

Academic Freedom in the Corporate University

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The university has historically played many distinct roles—elite, public, corporate—and has been perpetually haunted by another possibility—the democratic university. These roles have defined the relation between university and capitalist society.¹ However, university structure and functioning does not simply mirror the social-economic environment with which it must come to some accommodation. Similarly, politics within the university does not straightforwardly mirror politics outside. Their complex articulation sets the framework within which a democratic politics can today be carried on within the university.²

How does one define the university? It serves many functions—economic, political, ideological, etc.—and undertakes many activities—research, instruction, technical innovation, etc. In today’s climate it is tempting to define the university ‘materialistically’ as a private-public, or corporate-state, joint economic institution producing training and credentials (and therefore defining others who do not attend or fail as untrained and without credentials) recognized in the global corporate economy or the national bureaucracy. This is not wrong; indeed it is the reality of the contemporary corporate university which those who work and learn within it must address in some fashion or another. For many, it is simply the environment within which they go about their daily business and thus as natural and unquestionable as any other. But given the still relatively recent transformation of the public university into a corporate environment, and given the still incomplete nature of this transformation, a memory of other practices and legitimations survives. During the era of the welfare state the publicly-funded university was understood to play a public role in developing citizenship and social awareness that shaped and over-rode its economic

function. This memory serves to make many others uncomfortable with the new corporate reality of the university. University culture is now torn between the memory of better days that leads to a narrative of decline and despair and a new 'realistic' resignation to the 'fact' that the university is simply an economic institution no different from any other except insofar as making shoes is different from renting high-rises.

There was always a minority for whom the corporate function and even the citizenship function were questionable as such. The university after the Second World War continued the function of social criticism that has always hung around those who ask basic questions about human being and social organization. The socially critical activities of individual faculty were more or less tolerated in the 1960's, but when faculty and students tried to align the university as an institution with democratic forces outside in opposition to the government-corporation nexus—such as at Simon Fraser University or the London School of Economics—the possibility was soon closed down by the police. The critical minority was more acceptable within the public university than it is within the corporate one, though there were always limits. Thus, there is a tendency for radical critics to succumb to the liberal and social democratic narrative of decline, forgetting that the public role of the university in the welfare state was an interlude in a longer history in which university education was a key ideological and practical preparation for a career in the imperial adventure. The British Empire—or French, German, etc.—needed administrators and bureaucrats as much as soldiers, informants and head-breakers. The Canadian state continued to play this role within its own borders. The public university was itself a transformation of the traditional role of the elite university.

Such a materialistic definition provokes discomfort in those of us who work and study in the university. Not because it is wrong but because it is right. Nevertheless, it fails to capture

that for which we struggle when we teach and learn—the ability to think meaningfully about one’s experience that allows a deeper judgment of the current situation and brings one’s future actions into question—that one can still perhaps call for short (without implying any specific allegiances) ‘enlightenment.’ The struggle for enlightenment in its individual, social and biological dimensions has never by any means been limited to the university, but the dignity of the university’s role has rested on its claim to a link with the project of enlightenment. It is this claim that unsettles the purely materialistic definition of the university. Thus the ‘idealistic’ definition that the university is ‘a community of scholars’ resurges when one attempts to articulate the project that animates learning. It is all too easy to document the failures that prove that this definition does not capture the everyday practice of university life. It is more difficult to abandon it entirely in the face of an inquiring student or one’s own struggle to confront despair or madness.

The university is an institution of thought. Thus, its economic and political functions are pervaded by a practice whose distinctiveness consists in its attempt to transcend those functions by inquiring into their justification and their place in the wider social order. The university has been most itself when it has approximated in practice this struggle for enlightenment. Must this definition remain ‘idealistic,’ that is to say, must it ignore the realities of economy and politics? Is it only an ideology that dissimulates? It would seem so if the struggle for enlightenment were severed from its practical base in the encounter that produces education. However, even the most mundane practices of the university appeal to legitimations that refer to the moral and social significance of education. While such legitimation contains a perennial slide toward becoming a comforting ideology that merely masks a rude reality, it can never become entirely so due to the specificity of education as a practice. It is this specificity that accounts for the fact that there was always a minority for

whom the corporate function and even the citizenship function were questionable as such. Thus, in this sense the critics are well-placed. Their criticism is rooted in a practice that cannot be entirely dissipated as long as any distinction remains between education and selling shoes.

