

Origins of the Corporate Ideal in US Higher Education

The American system [of higher education institutions]... are 'state capitalist' enterprises.... This development, I am convinced, will engulf those disciplines in which the craftsman personally owns the tools... This development corresponds entirely to what happened to the artisan of the past and it is now fully under way.... the old university constitution has become fictitious.
—Max Weber, *Science as a Vocation* (1918)

Abstract The origins of the corporate university can be traced back to a corporate liberal political agenda first articulated during the American Progressive Era. The structure and processes of the corporate university were established from 1894–1928, and these institutional structures established the social form of the ideological state apparatus in the USA based on a concept of academic efficiency. A historical analysis argues that there have been three subsequent cycles of university corporatization from 1929–1952 and 1953–1989, and 1990 to the present. Each of these reform cycles in higher education has further advanced the corporate ideal at the expense of the academic ideal resulting in deeper penetration and stronger regulation of the university by corporate capital and the capitalist state.

Keywords Corporate University · Corporate Ideal · Academic Efficiency · Ideological State Apparatus

The critique of the corporate university has largely been elaborated by career academics, but ironically these critiques have been presented from a purely external social scientific perspective, rather than from an internal phenomenological perspective as the lived experience of the intellectual (Smart 1976). My elaboration of the concept of the entrepreneurial intellectual combines these methodological approaches by giving concrete content to the theoretical concept of the corporate university, while attempting to illustrate that concept as a lived experience through the mundane and everyday life of the intellectual. In this respect, much of the subsequent analysis takes the form of a historical and structural analysis of the emergence of the corporate university that is simultaneously elaborated as a concrete personal experience through the use of auto-ethnography (Chang 2008).

From the beginning of my own career as a professor, I was an active participant in both the theoretical critique of the corporate university and organizational resistance to the corporate university. My first book, which had been my dissertation, was *Universities and the Capitalist State* (1990), which was a theoretically informed historical analysis of the origins of the corporate university. The book was reviewed favorably in at least 13 journals, including leading journals in political science, history, sociology, and education. The book was also selected for an author meets critics panel at the American Educational Research Association. The book sold about 3,000 copies in three years, and it now has 286 Google Scholar citations so I have some reason to believe that it was being read by other scholars and continues to be read to this day. The book is what Louis Althusser (1978) would call a theoretical intervention in the practical struggle for control of the ideological state apparatus (or at least one element of it).

Universities and the Capitalist State documents that the origins of the corporate university can be traced back to a corporate liberal political agenda first articulated during the American Progressive Era. The structure and processes of the corporate university were established from 1894–1928, and these institutional structures established the social form of the ideological state apparatus in the USA based on the concept of academic efficiency. In *Universities and the Capitalist State* (1990), I argued that the corporate transformation of American higher education was part

of a broader corporate reconstruction movement that worked with state and national governments to implement a corporate liberal agenda in higher education (Kolko 1963; Lustig 1982; Noble 1977; Sklar 1988; Spring 1972, Chap. 1; Weinstein 1968).

The corporate reconstruction movement then, as now, proceeded simultaneously in several spheres of American society, although the multiplicity of activities associated with corporate liberalism shared a common agenda, organizational strategy, and political tactics designed to extend the so-called corporate principle of organization to social, cultural, and governmental institutions. The corporate reformers' objective has always been to construct an integrated and "socially efficient" capitalist *system* that subordinates every sphere of social activity to the needs and imperatives of the modern corporation (Habermas 1970, 90–100).¹ Thus, the corporate reform agenda is to extend 'the corporate principle' of organization to social, cultural, and governmental institutions in such a way as to construct a capitalist mode of production—that is, a capitalist society or capitalist system—as opposed to a merely capitalist economy operating within a larger non-commodified social formation (Negri 1991, 105–125; 1989, 177–191). Hence, the techniques of scientific management that were pioneered in large industrial corporations were applied to an ever-wider array of American institutions during this time (Haber 1964).

However, G. William Domhoff (1978a, 164; 1978b, 61–128) has shown that corporate reformers have always known that progress in securing their aims is not likely to be uniform in every policy area, nor is success likely to proceed at the same pace in different geographic locales. Consequently, corporate leaders in the USA adopted an organizational strategy over the longue duree that relies on networks of issue-based organizations linked to a common clearinghouse organization. The responsibility of a clearinghouse organization in each policy network is to conduct "scientific" studies of various institutions and issues, to distribute the results of these studies to build public support for reform recommendations, and to lobby for the adoption and implementation of reform proposals, especially through government executive agencies, departments, and bureaus.

