with shortcuts, and courses that enlighten without a telos), they traffic in corporate terminology they cannot quite master. Their failure is systemic and structural and therefore more troubling than occasional personal failures that can be overcome.

One could argue that instead of the university being exclusively neoliberal or completely devoid of neoliberalism whatsoever, there could be a model that would deploy neoliberal mechanisms only where appropriate (recognizing that appropriateness is a messy concept that changes under changing circumstances). This would mean deploying an efficiency model without harming pedagogical principles (e.g., web-driven registration and payments, parking platform, and some online course delivery to remote locations and differently abled students). When the non-curricula administration of higher education is efficiently run, eliminating along the way scores of middle-management officers and their staffs, there would be greater latitude in offering personal and communal instruction (e.g., small class size and ample support for students and faculty). This would also mean less sterile teaching environments and opportunities for faculty exchange of ideas. For all of this to take place, my suggestion is not to jettison efficiencies but instead to harness them for a purpose. Higher education is neither a factory nor a service business but a sanctuary for human enlightenment and the critical exchange of ideas (of course, some skills are taught along the way). As such, profit maximization and growth models should be replaced with notions of intellectual nourishment and sustainability.

Is this utopian? Not if you look at some wealthy universities which have endowments that subsidize this kind of vision and therefore, critics would argue, cannot be scaled to public universities. But if the obstacle is funding (and not an operable model of an ideal learning environment) then let’s tackle it structurally and not look within the system for cost-cutting. Would this mean, in more general terms, diverting funds from the military-industrial complex to higher education? Would this mean speaking of higher education as a national priority? Could the language of this priority appropriate the sacred “national security” terminology? Would this then change hearts and minds?

Conclusion

Perhaps Cruickshank’s reminder of the shift from the “feudal” university to the neoliberal and Scott’s appreciation of the “guild” to which faculty belong within the university are
worth pursuing in more detail. Though the former characterizes the entire university system and problematizes the power relations enjoyed by universities in relation to the state, the latter is more focused on the limitations imposed by disciplinary guilds on their members. In the transformation of the feudal to the neoliberal university, power is still not in the hands of universities and they remain exposed to the whims of outside forces that barely understand what the mission of higher learning should be, and if they do, wish to subvert them in particular business-minded ways.

In the maintenance of guidelines and restrictions on individual faculty members within their chosen guilds (methodological standards and intellectual boundaries), there is an appreciation that these are self-imposed power plays whose warrant is self-explanatory. These power plays, one external and the other self-imposed, deserve further critical analysis not so much in terms of what they do (as the consequences of their exertion are obvious) but in terms of their mutual influence. Would it be useful to fight the ascendency of the neoliberal university with guild-like principles? Would the utopian image of an academic sanctuary be more palatable and viable if internal intellectual guidelines were observed?

The neoliberal university works as a metaphor because it taps into American frustrations about the economy. It also resonates with an old American trope about anti-intellectualism, as Richard Hofstadter (1962) has brilliantly explained. Modes of local resistance can work, as Scott and others have argued, with an appreciation of the public service the university provides and a solidarity among faculty members at all ranks and positions. Perhaps what is needed is a change of the mindset of the world through rigorous and critical interpretation, exposing false pretenses and demanding a commitment to the life of the mind as a safeguard against the fascist encroachment of neoliberalism whose power grab fosters fear, ensures inequality, and curtails freedom of thought and expression.

References


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