The practical and organizational core of the institution of thought is the seminar room with its interchange between younger, beginning thinkers and one or more older, experienced ones. This encounter is not an exchange of information (which produces nothing new) but precisely an *encounter*, an event. The event of embodied reflection animates the struggle for enlightenment. It is no wonder that the corporate university in the most wealthy countries in the world cannot find sufficient resources to fund encounters in seminar rooms. While the public university of the welfare state was more accommodating, it also contained a tendency toward imparting information to serve purposes decided elsewhere. Both citizenship and corporate models prefer the lecture hall with its many listeners and few experts to the common struggle of the seminar room. Lectures can be learned and witty. They can be benign, taken in moderation, but the core of the university is the search for a not-yet-discovered understanding, a still-elusive formulation. This search produces enlightenment, not the supposed possession of knowledge itself which could be transmitted to the largest possible number of adherents. To define the university in this manner is not necessarily 'idealistic' in the sense of ignoring the material realities which make the university possible and invade its practices. It is simply a definition through the best of what the university does, based in a specific activity which the university did not create but to which it has given form, which concretizes enlightenment as the most fundamental and universal human task.³

Thus, the core of the university is the encounter between students and faculty and it is their responsibility to undertake that encounter in a spirit of enlightenment. Otherwise, what they do could be done better elsewhere. A community engaged in the search for knowledge enacts critical thinking. The justification for academic freedom is in the activity of critical thinking. Genuine searching requires criticism of received truth and constituted powers and demands the mutual criticism of students and teachers based in the quality of their ideas rather than their social positions. Criticism is of the idea, not the person, and is not only compatible with mutual respect of persons but demands and reinforces such respect. Despite its embodiment in the seminar room, this activity cannot be confined to the university. It has a wider importance which provokes a critique of all those forces which prevent enlightenment and which entrench domination and ignorance. Occasionally, thinkers who have taken this project seriously have been drawn to articulate in the public realm as social criticism the ethic that is built into the practice of university teaching and learning. For this, they have often been stigmatized by the powerful in university and society as ‘outspoken academics’ wandering outside their supposed academic specialties without understanding, or even repressing, the ethic that is embodied within all such inquiries, specialist or otherwise. The socially relevant critical thinker has no guarantee of truth—any more than any other human—but the corrective for this is in an expanded sphere of critical thinking not in its curtailment. One must ask who is really outspoken in the society in which we live. Corporations, government, media say long and loud what they have to say. They shout from all corners and are impossible to avoid in today’s propagandistic consumer environment. When these powers stigmatize an academic for being outspoken, the intent should be clear. It is to keep public awareness and debate from extending to these powers

and their social role itself. University-based thinkers are not the only ones to raise such issues but they are one crucial source for social criticism.⁴

A conception of the university based in the educative encounter which holds social relationships up to critical inquiry necessarily finds itself in conflict with entrenched powers. The public university gained a certain autonomy by accepting the legitimacy of the corporate economy outside its gates and confining its criticism to the classroom. This bargain was possible through a conception of 'spheres of society' in which different principles prevailed. While the university was dedicated to critical thinking, the economy was dedicated to profit-making. One has only to remember the outrage that was visited from all corners when this separation was breached. In the 1960's the student movement expected 'the critical university' to play a social function also and thereby drew the wrath of both public powers and university administrators whose distance from economic powers was thus threatened. But it is important to remember that the separation was not first breached by the student movement: it was the role of the university in war research, anti-union activities, job-training for the corporate elite and its technical lieutenants such as engineers and personnel department flunkies, corporate funding of technological developments, and the failure of its critical function that provoked the student movement's rejection of the separation of spheres. The critique of the 'knowledge factory' was a key element of that movement. Indeed, the 'spheres of society' seemed only to apply to a restriction of the critical function of the university and not to its increasingly strong ties with corporate and warfare powers. It was an uneasy conception at best, though it offered more independence than the subsequent corporate university ever could. During the 1960's, in a period of expansion of the universities due to the requirements of a more scientific-technical, bureaucratic capitalism protections of academic freedom became more widespread and extensive. For a short

