

Book Review

Love the Questions: University Education and Enlightenment

Ian Angus

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Drawing upon experiences from his career as a professor in Canada and the United States, Ian Angus evaluates the current state of the university in *Love the Questions: University Education and Enlightenment*. Rather than a detailed overview, this slim book provides Angus' reflections on a host of significant questions in contemporary higher education. He argues that self-enlightenment and the philosophical heritage of the university must be defended against corporatization and commodification. In his efforts to explain how the university has changed in recent decades, Angus examines the changing social function of the university. In doing so, he addresses links between education and global capitalism, technology and science, growing corporate influence, issues of public and private funding, the commodification of education, and the manner in which *knowledge* is understood. At the heart of his arguments is a historical interpretation of what the university has traditionally been and what it has become. Comparing the contemporary university with its 1960s counterpart, Angus' book "is an attempt to explain what has changed" (p. 10). Attempting to avoid "another lament about the fate of the university," Angus promises "a realistic assessment of the state of the contemporary university and the forces that would undermine it" and he optimistically provides "a sense of what can be saved, reinvented, or discovered of its potential" (pp. 10-11).

The work has two major themes. The first theme is self-enlightenment, defined as "the struggle for self-knowledge" (p. 24), and "the ability to think meaningfully about one's experience that allows a deeper judgment of the current situation" (p. 19). Enlightenment includes "all of those attempts that humans make to form their lives through a relationship to thought" (p. 134). For Angus, enlightenment is itself historical, "an *intervention* into the present situation that draws on the resources of the past for inspiration and guidance" (author's emphasis, p. 36). This overall "project of enlightenment" has historically been central to the university's social function (p. 19). Enlightenment, like education, is an ongoing process. The second theme is the university's philosophical heritage. The university, Angus argues, is indebted to a philosophical tradition of self-enlightenment dating from ancient Greece. Corporate interests and *techno-science* are challenging this heritage. Angus defines *techno-science* as "the integration of technology and science through the model of cybernetics" (p. 146), a system in which information is shaped by automation, virtualization, and delocalization. This system breaks knowledge down into little more than bits of information. This organization of information into individual units creates a "network society" that is contrary to the holistic

approach toward knowledge and enlightenment espoused by Angus (p. 64; pp. 105-113). The creation of this corporate-funded, information-driven, and “parasitic” network society has fundamentally challenged the university’s traditional values and social function as a center of public research and civilian education (p. 123). The emphasis on enlightenment and the university’s philosophical heritage shape Angus’ historical interpretation of the university’s development and his analysis of current issues.

Chapter I, *What Is the University?*, raises questions about what a university should be and what the contemporary university has become. Angus paints an unflattering portrait of contemporary universities as privatized, market-driven, and corporatized entities that place little value on humanistic and liberal education. Lack of public support, he argues, has made universities beholden to corporate interests, who dictate research topics by granting and withholding funds. This situation allows private interests to dictate policy, which undermines “democratic decision making in the university” (p. 15). This dependence also makes it difficult for universities “to safeguard the struggle for self-knowledge through society” (p. 24), as corporatized universities stress job training at the expense of self-enlightenment. This strategy contradicts the university’s original mission of teaching students “to ask and confront genuine questions” (p. 22). Drawing from Rainer Maria Rilke’s famous remark that it is necessary to “try to love the *questions themselves*” (p. 29, Rilke’s emphasis), Angus argues “the idea of the university can be defined as loving the questions” (p. 22). Angus concludes that corporatization is not an “absolute necessity” but only appears so because private interests suppress “genuine debate about the function of the university and its social role” (p. 15).

Chapter II, *Education as Enlightenment*, outlines what a university education should be. Angus argues that a humanistic and liberal education is ultimately more useful than a specialized and career oriented curriculum. Education, Angus argues, is not an acquisition of information but rather a process leading to enlightenment and self-knowledge. Through enlightenment, students can learn to “love the *questions themselves*” (p. 29, emphasis in original). Rather than learning specific information, they achieve a holistic knowledge with which they can better understand the world and their experiences. This idea is expanded upon in the *Note on Enlightenment* postscript, which provides a philosophical overview of enlightenment. Through enlightenment, students can know themselves, critique, challenge previous critiques, and gain the ability to think backward toward the origin of institutions.

Chapter III, *The University in History*, provides a narrative from Plato’s Academy to the present, arguing that enlightenment and self-knowledge have been historically central to the university’s mission. This tradition has roots in the ancient Greek Academy, medieval university, and modern and state-funded research universities operating since the 19th century. Angus fears this tradition is being abandoned in favour of subject specialization and technical training. Angus argues “the humanistic ideal of the university that was originally held up by both liberal arts and the research university” is now “undermined by the specialized and technically applied dimension of modern science” (p. 61). Beginning in the 1960s, the university curriculum expanded to include professional and job-oriented training, creating a “multiversity” with “no centre and no unity” (p. 59). The high-water mark of Angus’ historical narrative is the 1960s when student movements rejected the multiversity, demanding a “*democratic university*” (pp. 60-61, emphasis in original).

Chapter IV, *The Corporate University*, addresses the university’s perceived break with its heritage, declaring “there have been attacks on the humanistic university before, but now it seems that they have finally become successful” (p. 65). Private interests shape curriculum,

research, and the very conceptualization of knowledge. Intellectual property is valued at the expense of enlightenment, making knowledge a commodity. Degrees and students themselves have become consumer goods. Administrators are managers and faculty members are workers. This context creates “a hostile atmosphere that neither appreciates nor cares about its [the university’s] traditional function” (p. 82). The university is losing its traditional function as a citizenship education center, as international corporations have no reason to fund national programs of civilian education.

