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CULTURAL CONTRADICTIONS AND ETHICAL DILEMMAS IN THE CORPORATE-STYLED UNIVERSITY

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It's commonplace these days to note that American universities—and a growing number of universities overseas—are corporate in nature, practice, and culture and have been so for many years. Indeed, the Harvard [University] Corporation claims to be the oldest corporation of any kind in the western hemisphere and was founded in 1650. In the classic sense of the term, every university is corporate in that it is an institution that is bigger than the sum of its parts (faculty, students, and administration) and is united in a common mission, even if that mission has become uncommonly complex in recent years. But as mass education has developed in the past century and universities have had to be increasingly self-supporting, their corporate nature has inevitably become more commercial. Universities exist in a “knowledge society,” one that is shaped by the ever-growing commercial market for ideas and information transferal. Institutions of higher learning have been a primary engine for economic development, supporting the growth of the knowledge economy and understandably seeking profit themselves from the development of intellectual property and applied learning, not to mention ever-increasing tuition rates for all their programming. They have been willing to charge prices large enough to achieve, sustain, or even augment profitability, even while they are legally non-profits.

Institutions of higher learning, furthermore, form their own complex and loosely self-regulated market, which competitively defines everything the academy does, from research enterprises to sport to the curriculum. The market shapes academic trends, the value of ideas, the professional standing of faculty, the development of assessment and accreditation criteria, the importance of a degree as a job credential, the goals of general education, the shaping of ethical values, the growth of study abroad and globalized learning, the consumerist ideals of parents and students, and so on. A degree from a college or university must have academic integrity—but it is also a market-driven commodity in which knowledge tends to be important as much for its exchange value as for its symbolic or speculative value, its ability to develop further knowledge.

The university, in short, is now even more of a corporation of learning than Thorstein Veblen said it was a hundred years ago, and it has developed extensive links to the commercial sector. That is not going to change. We cannot de-corporatize the university, as calls from some scholar-critics (like Henry Giroux and Stanley Aronowitz) have urged, because the market for higher education is not going to disappear. Government (however Big) is most unlikely to take over all (or even some) of the 3900 institutions of higher learning in the US. It's more likely that commercial corporations will take over independent universities in years to come, as they have already begun to do. Even in Europe and other parts of the world, where higher education has traditionally been under state control, the privatization of higher education is well underway in order to competitively develop mass education on the American model to meet workforce needs, increase accountability, and augment state funding of higher education. According to UNESCO (Scott, 2000), in 2000, private institutions educated around 30 percent of the student population in Eastern and Central Europe. In Latin America more than half of student enrolment is in the private sector. Even state universities in the U.S., facing heavy cuts in state and federal funding, now frequently refer to themselves as “state-assisted” institutions and are actively seeking public and corporate support.
Americans seem happy that higher education is market "regulated." Recent polls taken by the Chronicle of Higher Education (Chronicle, May 2, 2003) and the Educational Testing Service (Chronicle, June 19, 2003) show that the American public overwhelmingly agrees that colleges and universities are among "the most valuable resources to the U.S." The level of confidence in higher education is second only to confidence in the military. All of which means that the public is happy so long as a degree credential is valuable, for the primary aim of higher education (say around 90 per cent of students polled each year in the past decade for the annual UCLA national freshman polls), is to provide a job credential.

On the other hand, higher education remains (mostly, but not always) smart enough to know that it cannot let go of the ideal of liberal education and the belief that undergraduate education is a broad and general education for the intellect—one that is essential to sustain cultural values and ethical reasoning, and one that cannot simply be explained in commercial terms. The university is the last social institution where learning and research can be valued for its pursuit of "truth" to which no strings are attached. Liberal education is an education for creativity, clear thinking, sound argument, and good citizenship—in all the ways we choose to celebrate our nationhood and now our global identity. It is also fast becoming, through the popularity of ecology programs, an education for the necessary sustainability of nature and the environment.