The two most important corporate clearinghouse organizations in the early twentieth-century higher education network were the General Education Board (GEB), founded in 1903 by John D. Rockefeller, and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (CFAT), founded in 1906 by Andrew Carnegie. The General Education Board was created

to study and promote education in the Southern states although, in 1905, Rockefeller amended its charter to include the endowment of institutions of higher learning throughout the USA (Buttrick 1922). The Carnegie Foundation (1906) was originally endowed as a pension fund for professors teaching in private non-denominational colleges and universities, although its charter authorized the foundation to pursue activities considered “incidental but necessary” to the administration of the pension fund.

The new educational foundations were key to the development of new strata of organic corporate intellectuals who, as a power elite, acted as the leadership group or operating arm of the ruling class in the field of higher education.² For example, between 1906 and 1929, 80% of the Carnegie Foundation’s executive committee served as directors or executive officers in a major financial or industrial corporation, one half held a post-graduate degree, and three-quarters had some experience as a college or university administrator. Similarly, from 1903–1929, 61% of GEB members were primarily corporate officers and directors.³ Moreover, an overlapping set of formal agreements between these and other foundations was devised to exchange information, to avoid duplication, and thus to create a coordinated policy planning network tied to America’s largest industrial corporations and financial institutions. This network, as David N. Smith (1974, 98) documents, played a decisive role in organizing and promoting the corporate reform agenda by serving as intermediate organizations through which the needs of corporate capital were “systematically built into the structure of higher education during the early years of the [20th] century.”

The CFAT (1935, 12) executive board concluded early in its deliberations that American higher institutions were “inefficient” and that higher education generally was in a state of “confusion.” Henry Pritchett (1905), the president of the Carnegie Foundation from its founding until 1930, was one of the first corporate intellectuals to explicitly ask “Shall The University Become a Business Corporation?”⁴ As early as 1905, Pritchett observed that the American university was tending “more and more to conform in its administration to the methods of the business corporation,” because its form of organization simulated the corporation with a board of directors, president, subordinate officers, and departments. It is not surprising that a railroad director was among the first to draw this analogy, because railroads pioneered modern corporate organization during this period and it was often railroad financiers, executives, and accountants who carried the modern form of corporate

organization into other spheres of the economy, society, and government (Chandler, Jr. 1962; Hymer 1978, 120–125).

Furthermore, Pritchett (1905, 93–97) was convinced that universities would benefit from *becoming* corporations under the leadership of business executives, because “no type of man has been developed who is a wider councilor than the businessman of large sympathy and of real interest in intellectual problems.” Frank A. Vanderlip (1907, 3–5), the vice president of National City Bank, and a long-time member of the CFAT executive board, echoed this sentiment in his statement that unlike professors who have a “tendency toward narrowness,” a “keen foresight, a shrewd knowledge of humanity, a wise and well-seasoned judgment of the practical value of things, ordinarily go to make up the mental equipment of the man who has made a million dollars.” Thus, Vanderlip argued that a higher educational policy developed and implemented under the direction of corporate executives was more likely “in all respects to follow the best lines.”

Hence, in early 1909, the CFAT’s executive committee asked Frederick Taylor to conduct “an economic study of education” that would contribute to the “efficient standardization” of the country’s higher education institutions. Taylor recommended Morris L. Cooke, a young mechanical engineer, who was a well-known protégé and personal friend of Taylor (Trombley 1954, 6–11). Cooke was a leading figure among the corporate reformers of the day and a member of an informal group called the progressive engineers. Cooke already had a long history of political activism as a proponent of social engineering based on the use of scientific survey data and industrial organization strategies. Cooke’s ideal for the American nation, which was not unusual among progressive engineers was to build a smoothly functioning social system in which each of its component parts—industry, government, family, and education—were reconstructed as socially efficient units that would each be coordinated with and subordinated to the economic system (Noble xiv–xxv; Nelson 1980).

In 1910, Cooke completed the requested study, entitled *Academic and Industrial Efficiency*, which Pritchett (1910, ii) introduced as a response to “the criticisms of American colleges and universities made during the past few years by businessmen.” Cooke’s (1910, 3) central aim in the report was to develop conceptual tools for making “an estimate of the cost and the output both in teaching and research.” The basic premise of Cooke’s analysis was that “the industrial world

is coming more and more to feel that all work is done under certain broad principles, and that the application of these principles to one industry is little different from their application to any other.” As a result, Cooke (1910, 26) rejected the claim that teaching and scholarship are somehow “radically different” from other kinds of labor, which meant that industrial engineers and corporate executives could rightly “apply the same standards of criticism to his [the professor’s] work as obtain generally throughout other departments of life.” Indeed, Cooke (1910, 21) insisted that professors “must be governed and measured by the same general standards that generally obtain in other occupations.”