moment, professors were in demand and could expect greater protection of their role.⁵ Those who are senior faculty in universities today had their expectations of tenure, peer review, and academic freedom of inquiry and expression formed during this period.⁶ It is hard for us to resist a narrative of decline, but one element of resistance must be to understand the greater university freedoms institutionalized in the 1960's as a specific period of gain rather than the natural state that it has often been assumed to be. We must also keep in mind the predominantly individual nature of academic freedom thus understood, though the gains in democratic self-government within the university were of a more cooperative nature.

The corporate university has been waging a battle for some years now against those aspects of the public university that are rooted in the gains of the 1960's. The major means of this battle has been fiscal. In the same way that right-wing governments at the provincial and national levels have begun their re-structuring with the claim that there is not, or no longer, sufficient money to sustain current social insurance/welfare practices, university administrations have justified their re-structuring with the claim that governments are no longer willing to support the public university and that they have no other option but to seek funding from other sources. This is by no means an empty claim. Public funding of universities has consistently fallen for decades now and major issues about the functioning and purposes of the university need to be addressed. University administrations, on the whole, have avoided addressing such questions directly because of their bureaucratic, rather than political, approach to society and have presented the new fiscal environment as an inescapable force that has turned them toward corporate sources of funding. Dedicated funding, grant money, distance education money grabs, etc.: the university is no longer a unity that can define its own priorities; funding of specific functions prevails and the whole

is simply the sum of its dominant parts. Increasing corporate funding has supported some aspects of the university at the expense of others and ultimately transformed the public university into the corporate university with barely a word of debate. Mainly, this has been done without dismantling procedures and practices directly but by simply voiding them of real content. All debates are cut off with reference to fiscal Realpolitik and the priorities of the Dean or higher administration. The corporate university has thus come into being in concert with the undermining of democratic decision-making in the university and the rise of the power of administrations responsible only to government and corporate sources of funding and not to the internal core of the university based in the educative experience. Suppressing of genuine debate about the function of the university and its social role has been key to this transformation. While fiscal abandonment by a waning welfare state is certainly a reality, the absolute necessity of a corporate transformation is not. The absence of debate on this crucial fact has spread throughout the corporate university as a virus: we are now confronted with discourses of necessity and decline on all fronts. But this helplessness is a product and not a fact. The tail is now wagging the dog: administrations and administrators run the university; there seems no alternative to corporate funding—which means corporate priorities—and the university's critical function has become vestigial. Those who keep it alive are used as window-dressing that others may not see what's going on.

Academic procedures are the mediation between the actual functioning of the university and the corporate world. These procedures are the result of a history of the university, which has always accommodated itself to the capitalist environment, but at previous stages gained a certain independence from that environment. The history of academic freedom struggles is one major component of this; another is equity struggles. The present demands of corporatization create a pressure that erodes this hard-won independence. Thus, the

administration voids procedures and rules of self-government within the university and, when it cannot do this, violates them altogether. Thus, one current task is to defend the rules and procedures within the university that limit the administration's version of corporate rule and also to extend the democratization of the university in light of the principles that led to academic freedom in the first place. All this is based in the educative encounter of the seminar room that animates those with a vision of the democratic university.

What happens when the corporate university violates academic freedom (as they are likely to do in the process of establishing the corporate agenda on the remains of the public university)? It is not for nothing that recent years have brought us a number of academic freedom cases that go to the heart of the functioning of the corporate university. Well, they don't come down to your office and announce that that is what they are going to do. Since there are still vestigial procedures and rules that make such violations look bad, their actions must be rationalized in another way. Since they are, obviously, responsible administrators doing a necessary job, then the fault cannot be theirs. If fault is not theirs, it must lie elsewhere. Thus, ensues a frantic search for others at fault. Finger-pointing at 'troublemakers' who 'do not play by the rules' is essential to the administrative diktat of corporate rule. This phenomenon has emerged in all the recent cases of violation of academic freedom in Canada—Nancy Olivieri, David Healy, David Noble. All have been transformed miraculously and instantaneously from respected academics worthy of high-ranking jobs and research grants into irresponsible troublemakers and charlatans. The logic of the scapegoat underpins the violations essential to the corporate university's transformation of the purpose of the university. If critical thinking is out, then ritual blaming is in.

