

On the Present and (Dark) Future of Academia and Humanities

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Abstract

I have a pessimistic view on the present and future of high education in general, and humanities in particular. As I see things, we face three main related problems. The first is what I would characterize as corporate control; the second, what I perceive as a class-divide enterprise; and the third as an attempt to limit the freedom of expression. I should add that my general impressions are mainly based on what I perceived within the North American higher educational system and in Europe, especially in England. Furthermore, I do not claim to be discovering something sociologically novel. What's happening in higher education is a mere reflection of what's going on in our neo-liberal capitalist society. My aim is modest. It mainly consists in highlighting how the neo-liberal and globalization (marketing) processes are affecting higher education and research. The conclusion doesn't look rosy. Intellectuals, philosophers in particular, should take time to reflect on the current corruption of academia, and take a stance against the attack on the integrity of higher education.

Key words: Neo-liberal capitalist society; Corruption of academia; Globalization; Academia and Humanities

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As I see things, we face three main related problems. The first is what I would characterize as *corporate control*; the second, what I perceive as a *class-divide enterprise*; and the third as an attempt to *limit the freedom of expression*. I should add that my general impressions are mainly based on what I perceived within the North American higher educational system and in Europe, especially in England. Furthermore, I do not claim to be discovering something sociologically novel. What's happening in higher education is a mere reflection of what's going on in our neo-liberal capitalist society. My aim is modest. It mainly consists in highlighting how the neo-liberal and globalization (marketing) processes are affecting higher education and research. The conclusion doesn't look rosy. Intellectuals, philosophers in particular, should take time to reflect on the current corruption of academia, and take a stance against the attack on the integrity of higher education.

1. CORPORATIONS CONTROL AND PROFITS

The general picture can be summarized as follows: we have taxpayers' money subsidizing academic research and education that ends up profiting big private businesses and corporations. As a matter of fact, a lot of research (and education) is governmentally sponsored, be it by the central government, or sub-state governance. In short, scholars engaged in higher education and/or research get subventions, either through their salary and/or governmental grants partly or fully paid by taxpayers money and student loans. Their research outcomes, directly or indirectly, ends up profiting the CEOs and/or shareholders of private corporations. It suffices to think of whom most of the research related to artificial intelligence turns out benefiting. Corporations such as Apple or IBM, not to mention nowadays internet-related businesses, such as Google, Facebook, E-bay, and Amazon, have ultimately been possible thanks to tax-payers' money. The latter, i.e.

the common users like us, in order to use these facilities end up paying for these services made possible by our tax money: the various internet-providers comes with a price, computer programs don't come for free, and so on. Most of the research that permitted the development of computer sciences came out of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, MIT, in the sixties and seventies by research often sponsored by the Pentagon, thus by the USA taxpayers. What the consumers end up with are costly services whose benefits and profits end up, mainly, in the bank accounts of the CEOs and shareholders of corporations. Another striking case at hand is furnished by the gains some publishers are making out of research publications, often sponsored by governmental research grants. Think, for instance, of most journals and review articles. In most of the cases—actually, all the cases I know in my profession—an investigator freely submits a research paper that gets assessed, for free (that tends to be advertised as “service to the community”), by his/her peers. The publisher, who is rarely a non-profit organization, holds the copyrights to the publication. The various Institutions, such as Universities, will then have to pay to permit their scholars and students to have access to these publications. This is another case of taxpayers' money ending in the bank accounts of some CEOs and shareholders.

When someone “breaks”, so to speak, the rules, he or she faces big trouble. The recent attack against Aaron Swartz is symptomatic. He was under indictment for logging into JSTOR, a database of scholarly articles, and rapidly downloading those articles with the intent to make them public. He was being charged for stealing and copyright infringement. Actually, Aaron Swartz didn't make the articles he downloaded publicly available; all that he *de facto* did was to download them. This, at the end of the day, compares to taking out from the library a huge amount of books. For this alleged crime Aaron Swartz faced fifty years in a USA federal prison. Under such pressure he committed suicide. It is worth noticing that in the USA for the robbery of a bank by force and violence one faces prison for a maximum of ten years, while willfully helping al-Qaeda developing a nuclear weapons program one risks twenty years in prison¹. To say that the legal system of the world's most powerful nation is out of touch with reality is an understatement. But this is the power of big corporations where information control serves the political and business system in place². To bring this point home, we can see how (tax-sponsored) academic work, contributes profit to private, businesses, but not to those whose tax money paid for the work.

All this is tolerated because of the “political” apathy of most alleged intellectuals who are willing (or forced) to subscribe to the *status quo* that profit what, after the Wall Street Occupy Movement, we came to know as the 1% (well in most cases it benefits only the 0,1%).

