

## THE FORUM

### A Section Devoted to Learned Opinion

#### *Abstract*

The American academic community is afflicted with a two-fold ideological blindness, affecting both its social position and its internal intellectual orientation. First, it has underestimated the role of market forces in determining the rewards and status of higher education, rationalizing its position in terms of social service and intellectual contribution. Second, it has, through the "publish or perish" syndrome, unconsciously applied an essentially market view of intellectual motivation, ignoring the Social Darwinist and Taylorist origins of this view, and their relevance to the most onerous working-class jobs of early industrialism.

James Wagman\*

#### **The Values of the Marketplace and the Ideology of American Higher Education**

No more passionate quest has occupied the modern intellectual community than the discovery of and liberation from the hidden forces determining human life. First the followers of Karl Marx made historical materialism into a tool for unmasking the economic interests masquerading under slogans of liberty, justice and the common good. Then the disciples of Sigmund Freud accomplished a similar unveiling of the psychological forces in the moral life of the individual. Both schools of thought claimed to be acting in the service of human liberation, with self-understanding being the prerequisite for social change or individual self-realization.

But, whereas academics have employed the tools of the social sciences to expose the folklore of capitalism and rationalistic individualism, they have been far more chary in turning these diagnostic techniques upon the intellectual perspectives and social interests of their *own* community. In this regard, even the more reflective among them have accepted the assurances of Karl Mannheim, who promised to one group alone an escape from the iron laws of the sociology of knowledge. That group, "the socially unattached intelligentsia", precisely because it was not firmly rooted in the modern social order, could be "sensitive to the nature of society and its wholeness", and could thereby attain the objectivity of scientific knowledge which was denied to other social classes.<sup>1</sup> The values and standards of the modern intelligentsia could, in short, aspire to timeless, universal and objective truth. In the last few years, however, an economic crisis characterized by increasing competitiveness and professional insecurity has afflicted the American academic community, revealing the limits of its social position and influence. The positive side of the crisis is that it encourages a new effort at collective self-understanding and

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self-determination, an effort in which — contrary to the canons of conventional medical practice — none but the patient can wield stethoscope and scalpel, and none but the patient can diagnose and possibly cure the ailment.

Any examination of the way American academics have reacted to the changing job market during the last quarter century reveals at once elements of rationalization, ideological projection and false consciousness comparable to what one finds, for example, among American doctors. The academic will smile good-naturedly when physicians ascribe their high incomes to the extensive preparation, specialized skills and social importance of their profession; instead, he is more likely to point to the control exercised by the A.M.A., through its monopoly over the entry points into the profession, over the supply of doctors. This, he will argue, explains the high incomes attained by doctors as contrasted with, say, lawyers or college professors. He will continue this analysis by showing that a comparable education, set of skills and social importance does not guarantee high incomes for Soviet doctors, and that relatively uneducated teamsters, electricians, and plumbers in America have somehow found the secret of Midas without undergoing extensive professional training. But the lesson will strike closer to home if the academic observes unionized faculty at two-year community colleges demanding across-the-board increases of \$5000-7000, while his own peers at prestigious state or private universities are willing to stab each other in the back for annual increases of a few hundred dollars, and sometimes even over fifty dollar increments.<sup>2</sup>

Academics, in short, have been blind to the extent to which their own professional lives have been shaped by market forces. John Kenneth Galbraith gives testimony to the rapid expansion of the professorate between 1900 and 1970: from a meager 24,000 teaching in colleges and universities at the turn of the century, the ranks grew to 49,000 in 1920, and multiplied to 480,000 by the end of the sixties.<sup>3</sup> The particularly rapid increase in the last two decades was fueled by the expansion of college enrollments to meet the needs of the modern economy and by the post-war baby boom. But, just as the demographic trends of the period were miscalculated or neglected by public and secondary education, producing a glut of teachers exactly when enrollments started to decline in the lower grades, so the professorate misunderstood the conditions which had created the increasing salaries, unprecedented job mobility and social prestige of academics in the fifties and sixties. The participants in this fortunate environment rationalized their position by attributing it to the importance of the social and intellectual work they were engaged in, more specifically to the flow of scholarly research and publication which was expanding the frontiers of knowledge and providing to society expanded opportunities for progress and social change. Furthermore, aping the natural sciences, then enjoying unprecedented prestige due to the successes of the Manhattan Project and Hiroshima, the social sciences and humanities sought to justify their pay by extolling their own production of monographs and articles on the most varied topics, important or minor, practical or abstractly theoretical.

