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# GOVERNMENTALITY OR COMMODIFICATION? US HIGHER EDUCATION

## Abstract

The history of US universities is both an expansion of governmentality, in the sense of research undertaken for the public weal and teaching undertaken to train the populace in self-regulation; and an expansion of commodification, as research becomes more driven by corporate needs, students are increasingly addressed as consumers of education, and paymasters and administrators accrete authority over academics.

## Keywords

US higher education; governmentality; commodification

**E**IGHTEENTH-CENTURY EUROPEAN Enlightenment knowledges invented social collectives and liberal individuals. Since that time, populations have been understood through statistics and policy interventions (Foucault, 1991a: 98–9). So even as Revolutionary France was embarking on a regime of slaughter, public-health campaigns were underway – an ongoing Janus-faced ‘game between death and life’ (Foucault, 1991b: 4). Cholera, sanitation and prostitution were figured as problems for governments to address in the modern era, through ‘the emergence of the health and physical well-being of the population in general as one of the essential objectives of political power’. The entire ‘social body’ was assayed and treated for its insufficiencies. Since that time, governing people has meant, most critically, obeying the ‘imperative of health: at once the duty of each and the objective of all’ (Foucault, 1991b: 277). Science and government combined to maximize civic management and economic productivity. In 1855, Achille Guillard merged ‘political arithmetic’ with ‘political

and natural observations,' which had been on the rise since the first population inquiries in seventeenth-century Britain. The new knowledge – demography – codified reproduction, aging, migration, public health and ecology (Fogel, 1993: 312–13).

The US university system effectively commenced at the same time. In this brief piece, I aim to explain how the history of US universities is characterized by an expansion of governmentality, in the sense of research undertaken for the public weal, and teaching that reaches into the lives of the populace to train it in self-regulation; and an expansion of commodification, as research becomes animated more and more by corporate needs, students are increasingly addressed as consumers of education, and paymasters and administrators accrete authority over academics.

Many writers working within the governmentality tradition do so in a way that assumes an incommensurability with Marxist critique (see, for example, the special issues of *Cultural Values* (2002) and *American Behavioral Scientist* (2000)). I see no logical reason for this. I acknowledge that the project of neoliberal governing-at-a-distance has its own logics and materialities, but in many ways, they fit the agenda and methods of corporatization as much as governmentality. I argue that both tendencies have been at play since the emergence of higher education as part of public culture in the US 150 years ago, but that neoliberalism has maximized their influence in recent times.

The classic US model of higher education aims to equip students with a liberal inclination that respects knowledge *of* a topic and *for* a purpose, rather than simply knowledge *by* a particular person. The model places its faith in a discourse of professionalism rather than charisma. It makes people believe in and exchange openly available knowledge, not secret magic. In other words, if someone *truly* wants to know how television works, she is permitted access to this intelligence. But she may equally subscribe to digital cable simply based on her confidence in the system of governmental and university research, industrial training and accreditation that impels and regulates this fraction of a culture industry. She need not do so based on the idea of audiovisual communication as a gift from a deity to an elect whose knowledge and power cannot be attained by others.

Of course, liberalism also uses the concept of human capital – that there should be a mutual investment of time, money and training by both society and subject to create a corps of able-minded technical employees and willing patriots who are taught by a docile professoriate. To that end, we have recently seen the idea of higher education as an industry, and students as investors. Hence Bruce Johnstone, a former Chancellor of the State University of New York, offering the concept of 'learning productivity' as part of students beginning to 'assume greater personal responsibility for their learning' (quoted in Martin, 1998: 9). How did this state of affairs come to pass?

Since the 1830s, when the first waves of white-settler European

immigration across classes began, US higher education has generated practices and knowledges for use by the state and business, and helped to integrate the population (Aronowitz, 2000: 5). By the 1850s, with the country rapidly industrializing, new chiefs of industry envisaged partnerships with tertiary education as a means of developing a skilled workforce. Abraham Lincoln's Republican Party enabled this alliance via the land-grant system. Technocratic from the first, it flowered at the turn of the century, when corporations were placing more and more faith in applied science via electromagnetism, geology, chemistry, and electricity. By the 1920s, Harvard had its business school, New York University its Macy's-endorsed retail school, and Cornell its hotel school (Pietrykowski, 2001). No wonder, then, that 80 years ago, Thorstein Veblen referred to US universities as 'competitors for traffic in merchantable instruction' (quoted in Pietrykowski, 2001: 299). His words remain accurate in their diagnosis, even if their style looks old-fashioned. The two World Wars provided additional pump-priming and *premia* on practicality from the Federal Government, and the big research schools actually expanded their capacity during the Depression (Aronowitz, 2000: 16, 18–20).