Defining an effective liberal education program remains one of the great ethical challenges to the university because this alone seems able to counter the assumption that knowledge has value primarily in exchange. I have described at length elsewhere the historical and economic pressures which have lead to the various American experiments in this field. But defining liberal education remains as great a problem in the new millennium as it was 150 years ago, particularly as we cannot resort to an aesthetic and transcendent theory of sweetness and light. It remains to some extent a focus on the history of ideas and culture and the nurturing of self-reflective reason. But what we once widely called liberal education is now general education. And that is increasingly about basic literacy, numeracy, and interpretation skills, along with an introduction to the various research and discovery methodologies of the disciplines and some special training in civics and service learning. General education is expected to smooth out the tensions within the mission of the university itself, which is complex indeed as we try to provide training for the world of work, to instill ethical values, to teach the history of ideas, to define reason and protocols of scientific research, to develop the economy at large, and to promote the public good.

I think I've said nothing so far that would surprise anyone who knows the university well. On the one hand we are unavoidably corporate and commercial because we do sell a service to the public, we are the social institution that offers essential preparation for the workplace, and universities must, to some extent, operate as efficient businesses. But on the other hand, we still like to think that knowledge is not for sale, must develop freely, and is best organized in the traditional disciplines. We hoard learning in large disciplinary storerooms to which we allow students progressive entry as they master various required courses. But increasingly, this organization of knowledge appears old-fashioned and even ineffective. Knowledge today is plural not singular. What survives as important knowledge invariably has some kind of pragmatic if not applied function, or it works to open up lines of questioning that lead to such a value. And it is clear that we have over-produced knowledge in the disciplines, indulging research agendas that exist primarily to justify faculty within their disciplines. Nor surprisingly, the fear of eroding academic freedom, not to mention budgetary pressures and market values that drive our organizational efficiencies, have left us with a gnawing dilemma over how to define essential knowledge and how to promote student learning. The public and most institutions of
higher education have yet to grapple with the cultural contradictions that lie at the heart of academe and are slowly but surely eroding whatever united front higher education displays.

I have described these cultural contradictions at length elsewhere (Gould, 2003), but let me briefly list a few of the more persistent ones:

- The university talks a good talk about liberal education but increasingly we place greater emphasis on the importance of vocational education and applied research for commercial gain. That is, funds are often diverted from the Arts and Sciences in order to promote revenue-producing technology and professional education. And although there is a great deal that is highly creative about education in these fields, the kind of creativity that grows out of a liberal education, one that broadly synthesizes ethical, aesthetic, and historical concerns, may soon take a back seat to “creativity” that is entrepreneurial in a commercial sense. That is, creativity is becoming judged more and more by its useful outcomes than by more intangible developments of the intellect.

- Civic education and concern for the public good is often simply an “add on” to the university mission. Indeed, university missions are nothing but a collection of added values. They have developed over the past 100 years as an accretion rather than a synthesis of important social concerns. Mission statements reveal an unholy alliance between goals that have been accumulated over the years. We have great difficulty focusing and synthesizing the university’s complex mission, stating clearly, simply, and forcefully what the university is for. We increasingly have trouble explaining what a liberal education is because the word “liberal” itself has become so tainted in our popular embrace of conservative values.

- Decentralized budgeting systems set departments at war with each other and serve mainly to encourage their isolation rather than cooperation. Research in league with corporate interests has eroded a trust in academic research protocols (Bok, 2003). Dramatic tuition increases in the past three decades have created enormous hardships for students, as has the huge rise in student debt. Learning is driven by credentialism and consumerism, however, so it seems acceptable (but remains ethically questionable) to raise the cost of learning in the face of continuing public demand. Universities vie with each other for students and are willing to leverage financial aid to build a student body that promotes status in national rankings rather than genuine diversity, making it hard for any university to be both a meritocracy and a community that reflects democratic and diverse values.

- Academic freedoms have been eroded for faculty, and even where freedoms remain intact, the strong influence of faculty, when serious decisions are to be made, is rarely felt. A division of labor demoralizes faculty and results from a radical disjunct between those who own the material means of production (trustees and regents) and those who own the mental means of production (faculty knowledge-workers). The disciplines have thus become over-professionalized and over-theorized as faculty retreat to their knowledge bases. Thus the market over-produces knowledge that is fragmented, commercialized, and commodified—in uncontrollably large quantities. And this is clearly supported by decentralized budgeting systems that set department against department in pursuit of the profit motive.