2. CLASS-DIVIDE EDUCATION

The constant increase in tuitions fees only contributes to the accentuation of the class divide. This isn't, for obvious reasons, the language favored by right wing politicians, such as the American Republicans or the British Tories. But it is, like it or not, the reality we confront. To engage in higher education, students often face prohibitive prices and, once graduated, end up with big debts. In the USA, for instance, nowadays students loan debt bypass the total credit card debt and total auto loan debt³. This comports two main problems. First of all, students from lower classes are discouraged from getting involved in this economically uphill struggle. Secondly, when a student ends his or her studies with a big debt, s/he cannot engage in a career that is not financially remunerating. Imagine, for instance, someone finishing law school or medical school having to pay back his/her student loan. Such a student is unlikely, perhaps even prevented, to engage in, say, a socially oriented career. A lawyer or a doctor may not join a NGO for s/he will never gain enough money to reimburse the loan accumulated during their studies. I know of some Canadian doctors recently graduated that, because of a big student loan on their back, emigrated South of the boarder to work for private aesthetic clinics. This was the easiest way to have an income that would help them to reimburse their student debt. Thus, people who may be keen to devote their career to some socially oriented institution are, if not forced, strongly encouraged or constrained, to serve moneymaking businesses that mostly help the favored and privileged classes of society. Not many people can undergo expensive aesthetic surgeries, let alone, have some big law firms representing and defending their interests.

The general consequence of the increase in tuition fees is that higher education and personally fulfilling careers come easier for economically well-off people. Furthermore, it is hard to imagine that students coming out from the privileged stratus of society turn out serving the interests of the general population, not to mention the interests of the unprivileged ones. They are likely to end up serving and perpetuating the sort of nepotism and privileges we all well know. According to the Wall Street Journal, the 2012 pay of the chairman of Goldman Sachs

¹ Cf.: <http://www.alternet.org/10-awful-crimes-get-you-less-prison-time-what-aaron-swartz-faced>

² As a case study on how totalitarian systems control the information flow cf., for instance, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2013/01/2013117111237863121.html>

³ Cf.: <http://www.zcommunications.org/mlk-injustice-index-2013-racism-materialism-and-militarism-in-the-us-by-bill-quigley>

was of 21 million US dollars. In the USA, from 1978 to 2011, compensation for workers grew by 5.7 %, while during the same period, CEOs compensation grew by 725 %. While in 1965 CEOs earned about 20 times the typical worker, in 2011, the typical CEO made over 200 times the typical worker. According to Nobel Laureate Joseph Stiglitz, in 2010 the top 1% of earners took home 93% of the growth in incomes, while middle income households have lower incomes than they did in 1996⁴. Education in general and higher education in particular, contributed to this kind of economical landscape. The current higher education situation doesn't seem to be helping in readdressing this trend. On the contrary, it looks like education is increasingly structured in such a way that these socio-economical inequalities, instead of decreasing, will continue to increase. And, when at the economic global forum in Davos this year it has been argued that income inequality is the biggest global risk, this trend is, to say the least, alarming⁵.

3. FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

With the influence of corporations on higher education and some well funded think-tanks or lobby groups, which often are just two faces of the same coin, professors' and researchers' freedom is under threat. It is doubtful that a cigarette corporation will sponsor biological or chemical studies, showing the dangerous influence of smoking. It's hard to imagine an oil corporation subsidizing environmental studies proving that oil consumption and extraction is ecologically unfriendly. With the increase of privately sponsored research (and teaching) in higher education, we face an increase of research promoting the big, profit making, agenda of their sponsors. The consequence is that academic researchers (that may also have Governmental subventions) tend to be indirectly used and exploited by corporations. We have here another clear example of the ways taxpayers' money turns out to profit the CEOs and shareholders of private businesses and enterprises. This is not that shocking when we look at how corporations, such as oil and pharmaceutical corporations, and financial institutions, so straightforwardly influence and dictate Central Governments policies. In the USA, eight government scientists were recently fired or reassigned after they expressed their concerns to their superiors about faulty environmental science used for policy decisions. Thus, government policies manipulate science to promote their (marketing and money-making) agendas⁶. If corporations are so powerful they determine

some countries' policies and have the "democratically" elected politicians act like subservient puppets, it shouldn't be surprising that they can also easily impose and direct academic research and curriculums. And they can reach their goals either through the various politicians involved in the governance of public education and funding, whose election they sponsored (it may be more appropriate to argue that they bought the candidate and/or the elections) *or* by direct influence on Universities' and higher educations Institutions' curriculums and research. The trend we're now experiencing is that education in general, and higher education in particular, tend to be converted into producing commodities for the big market. The obvious consequence is that the traditional free spirit of the universities aiming to foster creative independent thought, critical studies and inquiries, free from external controls and constraints, is progressively getting lost⁷.

