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## **What Should Be Done About Higher Education?**

A friend of mine recently completed his Ph.D. He prefers to remain anonymous; I'll call him Fred. Fred's thesis was a study of capitalism in a particular industry, based in part on interviews with workers. In a rare integration of theory and practice, Fred circulated the texts of the interviews to the workers themselves, in acknowledgement of their role in the production of knowledge. This may also help them to understand better their relation to their bosses.

Fred plans to prepare a more accessible book out of his thesis. It will provide valuable, if rather unpalatable, lessons to social activists. If they will read it, they will learn how industry has turned its workers into its supporters against outside activists, instead of workers and activists uniting against the owners.

On completion of his thesis, Fred exited from academia. He believes in the "reuniting of practical and theoretical consciousness" which is virtually impossible in universities with their intellectual division of labor. He has chosen to work for community organizations, aiming to empower oppressed groups.

Does this sound like an anarchist? Perhaps, but Fred acts on the basis of a highly developed Marxist, nonanarchist theory of society.

On the other hand, two other friends of mine, Val Plumwood and Richard Sylvan (formerly Val and Richard Routley), are two of the most prominent and prolific anarchist theorists in Australia. Each holds an academic position. They have produced numerous scholarly papers as well as activist writings for many years.

I present these examples to illustrate that there is no automatic connection between anarchist beliefs and action in relation to higher education. What should be done about higher education? On the one hand there is the argument for "deinstitutionalization." The idea here is that higher education is part of the problem. It provides training and research results to the state, military, big corporations and professions. It reproduces the class structure by providing credentials to children of the upper and middle classes. In its own structure it incorporates hierarchy, patriarchy and elitism. Following the lead of Ivan Illich, the solution should not be to reform formal education but to get rid of the need for it altogether. Learning and research would instead be integrated into

the life of the community. The way to achieve this is by building up alternative forms of learning and research outside the ossified bureaucracies of educational institutions. Another argument accepts this picture but reaches a different conclusion. Yes, the goal should be learning controlled by learners and teachers outside the large credentialing bodies. But this is a long term goal. In the meantime there is much that can be done from the inside of academia. Seldom are activist workers, such as members of the IWW, criticized because they work for a capitalist firm, even if their aim is to transform these firms into self-managed operations. Likewise, it makes little sense to advocate a mass exit from academia, so long as some activists do useful things there, either as part of their job or in their spare time. I doubt that Noam Chomsky would become more effective in promoting anarchism were he to resign from MIT.

I think both of these arguments have merit. There is no single best path for everyone.

What I plan to do here is outline some of the strategies for action concerning higher education, and point out their strengths and weaknesses. Before doing that, I list some of the problems with academia. These are likely to be familiar, which is why I can be brief.

## The Problems

From the point of view of the classical ideals of higher education, which can be summarized by the phrase "the pursuit of truth," the failings of modern higher education are many.

- Knowledge is treated as a commodity, passively accepted and absorbed by student consumers.
- Classroom experience is organized around the premise that learning results only from being taught by experts.
- Knowledge is divided into narrow disciplinary boxes.
- Original, unorthodox thoughts by students, and nonconventional choices of subjects and learning methods, are strongly discouraged.
- Competition prevails over cooperation.
- Knowledge and learning are either divorced from social problems or channeled into professional approaches.
- Credentials, the supposed symbols of learning, are sought more than learning itself.
- Performance in research takes precedence over commitment to teaching.
- Most research is narrow, uninspired and mediocre, useful only to other experts or vested interests.
- Scholarly openness and cooperation take second place to the academic rat race and power struggle, which involves toadying, back stabbing, aggrandizement of resources and suppression of dissidents.

- Original or unconventional thoughts by staff, or action on social issues, are penalized, while narrow conformist thought and action are rewarded.

Thorstein Veblen in 1918 argued that universities in the United States are controlled by or subservient to business interests. Business influence has a thoroughgoing impact on the staff hired, the curriculum taught, which departments are introduced, expanded or contracted, and the type of research supported and published. In earlier years big business influence was exercised directly through university governing bodies. Today there is greater reliance on grants, the promise of jobs, and the setting of social agendas concerning what is useful knowledge.

There are two additions that can be made to this analysis. Another major force involved in controlling higher education and being served by it is the state, including government bureaucracies, the military, the police, judiciary and welfare bureaucracies. The state provides most of the funding for higher education, including large amounts for so-called private universities.

Second, higher education also serves the interests of elites within the academic hierarchy. The interests of politically powerful educationists are closely linked with corporate and state patrons, who provide the basis for funding, prestige and jobs. But inside tertiary institutions (that is, colleges and universities), powerful figures have independent interests in building up administrative empires, increasing centralized control and laying claim to decision making over areas of the curriculum and research. Although students often see staff as the enemy, it is the steady acquisition of power by academic administrators over both students and staff that is a key feature of tertiary education over the past few decades.

