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Sources of political power in academia

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It is argued that the political power exercised by academic elites can be usefully understood as being based on service to non-academic elites and on disciplinary exclusiveness maintained via specialisation and isolation of work from the public. This perspective on the power structure of academia can help to explain evidence such as the suppression of academics pursuing environmental research and teaching.

In the 1940s and 1950s there were wide-scale sackings and harassment of academics, especially in the US, during the so-called McCarthy era¹. In Australia, many academics suffered in the aftermath of the Petrov affair². This era had a strong quietening effect on potentially dissident academics. Yet, contrary to belief in some quarters, political beliefs continue to play a significant role in appointments, promotions and sackings³. As well as political beliefs, suppression of academics is often closely connected with struggles with organisational vested interests, and with disputes over the validity of different types of knowledge and ways of acquiring it - that is, with paradigm disputes. A mixture of political, organisational and paradigm aspects in suppression cases is quite common.

The author has made a study of a sizeable number of cases of suppression of individuals involved in environmental research and teaching in Australia and New Zealand. One conclusion, in agreement with the findings of the few other investigations in this area, is that the scale of suppression in academia is much greater than usually realised⁴. Furthermore, one investigator in this area concluded that "the most direct attacks on academic freedom have come from the academic authorities themselves, and it is their gross and arbitrary power which continues to constitute the most serious threat to educational freedom"⁵. This situation points to the importance of understanding how and for what purposes political power is exercised by leading academics and administrators. The perspective adopted here is that political power exercised by academic élites can be usefully understood as being based on service to non-academic élites and on disciplinary exclusiveness maintained via specialisation and isolation of work from the public. Here only some general descriptive and summary comments are made. Detailed examples, argument and documentation are reported elsewhere⁶.

POWERFUL GROUPS OUTSIDE THE ACADEMY

Those who are high up within the academic power structure have considerable interaction - for example in providing advice, planning curricula, soliciting funds and making social contact - with people and organisations outside the academic community, particularly with those in positions of power. The results of this interaction can be seen as

a quid pro quo. From powerful non-academics, the academics receive funding and some prestige. From powerful academics, the non-academics receive help in channelling research and teaching into areas selectively useful to the latter's interests, a process which involves grant money, future job prospects and possible applications for research⁷.

The patronage of leading academics by powerful non-academics is threatened when issues are taken into the domain of public debate, since the legitimacy conferred by the stamp of unanimous scholarly approval is undermined. For this reason there is a strong preference among politically powerful academics for patterns of closed decision-making. When issues are taken to the public by concerned academics, often this is seen as inappropriate or even contrary to proper academic behaviour.

The perspective helps to explain cases in which academics who have been outspoken about environmental or other sensitive issues are denied jobs, promotions, tenure or are sacked, or in which efforts in these directions are made by corporate or government vested interests and their academic allies. Such cases can arise in the areas of forestry, chemistry (for example, over the issue of lead in petrol), entomology and political science, among others.

The influence of powerful groups outside the academy also helps to explain the existence or otherwise of research and teaching in particular areas. For example, the almost total lack of peace research or teaching in Australian universities can be seen as an accommodation to the influence of the military and its allies in government and industry. In contrast there are substantial academic programmes in nuclear physics and nuclear engineering.

In summary, academic institutions are not organised or run solely on the basis of ivory tower scholastic criteria, but in no small measure are run on the basis of the exercise of political power by academic élites who personally or structurally have close links with powerful groups outside the academy.

DISCIPLINARY EXCLUSIVENESS

Many who rise within the academic power structure do so via at least a moderately successful and orthodox research career in a fairly narrow specialisation. The bases on which power and prestige rest within the academic hierarchy therefore depend partly on the status of specialised research within recognised disciplines. This status in turn appears to depend in part on the discipline in question being off limits or opaque to non-specialists and to the public. Only to the extent that the essence of the work in a discipline and its specialities is either a special preserve or else not readily grasped by outsiders is it possible for members of the discipline to claim exclusive rights to judge the importance of work in the discipline.

With this perspective, it is understandable that many academics in traditional disciplines would be antagonistic to potentially substantial academic programmes which are either truly interdisciplinary or popular with students or the public. This helps to explain why universities such as Murdoch, Griffith or the Australian National University Institute of Advanced Studies, founded along interdisciplinary lines, have reverted to relatively traditional departmental patterns. It also helps to explain the lack of academic interest in areas which generate public interest or participant involvement, such as parapsychology or Alcoholics Anonymous.

In recent years the environmental area has been a source of research and teaching which is potentially threatening to many parts of the traditional academic power structure. By its nature much environmental research is interdisciplinary. The results of this research often offer a challenge to existing policies and practices of government and industry, and the area is one of high public concern. Such research thus can provide a threat to the hierarchical academic power structure⁸. Indeed, traditional disciplinary approaches and traditional hierarchical organisational structures seem quite inadequate bases for getting to the roots of environmental problems, as argued elsewhere⁹. The same strictures apply to the achievement of successful environmental education.

A study of environmental programmes in US universities concluded that two features were necessary, though not alone sufficient, for their success:

1. Substantial or complete control of the faculty reward structure and
2. Freedom to be innovative in introducing course material, educational programs, work study programs, and curriculum requirements for degrees.¹⁰

These requirements obviously conflict with the maintenance of the current academic power structure, and hence are seldom achieved in practice.

Because the existing emphases in universities are predominantly in traditional subject areas, using traditional methods in traditional organisational structures, there is an in-built resistance to changes in this prevailing pattern, such as offered by innovative interdisciplinary research and teaching programmes in areas such as the environment, alternative technology, women's studies or participatory democracy. Those who do research or teaching in such topics often find it hard to find jobs, get tenure or promotions, get grant money, maintain proper staffing levels or introduce desired innovations. These problems are sometimes imposed in a manner which can be widely seen as contravening academic principles; more often the discouragement of interdisciplinary and socially challenging research and teaching can be justified or rationalised in terms of a commitment to traditional disciplinary norms of scholarship and service to the

interests of existing powerful groups. For example, economic geology is accepted as an academic subject, while environmental geology is virtually nonexistent.

In any case, it is most difficult to change institutions from the usually narrow purposes for which they were designed. In the area of energy and environment in the US, no holistic study programmes were established at universities before 1971. Thus the programmes followed rather than preceded the development of widespread public interest and definition of the main problems¹¹, a situation which also applies in Australia. This suggests that the generation of public interest in issues and the creation of independent, citizen-oriented research groups may have a larger impact on existing scholarly institutions than isolated attempts for change from within.

Finally, it may be argued that many characteristics of the academic community have evolved out of the community's history of interaction with government, business and other groups. For example, the tendency of academics to avoid controversial public issues can be interpreted as an adaptive response to avoid alienating potential sources of patronage. More generally, the process of professionalisation can be seen as a process of transforming special knowledge and skills into social and economic rewards¹². The academic power structure would seem to be an important component in this process.

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