

Where Thought Is the Currency

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A year ago, I read an article about two scientists who patented their dyslexia therapy (in partnership with their universities), raised venture capital, and formed a company called "Scientific Learning Inc." (*New York Times*, 14 September 1999). I wondered: For close to 30 years, I have been on the faculty of Teachers College, the School of Education for Columbia University; I have conducted research and have taught this research and the traditions supporting it; I have tried to educate both new researchers and professionals who will use research; I have never thought that any of this could be sold in a mall. Have I been wrong?

As I closed the newspaper a year ago, I shook my head and moved on. I was sure that academics would immediately recognize the multiple threats to critical independence entailed in transforming universities into what a wag might call "commercities." I am now sure that this is not a time for trusting academic common sense. It is a time for resisting ideological choices masquerading as historical necessity. There are some who entertain the notion that their university might become a division of Disney or Microsoft. This might seem far-fetched, but we should pay attention and take a stand. Columbia University announced recently that it had created "Morningside Ventures" to "compete in the commercial marketplace for learning" by building "strategic alliances with businesses"; this is "a for-profit company" needed "to compete effectively and productively." The first instance of this is an agreement between the Graduate School of Business and UNext.com to deliver courses in finances, accounting, and marketing. UNext.com describes itself as "a group of business and academic professionals with a shared vision of the future of distance learning. We are dedicated to building the first-ever online education enterprise focused on high quality education as it is created and taught in respected and distinguished educational institutions" (from their web site). They tout their links with business schools at Harvard, Chicago, Stanford, and the London School of Economics. They talk about their concern with "the individual" even though most of their contracts so far have been with large corporations. They do not mention in any prominent place who their investors are, perhaps because a major one is Michael Milken.

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The brave new world of commercial teaching is with us and it cannot be ignored. Even such relatively small institutions as Teachers College are desperately trying to get on the band-wagon (or “the train leaving the station” as another popular metaphor goes), investing time and resources because “the mode of production and consumption of knowledge is undergoing changes no less dramatic than the changes from a pre-industrial to industrial society,” to quote another top administrator at Columbia. The tone is messianic and apocalyptic. The future is here and the consequences are obvious: the move from university to commercity is inevitable.

There has been surprisingly little public debate about all this—particularly about the inevitability of the transformation. History is never linear or foreordained. But public acts have now been taken. It is time to mount a vigorous challenge. We are talking here about our collective future and what we bequeath to future faculty members and students.

Arguments affirming the inevitability of the full transformation of the university into a commercity start with a thumbnail history of higher education emphasizing its material ties to buildings and people that limit its reach and impact. In the virtual electronic space, these limits evaporate as it becomes possible to reach thousands upon thousands. Two futures are then imagined: one that envisions freedom and the other, toll-takers. The second future is the one that concerns me here. This is the future in which “the search for knowledge” becomes “knowledge production” and when the distinction between university and business disappears. This, some understand, must mean the end of academic freedom and tenure—after all, employees of Microsoft or Disney do not enjoy either. Why should academics claim these? Are they not clear impediments to efficient production?

One would hope that the new commercities are merely additions to the world of schooling. If so, then there is not much cause for alarm. After all, private, for-profit, technical schools already exist. All large corporations have training departments for their employees. But, we are told, the commercity is not just a new institution within an ever more complex social landscape. It replaces the university because it performs its functions more efficiently. This argument only holds if one narrows one’s understanding of what these functions are. It only holds if one radically discounts the value for the polity at large of spaces optimized for critical investigation free from the constraints of church, state, and market.

My statement is organized in four theses:

- The political value of universities depends on their not having a commercial price;
- This value is dependent on a set of institutions ensuring that universities are “free”—economically as well as politically;

- Freedom is expensive and the costs must be carried by all involved (faculty, students and, above all, the full community, i.e., the polity);
- Technology opens new possibilities; it does not determine the future.

What Price a Great School of Education?

Those who talk about "knowledge production" seek to focus attention on one subset of a university's activities: degrees leading to better jobs. The current marketplace for degrees ("along with the rights and privileges hereunto attached") is regulated by state agencies that the university powerfully influences (but does not quite control). If the state deregulated this corner of the marketplace, and if private corporations were allowed to sell degrees cheaply, then universities would have to behave fully like businesses in order to survive. In this process, they would abandon that which makes them distinct from businesses.