One of the most important principles of scientific management is functional specialization starting with the separation of management and labor functions. In scientifically managed organizations, owners (trustees) are responsible for capital investment and strategic decisions, managers (administrators) are responsible for organizing the labor process on scientific principles, and workers are expected to “execute punctiliously” all orders given by management “down to their minutest details” (Taylor quoted in Herman 1968, 41). Thus, the first principle of scientific management is to separate administration from education by “relieving” professors of all responsibilities for administration and governance of the knowledge factory.

Cooke was ahead of his time in conceiving faculty as little more than content providers for the higher education industry. He observed that one of the central tenets of scientific management is that “a good workman is considered apart from the appliances and tools which may be necessary for the pursuit of his occupation.” The separation of workers from their tools is a key to scientific management, because it allows the owners and managers to change machinery, speed up the labor process, or reorganize the labor process, independent of the restrictions of craft, skill, or job ownership (i.e., tenure) (Braverman 1974). Thus, another crucial aspect of scientific management was task-based specialization, based on standardization and the interchangeability of parts that allows for mass production. Cooke proposed more research and teaching specialization by individual faculty, who would teach standardized courses (i.e., components) that could be assembled into majors. If adopted in conjunction with the new student elective system, Cooke (1910, 24–25) argued that faculty specialization and standardized courses would facilitate the mass production of students. The interchangeability of components, such as faculty and courses, would facilitate rapid adjustment

to changes in demand for particular products (e.g., majors) and allow regional or local adjustments to demand by assembling a different mix of products from the standardized components.

Cooke went so far as to propose that university departments maintain a “file of drawers in which were placed the lecture notes for all the different courses, written in a rather uniform style and all on standardized cards.” This production innovation would eliminate the labor time wasted in duplication and redundant start-up costs by new faculty, while incremental improvements to the central course file would guarantee that “the value of this part of the departmental equipment was constantly appreciating.” However, Cooke (1910, 19–26) recognized that a major obstacle to achieving academic efficiency was the professor’s attitude “that the lectures he gives and his pedagogical mechanisms are his own property.” This was the very same argument offered by other craft guilds, who claimed to have some special skill or expertise in the crafting of a product that could not be reproduced through mass assembly.

In contrast to the professors’ view, however, Cooke insisted that Frederick Taylor’s principles of scientific management were “more or less applicable in the college field,” although a major obstacle to applying these principles was the real difference between nonprofit educational corporations and for-profit business corporations. In business corporations, net profits and the rate of return on capital always provide a clear basis for measuring the efficiency of a corporation, while output per worker (labor productivity) and unit costs (total factor productivity) provide clear measures of industrial productivity. However, there was no comparable measure of academic efficiency because colleges and universities are non-profit corporations. Thus, Cooke suggested that the next best measure of academic efficiency would be a standardized statistical concept called the “student hour,” which in fact became the national standard for measuring teaching loads, setting admissions standards, etc.⁵

Cooke’s report suggested that if colleges and universities were to adopt the student hour as a national standard, it would eventually be possible to calculate comparative faculty workloads, the cost of instruction per student hour, and ultimately the comparative rate of academic efficiency for individual professors, courses, fields, departments, and universities. A social average of academic efficiency could be calculated in comparison with peer institutions once enough data were collected from different colleges and universities throughout the country. Furthermore, Cooke noted that by measuring academic efficiency, administrators would eventually be able

to tailor individual salaries to quantifiable teaching efficiency and research productivity. This would allow the most efficient or productive professors to migrate toward higher salaries and, hence, institute pressures toward the development of a competitive national labor market in academia. In addition, Cook recommended using salary inducements to encourage specialization in teaching and research as a way to enhance academic productivity and to create an academic production process organized around interchangeable standardized parts (i.e., courses and faculty). This restructuring of the academic production process would then facilitate market flexibility by making it easier to introduce technical innovations (e.g., new courses or fields) and to replace depreciated human capital. Indeed, Cooke (1910, 23) boldly declared that “if the same standards of efficiency are to be applied to college teachers as are applied elsewhere, it will mean that when a man has ceased to be efficient he must be retired.”