Here is the logic: The university has procedures which, theoretically at least, rule out non-academic grounds and 'old-boy' connections and rumours. If the administration wants to make a decision based on such rumours, old-boy connections or non-academic grounds, then it must interfere with the procedures. Then, if anyone points this out, they must defend themselves from wrongdoing. (After all, even if rules were broken, they were only doing what's necessary in the current corporate environment.) If they are not wrong in interfering in this way, then someone else must be culpable: the people who pointed out the violation, the committees that made the overturned decisions, most of all, the person whose academic freedom has been violated. The violated one is transformed in an instant into a powerful source of wrong-doing, thus justifying the 'special means' that were necessary to avoid this error. Expell the outside agitator! Then our nice and peaceful university will function smoothly again. This strategy works well given the congenital timidity of the professor type alongside the current corporate forces that make it seem the only 'realistic' option.

Such expulsions do not only occur in the publicized cases. They occur also wherever students and faculty overstep the bounds of a narrow specialty to ask more general and universal questions. Keeping everyone within defined and safe boundaries ensures that difficult questions will not be asked. The corporate university cannot address openly such difficult questions, thus it must make sure that they do not arise. Therefore, it promotes and polices a confinement of inquiry to technical questions within pre-established boundaries that violates not only the procedures, but the function and rationale, of the university as an institution of free inquiry. It is a university in name only, and then only because the right to so name is vested exclusively in the government. The culture of compliance that prevails today allows the corporate university to veil its usurpation of the name. The first task is thus to over-step these boundaries, to raise the larger questions, to make the issues public and

thus to fulfil the social task of the university by bringing critical thinking to the public outside the university.

Contemporary society is pervaded by knowledge-based innovations of all kinds. Medical research, new drugs, technical innovations, etc. affect millions of people daily. Government institutions of regulation and testing, such as Health Canada and Environment Canada, have been seriously degraded by under-funding such that they often have to rely on privately funded testing to make their decisions. Without an independent body capable of testing the claims of such knowledge-based innovations, the public is left vulnerable. I take it as obvious that corporations who test their own products, from which they intend to make huge profits, are not genuine sources of independent assessments. University-based researchers, on the other hand, have both the expertise and the independence to make assessments in the public interest. Moreover, they are able to raise questions concerning the larger social context and consequences of such innovations (if not hampered by being confined to delimited technical questions). Thus, the corporate agenda needs university-based research because it has a greater purchase on the public trust due to its presumed independence, at the same time as it must undermine this independence because it tends to raise questions that might challenge the corporate agenda. A politics of the democratic university in the corporate age will have to address this contradiction and, to do so, will have to take its critique and agenda beyond the university faculty to the students whose education is compromised by corporate-dominated research and the public whose welfare is sacrificed to it.

This point is perhaps easy to see in the case of medical and technical innovations, but it is no less pertinent to those who study the social sciences and humanities. Relevant thinking about social structures and practices, their history and their prognosis, is required by a democratic society which relies on informed citizens capable of sensible decisions. There is

an important role for academic freedom in a democratic society and a defence of the democratic university cannot prevail unless it reaches the active citizens with which it has a common interest. Social democratization and the democratic university, while not exactly equivalent, cannot ultimately prosper without each other.

The Canadian Association of University Teachers' (CAUT) policy on academic freedom recognizes this connection. It begins "The common good of society depends on the search for knowledge and its free exposition. Academic freedom in universities is essential to both these purposes in the teaching function of the university as well as in its scholarship and research. ... Academic freedom does not require neutrality on the part of the individual. Rather, academic freedom makes commitment possible."⁷ Its logic proceeds from the good of society, to the search for knowledge, to the necessity for free inquiry in the search for knowledge, to the necessity for individual commitment and expression in this search. To this degree, my argument is nothing more than an independent and somewhat more extended statement of this logic. But note: the CAUT policy ends "Academic freedom carries with it the duty to use that freedom in a manner consistent with the scholarly obligation to base research and teaching on an honest search for knowledge." Again, no disagreement, but the policy on academic freedom ends here with the defence of freedom of inquiry. It defends only the individual freedom of academics and extends neither to democratic decision-making within the university nor to the social responsibility of the university institution as such. At no point does the CAUT policy return to its point of departure in the concept of social good. In this respect my argument suggests more. Society as a whole, through its dominant powers, always makes decisions, not only about inquiry, but about the application of knowledge. Health and technical innovations, and also social-political ideas, have social applications. One should investigate them freely, but should one remain silent about their