If "granting degrees" is equivalent to "selling degrees," then universities are already located *within* rather than *without* the marketplace. But this is a misreading. The university, an institution granted special status by the polity through the state, must, ontologically rather than purely for tax purposes, elaborate and distribute its products freely without cost and in an atmosphere of freedom. It must not directly charge whatever price the market will allow. This restriction permits the university to do certain things that cannot be done within the marketplace—including determining the value of the marketplace for the polity. If the distinction disappeared, then, of course, exprofessors would start behaving like merchants, controlling each other closely for financial productivity while protecting trade secrets. Given the size of the current industry dedicated to providing educational material (from tests to textbooks to software to "edutainment") we have plenty of models for what happens in institutions dedicated to "knowledge production for sale."

Some of our products, of course, do have a price. The administrators of most universities have become obsessed by the fact that some faculty members with an entrepreneurial bent have been making commercial deals without arranging for the institution to share in the profits. So far, such arguments have remained relatively circumscribed matters, significant mostly in engineering, biology, and a few other fields where intellectual investigation may, at times, produce objects of great market value. Some hope, however, that this can be broadly developed so that it can become the mainstay for the material support of universities. This seems farfetched since most of what professors "produce" (presentations, articles, books) have very small commercial value—if any.

A related argument affirms that the name of some universities has itself a price because of the prestige attached to it, and that large corporations in, say,

the textbook business, might be willing to pay large sums of money to associate their product with a university. This may be so, but one must wonder about the source of this value. In the long run, the price of the name "Columbia" may depend less on *what* the university produces than on *how* and *under what conditions* it is produced. If it appears that the university is an intensely profit-seeking enterprise run by a board of directors accountable to investors, then the price of its "name" must come down.

But the major problem with even debating the price of academic products and names lies elsewhere. This debate makes us lose sight of the fact that most professors are not "knowledge producers" even if one thinks of dyslexia therapies or reading software as products. Collectively, universities are about "Pedagogical Creeds" (Dewey), "zones of proximal development" (Vigotsky), "conservation experiments" (Piaget), theories of *habitus* (Bourdieu) and so on and so forth. The price/value of a university with many Nobel Prize winners is not enhanced because their theories have been licensed, but because the university is the place where they developed the theories and where they can now be found. The overall *value* of the university is dependent on *not* setting a price on intellectual accomplishments. Price these and they lose their value, including the value of enhancing price by association. This can be stated as a paradox, but only to the extent that we forget that the phrase "cultural capital" is a metaphor: education (critical research, etc.) is not capital. Schooling (degrees, training, etc.) may have a price. Education does not. The products of intellectual investigation are *priceless*. This is their value for those of us who, as members of the polity at large, need spaces away from the marketplace. We cannot lose the spaces on the Left Bank of the Seine from which the University can stand against the merchants on the Right Bank, criticizing, prophesying, and otherwise challenging the marketplace. There is continued value for the polity in such open spaces where the scholar can stand against the merchant.

On the Value of Academic Freedom for the Village around the Marketplace

"Free" connotes both what is given away *and* what is developed in freedom. Anthropologists know that what is offered "freely" has a different social power from what is sold. This, of course, also applies to "free" speech. The political trick is to ensure that there are spaces within the "village" (to tap another version of the popular metaphors) where the various kinds of exchanges can safely occur. The market is one such space. Families, churches, and universities are other spaces, each organized to optimize different kinds of relationships. Universities are spaces politically organized for intellectual exchanges in relative freedom.

As we all know, such freedom is a historical construction to be continually reconstructed through well-focused cultural work in the face of always renewed challenges. Some of this work is internal: for example, all the mechanisms

involved in making someone the member of a faculty, that is, of a special class of political actors instituted and protected in particular ways. One becomes "free" academically only at the end of a long process starting, say, on admission to graduate school and probably not ending before the granting of tenure. Some of this work is external, for academic freedom is controlled not by the university but rather by the state's enforcing the distinction it grants. At the highest point within the campus of Columbia stands Low Library, and high over its columns is an inscription I find particularly appropriate, for it specifically places the university within the polity. It reads in part:

KING'S COLLEGE FOUNDED IN THE PROVINCE OF NEW YORK

BY ROYAL CHARTER IN THE REIGN OF GEORGE II.

PERPETUATED AS COLUMBIA COLLEGE

BY THE PEOPLE OF THE STATE OF NEW YORK

WHEN THEY BECAME FREE AND INDEPENDENT.

For an anthropologist, this is an origin myth grounding an authority *given* to the university (and to degrees it grants) by the "people" who make it one of its organs—and this applies as well to the stock exchange a few miles to the south with its own rights and privileges.

Obviously, I am asking that, for a brief while at least, we suspend common cynicism regarding academic freedom. Tenure, the institutional guarantee that we are indeed academically free, is not a matter of protecting elderly faculty members who have ceased producing in any sense. The existence of such is but an unfortunate byproduct. Arguably, tenure is not even mainly a matter of protecting the individuals among us who are exploring unpopular paths. Tenure is a guarantee to the world *outside* the university that the statements coming from the university are made in a context independent, that is, institutionally isolated, from political or commercial interests even if they end up supporting various political points of view or commercial products.