- For a number of years, activist trustees, politicians, and think-tank critics have been aiming for reforms of academe to make it more accountable to “stakeholders” (parents and students) and more accessible to political and even
religious interests. In some schools and states they threaten radical “reforms” that inevitably follow models of corporate restructuring. And much of this has taken place—when it has not been an expression of moral outrage over the erosion of Virtue and Values in the university—with little concern for the curriculum itself. Indeed the University of Excellence and Talent Development has replaced the qualitative ideals of the University of Culture—a point amply illustrated by Bill Readings in his now classic study, The University in Ruins (1996). Accreditation bodies have few tangible standards and have developed a culture of assessment obsessed with measurement to the extent that we often lose sight of the relative value of what is being measured.

- We speak fulsomely of globalization and the importance of study abroad to prepare world citizens. But few schools really attempt to develop and link courses that reflect a truly internationalized curriculum. Multiculturalism has simply become a pluralism of individual cultural agendas. As in the world of commercial markets and geo-political economic theories, internationalization too often means globalization of Western values and a strengthening of western corporate culture rather than genuine curiosity about or respect for foreign cultures. This is in keeping with the fact that higher education has become less of an intellectual challenge and more of a cultural right of passage made desirable by the rhetorical over-reach of slickly economistic and patriotic public relations.

And so on. When it does not appear to be completely market driven, unavoidably our culture of academe appears nothing if not contradictory in the struggle to reconcile service to Caesar and service to Sophia. Our dilemma is positively biblical. Yet in the eyes of the public the university remains (for now at least) the most value-laden of social institutions, and we have an important social duty to fulfill the public’s need for the university to function ethically. One of the facts of life in any democratic system of education, after all, is that academic politics is public politics: universities exist to serve the public good and can continue to do so only as long as they earn the public trust. That they have that trust right now is clear; that the trust is based on a public understanding of the economics and politics of the university even after numerous analyses by scholars and media writers, is not so clear. But in economic terms, universities exist in a kind of futures market: we offer a learning experience that no student or parent can fully define in advance. But they bet that the experience will be good and universities try to assist them in placing that bet with data about solid research, a reputation for having good teachers, and the value of a degree in the marketplace. Public relations spin is more important than ever in academe.

We need to focus on our ethical responsibility to live up to the public trust in ways other than national rankings and exaggerated public relations claims. It is our responsibility to develop knowledge that is important and useful but also to define a broadly inclusive mission that speaks to the public good. The dichotomizing of public versus private good needs to be avoided. Yes, we do love the political clash of values and secretly enjoy the culture wars in academe—which surely are not over. But the university has to set its house in order and somehow integrate the virtues of both a liberal and a market-driven professional education. Globalization and corporatization—those twin barrels of the great battleship Capitalism—are forcing us to do this because they are changing the traditional character of the university. The more the knowledge society is commercialized, the more it over-produces knowledge merely for its own sake.

My argument is a simple one, then. So contradictory is our culture in academe—at once stubbornly academic and resolutely corporate—that we have a genuinely ethical mandate to earn
the public trust by balancing all parts of the university’s mission. The university is not just about job preparation. It is also no longer just about interior design: learning the aesthetics of the well-decorated mind. It’s about educating the “whole person.” It’s about creativity, responsible citizenship, sound debate on human values, the questioning of utilitarian reasoning, an understanding of history, and a willingness to explore both nature and culture. It is not simply about an entrepreneurship that encourages classics professors to share in the wealth by writing film scripts for sandal and toga sagas, but about an ethical creativity—itself a form of entrepreneurship—that seeks to enrich knowledge by bringing the disciplines together to address major social, cultural, and political issues. And that requires as much of an immersion in the arts as in the humanities and in the social and natural sciences. As Richard Rorty has put it, we must become ironists and understand that ethics is an emotional and imaginative response to complex decisions that reason alone will not solve. The arts, above all, are the staging places for passionate debates about human values.

In conclusion, then, we must do two things to meet the ethical challenges posed by our highly complex and contradictory culture:

(a) **The first challenge is to synthesize the mission of the university:** to tease out our complex goals for higher education and try to focus the mission of the university so that we clearly serve the public good by producing graduates who are empowered by their education—which must be broadly defined in terms of intellectual and rhetorical skills and not simply vocationalism. Somehow we have to argue that this is the staple of a vibrant democracy, not belonging to a particular political party, religion, or even ethnic group.