Because they were dividing a larger budgetary pie coming to their community from the social larder, and because their internal criteria of allocation rewarded those who performed the research task best ( "publish or perish"), academics tended to assume that it was research and publication which were eliciting the supply of sweets from the wider society. In fact, it was a more prosaic variable: the scarcity of college teachers relative to the rising number of students enrolled in higher education. The seventies should have made this apparent: suddenly, academics began to note a dwindling in their ration of sweets; prestigious graduate

departments were no longer besieged by eager applicants as before; but meanwhile, the outpouring of articles about 17th-century metaphysical poets and studies on the ephemera of voting behavior today continued to swell ever higher. But alas, the secret of Midas appeared to have been lost, and the asses' ears of state legislatures and electorates were now deaf to the music streaming from the academic grove.

The college environment which we are facing today is indeed different. Enrollments are static or declining, and even the liberal members of the political community in the U.S. — such as Senator Proxmire and many others who share the social values of the liberal academy — are more likely to respond to our specialized research by offering us a “golden fleece of the month” award than by permanently improving the economic condition of the academic profession. If anything appeals to the public and its elected representatives, it is vocational training, on the one hand, and the transmission of civic and cultural values, on the other: in short, the staple of traditional undergraduate education rather than graduate instruction and research. This, at the very least, is true of the social sciences and the humanities. It explains the recent efforts of Harvard's Rosovsky and other reformers around the country to revitalize the curriculum of undergraduate education. They are beginning to address the fundamental issues of the relationship between society and academy under conditions of a shrinking Ph.D. job market. Barring such an assessment, no amount of administrative reshuffling or gimmickry will affect the total financial resources available to the universities. At most, it will create a frantic Brownian motion of individual faculty members seeking to improve their economic position through meaningless publications and trivial research, leaving in its wake competitive bitterness and intellectual alienation.<sup>4</sup>

#### *The Values of the Marketplace and the Motivations of Intellectual Life*

Neglecting the nature of market conditions, American academics have been unable to understand the relationship between society and higher education. At the same time, they have been myopic in grasping the effects of market behavior upon their professional values and collegial behavior. To some extent, Veblen's *The Higher Learning in America* (1918) anticipated this issue; its perspective, however, was probably too rationalistic and too sardonic to leave a permanent trace upon the minds he excoriated (it was deliciously different when he was satirizing the behavior of the leisure class).

Here we confront the fundamental issue of what motivates man to work and produce; we have moved from the *macro* level of the economic forces shaping American higher education to the *micro* level of individual behavior and its determinants. According to one view, work is primarily instrumental, and is performed for the sake of rewards external to the work and for essentially private material satisfactions. In order to elicit effort, it is necessary to provide significant pay differentials and status inequalities to different positions in the job ladder, as well as a measure of insecurity to workers at all job levels. According to a second view, it is possible to motivate individuals by providing them with work which is intrinsically interesting, socially valuable, and (in part) rewarded by professionally judged standards of craftsmanship.<sup>5</sup> We shall not investigate here whether the second model of work can be generalized to the entire society; but, surely, no one can question that, if it applies anywhere at all, it ought to do so among scholars and intellectuals who are studying the greatest contributions of human civilization, exploring the frontiers of knowledge, and transmitting these glories to the younger

generations. If this model does not apply among such men and women, then certainly we would have to judge it as totally utopian.

The first model mentioned above is, of course, derived from early industrial society as that was understood by William Graham Sumner, the Social Darwinist advocate of a "root, hog, or die" philosophy,<sup>6</sup> and Frederick W. Taylor, the father of scientific management.<sup>7</sup> Originally, it was meant to apply to the psychology of the industrial working class, and to elicit high productivity and efficiency despite the presumed inferiority of that class and despite the long hours, meaningless tasks and mechanical regimen to which it was subjected. According to Taylor, "one of the very first requirements for a man who is fit to handle pig iron as a regular occupation is that he shall be so stupid and so phlegmatic that he more nearly resembles an ox than any other type".<sup>8</sup> Yet even such a type, Taylor believed, could be motivated to produce by the principles of scientific management — which included, over and above a minute division of labor, the presence of material incentives, ladders of inequality and the prospect of social mobility, a constant pressure of insecurity and fear of job loss, and a benevolent central direction by management. At the time this view was formulated, it was applied primarily to the working class; others, such as merchants and entrepreneurs, were still thought to be motivated by an internalized set of religious norms (which Weber later called "the Protestant Ethic").