application? Is there no concept of academic freedom that pertains to the question of whether the products of free inquiry are being properly and sensibly applied? Certainly, this kind of evaluation always takes place in some form. Powerful institutions such as corporations, governments and the media engage in it regularly. If academic freedom does not extend to the evaluation of knowledge-based applications, then it completes just half its task. The question of ‘what is a social good?’ must be raised in universities and outside them. This is the connection between the democratization of the university and the democratization of society. Without it, academic freedom in the corporate university is just a wizened, empty shell capable only of justifying the freedom of researchers to accept the large grants proffered by private interests. It is sustained by the logic of the scapegoat. A democratic society demands a more lively conception of academic freedom. Its logic must be one of free inquiry and expression complemented by responsible evaluations of the social good and the actual applications of research.

The corporate university undermines academic freedom and self-government entirely. But the possibility of a democratic university respecting individual academic freedom while enacting an institutional social freedom through democratic decision-making haunts both the recent history of the university and its contemporary situation. Recalling this history should establish the importance of defending those gains made at an earlier period, but it should also avoid the narrative of decline. The public university repressed, no less than the corporate university, the democratic possibility that is rooted in the respectful give-and-take of cooperative learning in the seminar. This possibility cannot be kept alive without raising basic questions about the meaning and function of the university in a corporate environment and pressing for the greatest possible cooperative autonomy that will sustain criticism of that environment. Nothing less befits the institution of thought.

Notes:

¹ The pre-capitalist medieval university and its ancient progenitor, the Platonic Academy, are outside the scope of this essay, which will not reach any further back than the 19th century.

² My involvement in such matters has been, until recently, only through daily university politics. The motivation for trying to think more systematically about them derives from the recent (since 2001, as yet unresolved) controversy over administrative violation of academic freedom in the proposed hiring of David Noble by the Department of Humanities at Simon Fraser University. Documents relevant to this controversy can be found at www.ianangus.ca

³ See my “Appendix Two: Why are we in the university?” to “Sharing Secrets, or, On Burrowing in Public” in Ian Angus (ed.) *Anarcho-Modernism: Toward a New Critical Theory in Honour of Jerry Zaslove* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2001) p. 376.

⁴ Another important source, which also often stimulates research questions for academics, is social movements. I have discussed the impact of social movements on democracy and public debate in *Emergent Publics: An Essay on Social Movements and Democracy* (Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring, 2001) and *Primal Scenes of Communication* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000).

⁵ Michiel Horn, *Academic Freedom in Canada: A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999) chapter 10.

⁶ One other aspect of this expansion was the entry of a large and dominant number of U.S. professors into the Canadian university system. While the politics of such professors was by no means uniform, this had the effect of marginalizing specifically Canadian issues and traditions of thought, calling forth the report *The Struggle for Canadian Universities* (Toronto: New Press, 1969) edited by Robin Mathews and James Steele. The argument that Canadian universities need to be rooted in Canadian society in order effectively to address its problems

retains its relevance even though the more recent government regulation concerning hiring has altered the U.S. predominance. University culture often opposes such regulation because it is committed to a free-floating idea of excellence rooted in that 1960's dominance and which has had a huge impact in muting the critical potential of Canadian universities. See my discussion of Canadian nationalism in *A Border Within: National Identity, Cultural Plurality and Wilderness* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's Press, 1997) chapter 2.

⁷ CAUT-ACPPU, Policy Statement on Academic Freedom (approved by the CAUT Council, May 1977) available at http://www.caut.ca/english/about/policy/academic_freedom.asp.