These matters are not abstract. They are directly political in all the houses, streets, squares and, yes, marketplaces of our global village. We are all aware of the relative authority of voices coming from university settings by contrast to voices from commercial settings on all issues of health. The polity, through its politicians and media, clearly distinguishes between researchers from the tobacco or pharmaceutical industries and researchers from the university even when they have the same credentials. I started this piece with a journalistic account of the creation of "Scientific Learning Inc." In the report, the journalist made the same distinction usually made in the health field: university researchers are not equivalent to commercial researchers. Substantively simi-

lar development research, conducted by individuals with the same credentials, and leading to similar products, is to be evaluated differently by the polity depending on whether the developers may profit commercially or whether their work was protected *and constrained* by academic freedom.

I understand the postmodern critique emphasizing that university research is never independent of its social and cultural foundations. This recognition need not, however, necessarily lead to materialism or nihilism. Rather it is a reaffirmation of the humanistic call for reasoned political choices. And so I am offering what I see as a rational argument for the value of preserving a particular kind of political space that allows for a particular kind of speech that other spaces may not be friendly to.

The Material Costs of Institutionalized Freedom

(Academic) freedom, we know, comes at personal cost. Some costs may not be quantifiable. Others are directly measurable in income lost when one chooses to join a faculty rather than a venture capital firm, perhaps on the model of Tim Berners-Lee whom some credit with inventing the World Wide Web in a research environment. At one point, he could have been a member of the group founding Netscape and possibly become a billionaire. Instead, he chose to join the faculty at M.I.T and to continue working for a free internet.

Academic freedom does have real collective costs. There are political costs: When "the people of the State of New York" granted academic freedom to Columbia, "the people" relinquished some of its right to control the university. There are social costs: "free" academics must be supported by others (from administrators to janitors) who are not granted the same privileges. There are ecological costs and all of them might be summarized into economic ones that can be easily quantified: "free" academics must be fed, housed, computerized, etc. Academic freedom is expensive for the polity.

Once the ultimate value for the polity of a space dedicated to free investigation and critique has been accepted, then one must find some mechanisms for allowing people to inhabit these positions. Eventually, the polity must accept that to ask the merchant directly to pay the scholar for his ware is in fact to erase the distinctiveness of the scholar. Business school types would probably say, quite correctly as far as it goes, that the merchant ends up supporting all economic activity. Marxists would point to the workers whose labor produces the surplus academics spend. But economic support is qualitatively different depending on the institutions mediating between those who give and those who receive the support.

As a fundamental political construction, the state—whatever its form across time and space—must be involved. In the long run, it is the state that establishes the parameters of the peculiar social field (the university) within which academic freedom to probe, criticize, and build can flourish. Whether the state can or should directly fund the university is clearly a question that the

various cultures of the school have answered differently. The French opted for all costs to be carried by the polity as a whole through the taxing power of the central government. Americans continue to rely on a philanthropy that, arguably, insulates the university from the state as well as from the commercial world. More and more this philanthropy has been supplemented by types of state support and by the fees students are willing to pay to get degrees. There are dangers to academic freedom here. Still, in the long run, whether the funds coming into a university are dangerous to its mission must depend on the extent to which the right hand that collects the fund is insulated from the left hand that spends it. Contributions from industry are not dangerous if they are true gifts and not contract payments. Tuition payments are not a direct threat if the faculty is at liberty to refuse to grant the privileges attached to the degrees.

Crystal Balls and the Future

As an optimist, I must assume that, once the mirage of the commercialization of the university fades, the free university will perdure. What some fail to notice is that, in any event, the new electronic media will not necessarily appeal to the merchants. One must also envision a future when the core of academic knowledge is available so ubiquitously and at so little cost that the very idea of charging fees for access will be forgotten. One should not forget that much we now gloss as "computers" was developed and distributed "freely." Many continue to find appealing situations where they can offer their intellectual work without immediate regard to copyright and licensing fees. In the commercial future, intellectuals become piece workers. In the other future they escape and, from machines in various corners of the village, they propose new futures for public discussion and critique. One has only to contemplate the development of the "Linux" operating system, or the growth of Project Gutenberg in which many volunteers enter always more obscure books on all subjects, to realize that the need for informed academic appraisal—free and yet controlled—can only grow. And so I trust that, in the future, between marketplace and public square will stand an institution dedicated to controlled debate, adjudication of value, and the recording and transmission of knowledge, as well as to the constructive critique of itself and others.