In the research domain, the notion of mutual interest licenses partnerships between state, college and industry. Such relationships merit scrutiny rather than an amiable blind faith. In the USA, the history dates to nineteenth-century museums, observatories and agricultural-experimentation outposts, but the shop was really set up in the late 1950s. The Cold War 'became the instrumentality of a vital national economic policy,' as evidenced in the growth of the university via increasing federal and state subsidies (Lewontin, 1997: 7). Considerable effort since then has gone into clarifying the significance of tailoring research priorities to contemporary political parties and corporations: 'pork-barrel science', as it is known. Major research schools such as Harvard and Stanford have had literally dozens of formal corporate partners since the 1980s (Aronowitz, 2000: 44). The complications are obvious across disciplines. In anthropology, there is unfolding controversy over ethnographic and medical research into the Yanomami in Venezuela and Brazil, involving measles vaccines and money from the Atomic Energy Commission. In psychology, there is the less spectacular but telling requirement that undergraduates present themselves as research subjects as a condition of enrolment, with the results – publication, presentation, or commodification – of no tangible benefit to them. Or we might consider language-spread policy and the part played in it by linguists; the work of economic advisors (Robert Triffin acting as plenipotentiary for the US to the European Economic Community and then as a European delegate to the International Monetary Fund, just a few months apart, in the 1980s); political scientists (Project Camelot in the 1960s); biomedical researchers (relations with pharmaceutical companies); public-relations consultants (a critical concern of the professional associations); sociobiologists (defences of male sexual violence); and nuclear physicists (red-baiting of scientists). The very existence of

communication research raises questions of ideological distortion, given the discipline's formation under the sign of war and clandestine state activity and later corporate and foundation support (Simpson, 1996). The same could be said of the policy sciences. Originally conceived as points of connection between democratic and executive action, they have degenerated into 'unrepresentative expertise' that lacks articulation with the everyday. Thomas Streeter points out that in the USA, 'policy' frequently connotes a pro-corporate position that turns highly contestable positions into absolutes, with consultant professors simultaneously performing objectivity and applicability. (For example, programme management of the National Parks has consistently owed much more to bureaucratic *force majeure*, tourism money and 'development' than to ecology (Dryzek, 1994: 117; Streeter, 1996: 16 n. 14, 133, 136; Sellars, 1997: 3–4).) The social sciences have become so policy- and paymaster-oriented in their ends, and science-oriented in their methods, that they 'have largely lost their critical character.' Some say that they have even given up on the task of socialization, other than into possessive individualism (Aronowitz, 2000: 4, 40) – governing at arms length through the inculcation of selfishness.

This history predates contemporary concerns about how to finance US research universities since the system lost relatively disinterested Cold War stimuli to big science in the early 1990s. Today, it appears as though governmentization and commodification have merged in their concerns and methods. Congress provides more than a billion dollars in direct grants to universities, apart from the peer-reviewed funds available through the National Science Foundation and the National Institutes of Health, but corporations gave US schools about US\$850 million in 1985 and US\$4.25 billion a decade later (Poovey, 2001). The multinational pharmaceutical corporation Novartis funds more than a third of the activities of the Plant Biology Department at the University of California Berkeley. MIT's media laboratory is seen by many outsiders as a play-pen provided by corporations for well-meaning but apolitical graduate students working with implicit and explicit theories of possessive individualism – an *ethos* of fun in which the latter may privately claim to be subverting their paymasters, but where they do so in ways that are eerily reminiscent of the dot-com boom's empty cybertarianism. Industrial research parks now dominate the work of such schools as the Universities of Texas, Massachusetts, Duke, North Carolina and Stanford. Not all such ventures are simply supported by private money. The National Science Foundation established dozens of engineering research centres in the 1980s with the expectation of 'partnerships' flowering between corporations and higher education. Such centres have effectively functioned as ongoing public welfare for 'entrepreneurs' (Rhoades and Slaughter, 1998: 36). This has led to vast sums being given to corporations, as table 1 indicates.

The extraordinary Bayh-Dole Act of 1980 permits non-profit educational institutions to own and commercialize inventions provided that the state can use

**Table 1** Federal funds for research, development and related plant (1991–99) in millions of current dollars, rounded to whole numbers<sup>1</sup>

Category	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998–EST	1999–EST
Outlays	64,292	65,719	68,386	68,336	68,410	67,756	70,892	71,780	73,150.4
Corporate	28,490	31,754	31,777	32,748	32,672	31,498	32,646	33,540	33,166
Educational	13,772	14,126	14,823	15,121	15,507	15,391	16,260	16,844	18,065

Source: Federal Department of Education *Digest of Education Statistics, 1999*

them as it sees fit. Prior to the Act, research schools collectively accounted for about 250 patents a year. Now the figure is close to 5,000. Perhaps 3,000 new companies have emerged as a consequence of the legislation (Poovey, 2001; Blumenstyk, 2002). It should come as no surprise that US universities are increasingly business-like entities, at times taking legal action against their own researchers to make as much money as possible. In 1999, the top hundred research schools received US\$641 million in royalties, up by almost US\$500 million in just four years (Goldschmidt and Finkelstein, 2001). The idea of working in the public interest has been erased through amendments to state laws throughout the country that have quietly exempted publicly-funded scientists from conflict-of-interest responsibilities that apply to refuse workers and personnel officers (Rhoades and Slaughter, 1998: 39).