A further main consequence of the corporations' influence in academic research lies on their aim to get quickly applicable results that will immediately benefit the corporations' shareholders interests. Given the structure of a corporation and the way they need to maximize and make quick profits, they are not that keen to offer subvention for basic research that may end up profiting some other concurrent enterprises in the future. What they want are quickly applicable results. For this very reason, we see an increased in so-called applied research, with the decrease in basic research. Thus the latter, like mathematics or physics, not to mention disciplines linked to social sciences such as philosophy or arts, tend to be undermined, insofar as they may not so easily get a direct and immediate impact, read profit, for the businesses' leaders. Humanities are not exempt from this "applied-research" trend. The increased of applied disciplines to the detriment of more basic studies in humanities is alarming. If one looks, for instance, on the recent tendencies in job advertising, one realizes that more and more job announcements for university professors in Humanities and Social Sciences, ask for the candidate to be able to engage in having external funding, to be pro-active and/or entrepreneurial. The latters don't come for free. Externally founded grants for research, either by the Government or by private sector, put pressure on the way the results should affect and benefit their investment. In this marketing landscape, how to justify the impact to society of, say, history of sciences, history of ideas, metaphysics, epistemology, classic studies, etc.? The general tendency we face is the proliferation of applied researches and sciences to the disadvantage of the basic ones.

⁴ Cf.: <http://www.zcommunications.org/mlk-injustice-index-2013-racism-materialism-and-militarism-in-the-us-by-bill-quigley>

⁵ Cf.: <http://www.cnn.com/id/100384824?>

⁶ Cf.: <http://townhall.com/columnists/davidspady/2013/01/18/government-scientist-gets-fired-for-telling-the-truth-n1492207>

⁷ Cf.: <http://chomsky.info/talks/20110406.htm>

One of the major problems that arose with the emergence of Corporations' and think-tanks' influence in higher education, concerns the infringements on professors and researchers freedom of expression. When someone infringes the aims and ideologies of the sponsor one is likely to be summoned by his or her pay master, be his/her administrator, rector, or what you have. An obvious example that springs to mind is the DePaul University (Chicago) refusal to grant tenure to Professor of Political Sciences Norman Finkelstein. While Finkelstein's promotion was supported by his Department and Faculty committee, the Dean and the President overturned it. Finkelstein is well known, among other things, as a critic of Israel and of Alan Dershowitz, the famous Harvard University law professor whom Finkelstein, to use Chomsky's words, "exposed as a vulgar and fraudulent apologist for Israeli human rights violations—carefully, judiciously, with extensive documentation"⁸. In this case it is hard to believe that outside pressure by some groups that threatened to withhold their endowments and sponsorship to the university, didn't play a role in the Dean's and President's decision to deny Finkelstein's tenure and, thus, to get rid of him and his views⁹.

Academic scholars face, we could safely say, a kind of war on information. The case of Aaron Swartz I mentioned is just one among many, where the divulging of information, that doesn't please the Corporate masters or some lobby groups, put the divulgers under pressure and, often, Governmental threats. As a case in hand, we can further mention Bradley Manning, the alleged whistleblower of secret information to Wikileaks, incarcerated in what many organizations have described as inhuman conditions. Julian Assange, the Wikileaks founder, is another famous case. He entered the Ecuadorian Embassy in London asking for asylum to avoid being detained and extradited to the USA where he would be imprisoned because of his leaking of documents. And academics, especially those involved in some "hot" debates, are under the same threat. This is reminiscent of a society run by a Stalin-inspired control system. Nowadays, scholars encounter the same threat that their middle-age counterparts faced from the church. We haven't made much progress. The famous Nazi propagandist Joseph Goebbels'-tactic that truth should be suppressed when it contradicts the objectives of propaganda, is well operating nowadays. The recent war against whistleblowers and truth tellers can but confirm that. Big brother corporations are carefully scrutinizing academic research and curriculums.

CONCLUSION

Given that researchers in the humanities, like business persons, are more and more expected to be *entrepreneurial* and look for external funding, we end up with some universities having more administrators than teachers and researchers. Many administrators are now employed to help researchers compete for grants and research funds against their colleagues from other universities. Researchers and professors are then asked to peer review each other's applications, most of the time for free. This whole process further reduces the time professors can dedicate to teaching and research. Since a university's or institution's prestige also rests on the amount of money their academic corpuses generate from external funding, scholars are thus, if not literally forced, strongly encouraged to be entrepreneurial, for the good of the institution and, ultimately, their own career. And to be entrepreneurial they are forced to implicitly subscribe to the agenda set up by sponsoring businesses. Research projects that don't show up as having a direct impact to the socio-economic view and policies advocated by the sponsors are unlikely to be funded. Thus in academia the space for investigation and research having intrinsic values benefitting the general public is more and more squeezed out from universities' curriculums. Research and programs aiming at pure knowledge is eliminated in favor of research and curriculums aiming at "practical" knowledge for the good of private investors and corporations.