Today, very few academics would rush to apply the Social Darwinist and Taylorist model to the working class. The intellectual community supported the creation of and conceived many of the institutions of a welfare state, whose aim was to reduce the insecurities and miseries of the early industrial revolution. Minimum wages, social security and unemployment compensation, unionization, the seniority principle, generous support for dependent children and the handicapped, even suggestions of a guaranteed annual income — all these testify to our commitment to a more humane social order. They also testify to our conviction that the material fabric of modern civilization will not collapse if workers are sheltered from the insecurities of poverty, disability, and old age. In fact, the record of countries such as Japan, Sweden, Yugoslavia, and Germany — as well as some practices of industrial pioneers such as I.B.M. — indicates that productivity may even increase under conditions of security, work reform, and the development of a sense of mutual obligation between enterprise and employees.

It is all the more striking, therefore, that American academics continue to advocate principles very close to that of the early industrial model when it comes to determining salaries, promotions, and tenure for university professors. For the real meaning of the "publish or perish" syndrome (from the perspective of motivation) is to institutionalize insecurity, inequality of reward, and external material compensation for the proper performance of function. Subjected to it, the work of the scholar, teacher and intellectual comes to be seen as a burdensome, if useful, thing which we want only for the sake of external reward it can bring us. The scholarly quest for knowledge and the profession of the educator are no longer the activity of a whole human being, but an alien and enforced routine. Recently, the syndrome has reached truly Swiftian proportions: any publication is regarded as better than none; all publications are (with a tolerant democratic relativism) regarded as being created equal; and a proliferation of unread trivia threatens to decimate the forest reserves of North America. The badge of nobility in academe is "doing research" (few ask about what), applying for and receiving "grants" (symbols of knighthood in the quest for our holy grail), and "reading papers" (at

assembled tournaments of valiant warriors each determined to yield the lists to none). But perhaps the chivalric analogy is misplaced. Frederick Taylor's dark view of the human type most suited to the industrial discipline stands facing us as a mute warning of the choice we must make: *Quod licet bovi, non licet Jovi*.

The acceptance of the market or industrial model as a governing principle for the internal organization of the academic profession prevents us from confronting the rest of society with a persuasive case for our collective professional interests. Unlike the medical profession, we do not even have an equivalent of the A.M.A. This is not unrelated to the mechanistic, individualistic view we have taken of the intellectual quest and of higher education. It prevents us from fostering the inner values of the life of the mind rather than the external signs of accomplishment; it destroys the sense of community and tradition which used to bind scholars together; it alienates us both from students and fellow-citizens. In addition, it is a false view: false in accounting for the recent history of the American academic community, and false in explaining what motivates true creativity and original research in the individual scholar. It is the ideological reflex of a bygone age, and a barrier to self-understanding and collective self-determination.

#### *Résumé*

Idéologie de l'éducation supérieure américaine.

La communauté académique américaine est affligée d'une double cécité idéologique, affectant à la fois sa position sociale et son orientation intellectuelle. D'abord, elle a sousestimé le rôle des forces du marché en déterminant la valeur et les statuts de l'éducation supérieures et en justifiant sa position en termes de service social et de contribution intellectuelle. Ensuite, par le syndrome de la publication obligatoire (publish or perish) elle a inconsciemment adapté une motivation intellectuelle inspirée essentiellement par ce même marché, ignorant les origines darwinistes et tayloristes de ce point de vue et leur importance pour les travailleurs les plus coûteux du début de l'époque de l'industrialisation.

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#### *Notes*

<sup>1</sup>Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia* (New York: Harvest Books, 1936), transl. from the German by Louis Wirth and Edward Shils. Pp. 154-5.

<sup>2</sup>It might be too embarrassing to indicate the empirical evidence for the last proposition, but every one can choose his favorite example in the privacy of his study. The important point regarding the validity of the observations is whether they are psychologically convincing to the reader on the basis of his academic experience.

<sup>3</sup>John Kenneth Galbraith, *The New Industrial State* (New York: Signet Books, 1968), p. 293.

<sup>4</sup>I am indebted to Professor David Klein of Michigan State University for the felicitous analogy of conflicting random research objectives of numerous scholars to the Brownian notion of particles suspended in a liquid.

<sup>5</sup>A good brief discussion of the contrasts between these two models of work is provided in Michael H. Best and William E. Connolly, *The Politicized Economy* (Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath, 1976), Chapter Five.

<sup>6</sup>Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (Boston: Beacon Press, rev. ed., 1966) p. 54.

It is a mark of Sumner's consistency that he elaborated and applied the "root, hog or die" philosophy not only to industrial and business activity, but to scholarly activity as well. Responding to students' questions if he would carry the competitive system so far as to allow some other academic to compete for this job, he said: "Any other professor is welcome to try. If he gets my job, it is my fault. My business is to teach the subject so well that no one can take the job away from me."

<sup>7</sup>See Daniel Bell, "Work and its Discontents," in *The End of Ideology* (New York: Collier Books, 1961), esp. pp. 231-35.

<sup>8</sup>Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 233.