Turning away from research, we can see a tendency across the entire degree-granting sector of transferring the cost of running schools away from governments and towards students, who are regarded more and more as consumers who must manage their own lives, and invest in their own human capital, as table 2 indicates. In 1980–81, the three levels of government accounted for 48.3 percent of funding, whereas the proportion was 38 percent in 1995–96. This trend towards reliance on tuition doubled student debt between 1992 and 2000 (Chaker, 2002).

A financial dependence on private sources is twinned with what we might

**Table 2** Current-fund revenue sources of universities 1980–96 by percentage

Source	1980–81	1985–86	1989–90	1990–91	1991–92	1992–93	1993–94	1994–95	1995–96
Tuition	21	23	24.3	25	25.7	26.5	27.1	27.2	27.9
Federal government	14.9	12.6	12.4	12.2	12.3	12.3	12.3	12.3	12.1
State government	30.7	29.8	27.5	26.4	25.1	24.1	23.4	23.4	23.1
Local government	2.7	2.5	2.6	2.6	2.6	2.6	2.8	2.7	2.8
Gifts, grants, contracts	4.8	5.4	5.6	5.6	5.6	5.7	5.7	5.7	6.0
Endowment	2.1	2.3	2.3	2.2	2.1	2.1	2.0	2.1	2.3
Sales and others	23.9	24.4	25.4	26.1	26.5	26.6	26.6	26.5	25.7

Source: Federal Department of Education *Digest of Education Statistics, 1999*

call the mimetic managerial fallacy, a process whereby both governments and university administrators construct corporate life as their desired other. This not only makes for untimely influences on the direction of research and teaching, but on the very administration of universities, which are increasingly prone to puerile managerial warlockcraft superstitions about 'excellence' and 'quality control.' Academic institutions have come to resemble the entities they now serve; colleges have been transformed into big businesses. Major research schools, particularly private ones, are also landlords, tax havens, and research-and-development surrogates, with administrators and fundraisers lauding it over faculty. Decanal *apparatchiks* have essentially replaced faculty governance. College bureaucrats are making a transition to full chief-executive-officer stature.

The mimetic managerial fallacy also leads to more and more forms of surveillance from outside. Regional accrediting institutions vouching for the quality of US degrees have been in place for well over a century. However, since the 1970s, we have seen ever-increasing performance-based evaluations of teaching conducted at the departmental and Decanal level, rather than in terms of the standard of an overall school. Today, such methods are used by 95 percent of departments (Rhoades and Sporn, 2002: 360). Such systems directly link budgets to outcomes, in keeping with the prevailing beliefs of public-policy mandarins – their restless quest to conduct themselves like corporate elves *manqués*. As successive superstitions came along – the 1990s variety was Total Quality Management – administrators fell in line with these beguiling *doxa*. Along the way, faculty–student ratios worsened, and reporting, surveillance and administration grew in size and power (Rhoades and Sporn, 2002: 359–62, 366–7; Sora, 2001). Many of us who have actually worked for business and government know what laughably inefficient institutions they can be – but then, those who watch academics do research and teaching from the perch of administration frequently have *ressentiment* in their eyes and underachievement on their résumés.

The upshot to this is a realignment of power. Superficially, much of it may seem perfectly legitimate. Governments that provide funds may make universities account for their conduct – think of the outrageous conflicts of interest alluded to earlier that might be exposed by such audits. Shifting the burden onto students to be financially responsible for their education supposedly makes them keener learners, while encouraging additional scrutiny of the classroom is said to aid them in a space of traditionally unequal relations of power. However, that Pollyannaish analysis will not do. First, as more and more funding in fact comes from private sources, it is they who are acting governmentally to ensure returns on their investments, both ideologically and monetarily. Second, the address of students as liberal agents both distorts their actual subject-positions, and underprepares them for the obedience and absence of free speech required in most US workplaces, in addition to adding to the central power of has-been and never-were academic administrators over working scholars (for the specific inequalities this can lead to for feminist professors and faculty of colour, see Valdivia, 2001).

The idea of a market in which the employer allocates resources according to what consumers (students) want, the purported logic underpinning this practice, is utterly fantastical. In a country where at any one time 50,000 people are undergraduate English students and 4,000 are undergraduate physics students (Martin, 1998: 13), that would make for massively greater rewards and better labour conditions for English professors – wouldn't it? No, because demand is about corporate needs beyond the academy, not student desires. Neoliberal doctrines of governance are much more centralized and corporate than their *ethos* will admit.

Witnessing the dual systems of a corporate agenda and a governmental method at play should enable us to combat them – not by denying the utility and legitimacy of external or internal scrutiny *per se*, but by confronting what these systems amount to in terms of research and teaching, and seeing how they have dramatically coalesced over the past two decades. Utilizing accountability to reveal corporate power over intellectual production, or pointing out to students the realities of a consumer address, can be fruitful. But both commodification and governmentality need to be identified and problematized in any struggle for progressive education, not just embraced, misrecognized or treated as opposites.

## Note

- 1 Includes federally-funded research centres. The disparity between outlays and the sum of moneys allocated to corporations and universities lies in sums provided to state and local governments plus not-for-profit non-educational bodies.

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