Cooke’s report on *Academic and Industrial Efficiency* was a direct ideological assault on the twin pillars of faculty self-governance and tenure (i.e., the academic ideal), which clearly and coherently articulated a corporate ideal of higher education. Cooke’s report contributed to these changes by compiling extensive tables, charts, accounting forms, illustrations, and explanations designed to assist administrators in implementing the new policies. What would soon become the “Carnegie movement” received a further impetus when CFAT, acting on Cooke’s report, issued its *Standard Forms for Financial Reports of Colleges, Universities, and Technical Schools*. Institutions that applied for membership in the CFAT pension system (now TIAA-CREF) were required to use the standardized forms and, by implication, to adopt the organizational procedures and accounting routines that made it possible to collect the required data. Pritchett emphasized the importance of adopting the new CFAT (1910) guidelines with a warning to faculty and administrators that “no college which refuses to do this deserves to be entrusted with money.”⁶

The General Education Board complemented CFAT’s initiative by maintaining a staff of field representatives that were sent to any campus requesting assistance with administrative reorganization and managerial development. By 1913, however, the requests for assistance were so numerous that the GEB found it impossible to assist them all one by one. Thus, in 1915, GEB arranged for Trevor Arnett, chief auditor of the Chicago Great Western Railway, to publish a nuts-and-bolts handbook for college financial officers entitled *College and University Finance*. By 1924, the GEB had distributed roughly eight copies of the

book to every college and university in the country. Yet, the demand for on-site assistance was so great that in 1922, GEB (1915, 44–45; 1924, 9–10; 1925, 12) agreed to aid another 100 colleges with administrative reorganization.

However, the internal rationalization of university organization was only the first step in a more comprehensive plan for the creation of an American higher education *system*. CFAT (1911, 14) trustees often lamented the fact that “education was not touched by the Constitution” and thus had “no guidance from the central government looking toward unifying and coordinating the separate State systems.” Likewise, they were concerned that “private initiative in the field of education has been both unguided and unrestrained by supervision on the part of State governments.” The CFAT (1908, 152) board of trustees concluded that “underlying all other causes which tend to confusion in higher education is the fundamental one that American colleges have in the past been conducted as separate units, not as factors in a general educational system.” John D. Rockefeller shared this sentiment and charged GEB with an explicit mandate “to promote a comprehensive system of higher education in the United States.” Frederick T. Gates, GEB’s president, explained that the Rockefeller endowment was “not merely to encourage higher education in the United States, but is mainly to contribute, as far as may be, toward reducing our higher education to something like an orderly and comprehensive system, to discourage unnecessary duplication and waste, and to encourage economy and efficiency” (quoted in Fosdick 1962, 127, 129). Following the lead of major foundations, the initial rationalization and systemization of American higher education was soon taken up by the US Bureau of Education (USBE), which initiated a scientific survey movement (1914–1928) that resulted in the reconstruction of state higher education systems and individual universities throughout the USA. This process was essentially complete by the onset of the Great Depression (Barrow 1990, Chap. 4).

The conceptualization, adoption, and implementation of this ideological state form were contested at every step by dissident faculty, populists, socialists, and labor unions, but it was an asymmetrical contest that resulted in an unstable balance of power between the intellectuals, the capitalist class, and state managers (i.e., university administrators). When I published this historical analysis in 1990, I (1990, 254) argued that the key to maintaining this asymmetrical balance of power (also wrongly labelled the “Golden Age of Higher Education”) was:

...a very reluctant concession from businessmen that they leave the details of university life to administrators and faculty. Yet, their proprietary relationship to the institution creates a continual temptation to exert direct control [over universities] at precisely those moments when the potential for confrontation is greatest. Thus, a crucial pillar in the existing balance of power has been the managerial ability of educational administrators to restrict autonomy [of the intellectuals]...through the elaboration of endless regulations that constitute fair warnings and the rules of the academic game. Team players are rewarded with an array of quite desirable material and social incentives. The occasional renegade is still punished in a symbolic public spectacle.

Intellectuals and business executives in the USA were both uneasy with this bureaucratic accommodation, but the intellectuals have always been divided in their response to the great class compromise of the 1920s (and later the 1940s) negotiated primarily by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP). One response has been to assert traditional claims about the autonomy of the intellectuals and this response has been organized partly through disciplinary associations,⁷ although historically it is the American Association of University Professors that has come closest to organizing the “class interests” of the intellectuals as a whole. A second response has been for the intellectuals to align themselves intellectually or organizationally with other social groups as organic intellectuals—most often with labor unions and left-wing parties, although in more recent times with the feminist movement, the environmental movement, and with racial, ethnic, and other identity movements, which has only further fragmented university intellectuals with extra-university identities. The primary effort to overcome these divisions has been the organization of university intellectuals into labor unions (Eaton 1975). As I (1990, 255) observed at the time, it is actually from this continuing dispute over political strategy among the intellectuals that the competing ideal types of the intellectual “have appeared as components of larger ideologies that define specific historical missions for intellectuals” within society.