Given that the amount of "entrepreneurial" money generated by applied sciences is far superior to the amount generated by humanities, it is not surprising that university administrators and directors who, in justifying and advertising their institution's success (and their often inflated salaries), tend to focus on numbers and statistics, are inclined to privilege applied research. They are sometimes keen to abolish non-profitable disciplines, i.e. disciplines that, because they don't have a direct impact on the society's economical growth, face the difficult task of generating external funding. This is a direct consequence of the privatization trend we now face in higher education. And, to borrow Chomsky's words, "the privatization, of course, means privatization for the rich [and a] lower level of mostly technical training for the rest"¹⁰.

In an information society we have the advantage of being capable to attend talks, seminars, and lectures at a distance. The risk may be that educational institutions may gradually eliminate their professors insofar as their students can "attend" lectures and classes prepared and delivered by some other university. They can engage in so-called distant learning. A video recorded class can be

⁸ See: <http://www.campus-watch.org/article/id/3532> and http://www.democraticunderground.com/discuss/duboard.php?az=view_all&address=124x172861

⁹ Cf.: <http://leiterreports.typepad.com/blog/2007/10/academic-freedom.html>

¹⁰ Cf.: <http://chomsky.info/talks/20110406.htm>

delivered to millions and millions of people around the world year after year. Students would simply be asked to register and pay for this class and the credits obtained. The human interaction, which is so important, involved in education is thus jeopardized, with students' creativity thrown out of the window. Students may pass tests and exams at a distance. Seminars, where students are encouraged to be interactive, risk becoming ex-cathedra lectures. Students will be spoon-fed with information they will then have to repeat in order to get their credits. Needless to say, such a distant-learning system will further risk being under great scrutiny and control of either the Government and/or corporations delivering the service. The inevitable consequence is that such an educational system serves the socio-political and economic agenda of some powerful groups and businesses; it will turn out to be a kind of propaganda, forming subservient and obedient individuals who are neither critical nor can see the point of critical study. This would contribute, to use Chomsky's phraseology, to a powerful form of manufacturing consent.

In universities today, students tend to be considered as clients. The former are buying a service. There is thus a tendency to consider their teachers as sellers and providers. The latter are asked to deliver the necessary skills enabling their customers to actively enter the labor force, which, most of the time resumes in acquiring the necessary abilities permitting them to enter a corporation as skilled workers. Universities, with a few exceptions, lean towards becoming devotional schools dedicated in the formation of workers fulfilling the need of various corporations and their shareholders. In such a situation, teaching will be carefully monitored. With terms like "drop off", "retention", "progress" etc. part of the university administrative jargon, teaching gets carefully scrutinized by administrators. If students ought to be retained, high failure in a class penalizes professors in many ways. The students' evaluation of the teacher (it is unlikely that a student who failed a class will praise his/her professor) directly affects a professor's career progress. Furthermore,

professors are often asked to fill in administrative forms justifying their teaching to the relevant administrators who will be assessing their work and progress and, ultimately, their career. Failure in students' retention and progress will penalize education as well. To avoid being summoned by administrators, professors are thus inclined to lower students' expectations and inflate their grades. Creativity that often goes with the unexpected and the unpredictable will tend to disappear, with a more and more unified teaching curriculum and methodology taking over.

In such a corporate-run culture, the human and social cost that comes with the gradual converting of education into producing commodities for the job market cannot be underestimated. The way higher education is now turning to be so subserviently serving the privileged rich, the 1 % (or, more accurately, the 0,1 %), cannot be underrated as well. Higher education is now under the risk of becoming a corporate propaganda machine allowing the few privileged to further increase their benefits. This is scary insofar as it ends up promoting plutocracy where, to quote once again the Nazi propagandist Joseph Goebbels, "the insane belief in equality that found its crassest expression in political parties is no more. The principle of personality has replaced the notion of popular idiocy"¹¹. In such marketing culture promoting neoliberal policies, we will not hear someone telling the truth that private funded research is a gutter of corruption.

To sum up: higher education and research in the humanities, is under treat. The three main problems affecting higher education I have explored, directly impact on humanities. First of all, corporation control doesn't tend to promote investing in humanities. Secondly, the class-divide enterprise promoting the well-being of the privileged ones guides education and research into forming subservient people. Last, but not least, the limitation on the freedom of expression forces academics and their students to subsume themselves to a "politically-correct" agenda promoting the views and agenda of the few.

¹¹ Cf.: <http://www.calvin.edu/academic/cas/gpa/goeb41.htm>