   It is fashionable to talk about a democratic education these days, and if I had to choose one thing that pulls the university’s mission together it is a concern that the university exists primarily for the public good. And what creates that good is a democratic education, one in which the curriculum addresses the following issues: (i) the promotion of democratic values, including an understanding of the problematic and often frustrating nature of democracy and our continuing need to mediate and adjust its ideology; (ii) the development of the university itself as a democratic institution, one that is driven by principles that rise above the profit-making offered by the market to develop a genuinely inclusive community of learning, opening access to high quality education for all and revising the curriculum so that it really addresses issues that define how we live in a democratic society. Markets, after all, are not democratic by their nature. Democracy is a political system that is defined by its own process of self-regulation and does not leave everything to chance: its end is its beginning, but the nature of democratic processes is by no means self-evident and must be constantly re-examined.

(b) **The second challenge is to restructure the way we organize the disciplinary knowledge that must serve the mission of a democratic education,** promoting a genuinely interdisciplinary and internationalized curriculum that works with cross-disciplinary, social and intellectual topics. We need to recognize that the entrepreneurial, ethical and social responsibilities of the university go hand in hand. The university must serve the public good by helping to shape a social meritocracy and educate generations about the forces of modernization. It must mediate the forces of modernity. It must develop knowledge through research and scholarship that know no limits and can sustain the well-being of the academic disciplines. It must provide a general, liberal education that educates people to think critically, creatively, and independently. And it must support the economy and the growth of a specialized workforce. It can only do all these things at once if it brings all the disciplines to bear on the large questions of our time, issues which make for interesting interdisciplinary courses for undergraduates. How much democracy do we need and how do we define it? How can we alleviate democracy’s discontents? What is the nature of power in today’s society and how can we genuinely share in
it? How do markets work and must they insist that profit-making is the major purpose of
democratic systems? To what extent is human behavior the result of nature or nurture? Why is
the law open to interpretation? How are human values created? And so on... the list is very long
indeed.

The enormous challenge to higher education, ironically, is not simply to broaden the gap
between the university and the society it serves, to make it more critical of capitalism’s
complaints. The university must be free enough to do this and always has done so to some
extent. The real challenge for academe, though, is to become the great synthesizer of knowledge
and social needs, to mediate much more effectively between the academic disciplines, social
needs, and social and economic power structures. The disciplines must emerge from the
shadow-watching of their departmental caves and address important topics together.

Take the question of globalization, for example and how the disciplines can contribute to its
definition:

• A somewhat common and clichéd view of globalization is that it is a synonym for
corporate globalism and by association an extension of American economic power,
which has accompanied the rise of modernity in the last century. This is a narrow view
of modernity, though, for as any world historian knows, there are many versions besides
ours. It is also a narrowly “corporate” definition of the phenomenon of globalization,
which has been in play for 500 years since the beginning of world trade in the
Renaissance. While it would be hard to argue that American forms of liberal capitalism
are not dominant in the marketplace, especially since the shaking of Asian assumptions
during the Japanese economic crisis, economic globalization remains notoriously difficult
to define because of the subtle interconnectedness of highly diverse economies and
cultures.

• Cultural globalism too is very important with the spread of mass media, consumer
habits influenced by advertising strategies, and the diffusion of digital and agricultural
technologies. Even the novel is now an international art form in the ongoing engagement
with the power struggles of postcolonialism. Film and the visual arts have blazed a
global trail for many years.

• Political globalization is also a fact of life ever since the collapse of both Western
colonialism and Eastern, communist, colonialism—as is the internationalization of the
concept of the state and social movements and the effort to develop a kind of political
morality that has universal implications, one favoring democratic practices.

• Geographical and ecological globalism further defines our internationalist yearnings as
we discover the proliferation and integration of ecosystems and develop a growing sense
that our place on planet earth—in spite of the politics of pollution and energy
consumption—is a shared fate.

In short, globalization is much bigger than the economy. It is a cultural, political, social, and
economic fact of life that requires the disciplinary expertise of all the departments in the arts and
sciences in order to dramatize its issues, something that would make for a marvelous
conversation between faculty and students from all departments. If “globalization is a long-term
historical process of growing worldwide interconnectedness” (Pieterse, 2004), then so too is the
development of a democratic education one of growing disciplinary interconnectedness. This
becomes even more pressing when we realize that globalization has deeply influenced the
development of higher education world wide, and universities themselves have become the
willing engines of globalization. In the end, globalization, like a democratic education, is about
hybridization: cultural mixes, diasporas and migrations, vast inequalities of wealth and power in play to be sure, but also signs of genuine human integration.

References