My historical analysis of the origins of the corporate university in 1990 concluded that there had been two additional cycles of university corporatization from 1929–1952 and 1953–1989. The same cycle of events that took place from 1894 to 1928 in American higher education was first repeated from 1929 to 1952. The Great Depression and the events leading up to World War II resulted in another left-wing academic

rebellion during the 1930s, while the Thorstein Veblen (1957) genre of academic criticism was carried forward by writers such as Eduard C. Lindeman (1936), Robert S. Lynd (1939), James Wechsler (1936), and Hubert Park Beck (1947).

American campuses began a third cycle of university reform in 1953—signaled by passage of the National Defense Education Act in 1958—and this cycle, as usual, culminated in a new round of state and national surveys with the most notable and influential effort again coming from the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education (1967–1973) and the Carnegie Council on Higher Education (1973–1979) (Douglass 2005). Over a 13-year period, the Carnegie Commission and the Carnegie Council issued a series of reports⁸ that essentially outlined a strategy of accumulation by dispossession designed to disempower university faculty and reduce to them to proletarianized functionaries, while largely privatizing the cost of higher education by shifting it onto students.⁹ The reports of the Carnegie Commission and the Carnegie Council, bolstered by numerous other state and national organizations, refined the mission, corporate organizational structure, and financial measures (austerity as “efficiency”) that became the hallmark of the emergent neoliberal university in the 1990s and afterwards.

Thus, each of these reform cycles in higher education has furthered the goals of the corporate ideal at the expense of the academic ideal, and I (1990, 258) noted at the time that “each of these cycles has resulted in deeper penetration and stronger regulation of the university by corporate capital and the capitalist state. Yet, that hegemony has also accelerated the countervailing tendencies which historically have always been present in the contradictory structures of the ideological state apparatus.”¹⁰ At the time, I identified these countervailing tendencies with the rise of “faculty unionization and the growth of the left academy” (Arnold 2000; Ollman 1982), which I incorrectly predicted would lead to a new political explosion on university campuses by the mid-1990s or shortly thereafter. However, as soon as I had published these words, the devastating recession of 1990–1991 struck American higher education with a ferocity not witnessed since the Great Depression of the 1930s. Thus, in pursuing a theme established in *Universities and the Capitalist State*, I reminded faculty that “fiscal crises have often been a catalyst for institutional reform in the American system of higher education.” By 1993, I (1993, 7) was writing that “it is now certain that the 1990–1991 recession marked the beginning of a severe and prolonged fiscal crisis in American higher education.”

NOTES

1. Offe (1984, 257) notes that “the systems-theoretical approach is an adequate tool of analysis because it corresponds to the way the managers of the [capitalist] system conceive it.”
2. The concept of an organic intellectual is derived from Gramsci (1971, 3). See also, Domhoff (1978b, 13), who describes the power elite as the “active, working members of the ruling class and high level employees in institutions controlled by members of the ruling class.”
3. More extensive documentation of this claim can be found in Barrow (1990, 61–64).
4. Henry S. Pritchett epitomized the organic corporate intellectuals of the Progressive Era. He was a professional engineer, a director of the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad, and the former president of M.I.T.
5. A student hour is “one hour of lectures, of laboratory work, or recitation room work, for a single pupil,” see Cooke (1910, 19).
6. The Carnegie pension later evolved into the TIAA-CREF pension system.
7. For example, the Constitution of the American Political Science Association (Articles I and II) states that the association “is nonpartisan. It will not support political parties or candidates. It will not commit its members on questions of public policy nor take positions not immediately concerned with its direct purpose,” which is “to encourage the study of Political Science.” Available at <http://www.apsanet.org/portals/54/Files/APASConstitution2011.pdf>.
8. See <http://library.columbia.edu/locations/rbml/units/carnegie/cche.html> for a complete list of these reports.
9. On the concept of accumulation by dispossession, see Harvey (2005).
10. Among the most important of these reports, see Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (1972), Mood (1972), Carnegie Commission on Higher Education (1973a, b), Riesman and Stadtman (1973), Perkins (1973), Eckaus (1973), Carnegie Commission on Higher Education (1974).

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