Similarly, Chapter V, *Knowledge as a Commodity*, argues that the university’s social role as an impartial critic and arbiter in the service of the public has declined. Instead, universities are now like a “knowledge factory” for “war research, anti-union activities, [and] job training for the corporate elite” (p. 93). Corporate influences and their emphasis on credentials and proprietary research “undermines academic freedom and self-government” (p. 100). Dependence on private funding, Angus argues, creates a “culture of compliance” within the university (pp. 96-97). “Knowledge is becoming a commodity” and “a private good for sale, and the public interest in evaluation is on the wane” (p. 101). Angus concludes that this process can only be prevented when the “public takes an interest in, and is willing to fund, independent universities” (p. 103).

Chapter VI, *Transformation of Knowledge*, concludes the historical narrative in the present, arguing that techno-science has changed conceptualizations of knowledge. Subject specialization and an emphasis on the utility of facts has broken knowledge into bits of information and “pieces that can be added to other pieces” (p. 113). This practice results in a “network society” where information is raw material (pp. 116-118). Similarly, information dissemination is valued over knowledge creation. Conceptually, this preference for fragmented information implies that knowledge is a “completed thing rather than an ongoing search” (p. 123). This, Angus argues, is contrary to the traditional university mission in which “professors did not simply transmit knowledge but were engaged in producing it” (p. 112).

Chapter VII, *What Is Possible*, argues that the public must “recognize the role that a real university culture can play in society” (p. 125). Independent universities, Angus argues, promote a democratic society by providing citizen education. When research is “non-proprietary and publically available” (p. 132), universities become impartial evaluators of political, economic, and scientific claims. By scrutinizing the claims of private interests, independent research universities are advocates for the public good. To maintain this service, the public must provide “the political will and financial resources necessary” to support independent universities (p. 125). While there is currently “limited opportunity for hope,” Angus believes that public support could allow the university to return to its traditional focus on enlightenment (p. 126) and the “meaningful whole of experience” (p. 132). To ensure public support, Angus suggests that universities limit expenses for students, while professors should make their scholarship and publications accessible to the public. This increased access will allow taxpayers to appreciate the university’s social function as an independent centre of public education and research. Enlightenment is possible but the university must be saved with public support.

Angus provides a panoramic look at the contemporary university. In doing so, however, he overlooks institutional differences between universities. Angus’ informal writing style is a strength, as is the inclusion of his personal experiences. This familiarity is also a weakness, as the work is aimed at an audience of like-minded and sympathetic readers in the humanities and education. Angus criticizes colleagues outside of this group. He admonishes “young faculty” who “come into the university in expectation of a cosy [sic] middle-class job” as “careerists who didn’t really understand what was going on,” (p. 9). Administrators are dismissed as managers

far from the classroom. Angus notes how “science faculties adapted much earlier to the corporate world,” while “the arts faculty continued to draw on older traditions” (p. 65). In the wider context of the book, he suggests science faculties have abandoned the university’s traditional mission. Angus is hostile toward “technical lieutenants such as engineers and personnel department flunkies” who support the corporate university (p. 93). Even in recognizing the need “to combine practical learning with a higher mission,” Angus’ phrasing indicates that career-oriented training is of less intrinsic value than a liberal education (p. 58).

Angus’ admirable brevity prevents the work from becoming monotonous but the broad scope also ensures readers will frequently want more detail. Angus speaks in generalities and neglects specific details. Discussing challenges to academic freedom, he names Nancy Olivieri, David Healy, and David Noble without providing background information. He references the 1960s student movements at the University of California, Berkeley, in Berkeley, California, United States, the London School of Economics, in London, United Kingdom, and Simon Fraser University in Burnaby, British Columbia, Canada, but gives few details. This omission is problematic as these movements are a defining feature of Angus’ historical narrative. The *References and Further Readings* section addresses this gap somewhat but the work would have benefited had this information been integrated throughout the text.

As a historical narrative, the book contains the “lament” (p. 10) and “conservative nostalgia” (p. 125) that Angus sought to avoid. He uses language of decline with statements like “the university is in crisis” (p. 41). Angus nostalgically makes the 1960s the apex in a historical declension narrative. He argues that the 1960s university, unlike the contemporary university, successfully repulsed influences of “scientific-technical, bureaucratic capitalism,” and “corporate and warfare powers” (p. 94). He laments the “never-realized ideal” of the 1960s “*democratic university*” (p. 64, emphasis in original). This perceived failure of democracy is at odds with Angus’ statement that Canadian university attendance has since grown from 10% to 40%. This growth of the educated electorate should be seen as a democratic success. Instead, decline and nostalgia are present in his descriptions of these students. In the 1960s, students like Angus believed “everyone has at least one great novel or poem in them struggling to come out” (p. 31). In the 1980s, the “student mood was so disillusioned in comparison with my own student days.” In 2002, student “answers were uncharacteristically ordinary and uninspiring” (p. 30). In the present, “dumbing down is the order of the day” (p. 82). The corporate university, Angus argues, has negatively influenced expectations of, and approaches toward, education. Students and anxious parents are persuaded by private interests and the market-driven university to “dump” enlightenment “for the practicality of training” (p. 35). This corporate coercion explanation, however, fails to fully consider the extent to which social, economic, and cultural changes since the 1960s have led students to choose a profession-oriented education of their own volition.

Angus addresses significant and pressing issues in this interesting and concise text. Readers with a background in the humanities will often agree with the book’s main points and general sentiment, although a wider audience will want Angus to provide more detail and citation to support his arguments. Lack of specific examples and background information prevents the work from serving as an entry-point into the ongoing debates on higher education. The work would be an interesting primer for a graduate seminar as the issues raised by Angus could be discussed in detail throughout the course.

Reference

Angus, Ian, *Love the questions: University education and enlightenment*. Semaphore Series, Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring Publishing, 2009

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