So far I have focused on the content of higher education, such as the subjects in the curriculum and the types of research undertaken. Since the late 1960s the form of education has come under scrutiny. The "hidden curriculum"—the structure of the learning/teaching situation—reflects and reproduces aspects of wider society. The dependent, passive relation of students to teachers and administration is similar to the relation of employees to management. Acceptance of the frameworks in which knowledge is packaged is similar to acceptance of the frameworks in which social questions are put by major institutions. Certification of satisfactory performance, and implicit certification of acquiescence to standard procedures, is similar to the reward system in state or private employment. Emphasis on intellectual analysis and actual avoidance of practical action reflects most academics' own avoidance of action on social issues.

One of the most insightful critiques of higher education is *The Credential Society* by Randall Collins. Collins documents that most job skills are learned on the job, not in formal education. The reason that credentials are required to enter certain occupations is more to raise professional status than to guarantee skills. The main content of schooling is middle class culture; this helps perpetuate class divisions. The expansion of higher education in the United States is a result of competition for lucrative professional and managerial jobs, a com-

petition which has led to enormous inflation in requirements for credentials.

Collins concludes that the best way to address these problems is by abolishing credentials. But he doesn't say how. Nor is it obvious that this would really challenge occupational inequalities in a fundamental way.

## Alternatives

One of the ways to respond to the problems with higher education is to develop alternative systems. An excellent example is Abbs and Carey's *Proposal for a New College*, which is based on the following features:

- small size;
- curriculum based around aesthetic education;
- equality of staff salaries and status;
- internal democracy (staff and students);
- work as an integral part of learning;
- practical use of skills for self reliance, for example, production of food;
- sharing of all routine tasks such as cleaning and preparing meals.

Abbs and Carey find the basis for their proposals in many vintage ideas and movements, such as Fountains Abbey, the Bauhaus and Gandhian schools, and also draw inspiration from more recent developments.

A more political approach to learning has been espoused and adopted in Paulo Freire's approach combining development of literacy and political awareness, which has mainly been applied in nonindustrialized countries. There are also a number of inspiring programs in rich countries, and a host of small scale experiences and experiments showing the value of freedom, direct democracy and social relevance in promoting learning. Especially worthy of note is learning "at home," advocated for children by John Holt, which can even more easily be applied to learning at the tertiary level.

These efforts at building alternatives are vitally important. But it is also essential to ask, are they enough to challenge the dominant tertiary institutions? Is it also useful, or even necessary, to work from within?

## Campaigns

There are various campaigns inside academia. It is worth examining to what extent they challenge the basic directions of present higher education. Here I use Australian examples in many cases because they are familiar to me. Many of the conclusions apply more widely.

**Fees.** In the mid 1970s, the Australian government abolished tuition fees for all tertiary students, after a major campaign by student organizations. (All Australian higher education is funded by the federal government.) In the following years there were some attempts by politicians to reintroduce fees, but

the political outcry from students and parents of students was enough to block this. In 1987, though, a \$250 annual "administrative fee" was introduced. This is seen by many students as the thin edge of a wedge for much higher fees, such as those already charged to overseas students.

The aim of free tertiary education was to enable disadvantaged groups such as immigrants, Aborigines, women and working class and disabled students to gain access. Some groups, such as mature age women, have undoubtedly benefited. But the effect of the abolition of fees on the class, ethnic and gender composition of student bodies has not been all that large. The problem is that fees are only one barrier. Other crucial factors are home environment, secondary schooling, and peer expectations.

Nor have fees campaigns challenged other aspects of higher education, such as the links between teaching and research and the interests of corporations and the state, or the hierarchy and competitiveness within academia itself. The abolition of fees has meant that a somewhat wider cross section of the population is enabled to compete for places in an otherwise unchanged tertiary education system.

**Representation On Committees.** In the aftermath of the student movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s, there were concerted efforts around the world to "democratize" higher education. What this meant in practice was that previously exclusive clubs of professors and community elites who sat on powerful academic decisionmaking bodies had to open up some positions for students, junior faculty and non-academic staff. This has had a moderating influence on academic hierarchies, but has seldom altered the channels through which power is exercised. Students are almost never given more than token representation. Being on committees and councils can provide an insight into how things happen, but seldom much influence on what does happen. This is because the setting of agendas, the detailing of options and the labor of negotiating courses of action through complex systems of committees is still carried out by academic bureaucrats (whether members of faculty or administration). Students simply do not have the time nor the inside connections to become key players in this sort of system. Another problem is that representation on committees can serve to legitimize the committees while draining off the energy of the more active students.

**Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO).** One of the greatest challenges being mounted against present power structures in higher education has grown out of the feminist and minority group movements. The most common expression is EEO and affirmative action, which officially means providing everyone a fair chance in the competition for academic degrees and posts. This is a severe threat to the dominant privileged group, white middle class men, who occupy the bulk of top positions in academia. These men have long been serviced by wives, secretaries, research assistants and others. Some of these people are now demanding a chance to join the academic elite.

There are problems with the EEO strategy. For example, it does not directly challenge the gender division of labor in the home, and women are still heavily disadvantaged by their disproportionate share of the tasks of

housework and childrearing. But even if EEO efforts were to be ultimately successful in considerably enlarging the number of women in elite positions in academia, it is worth asking, would this really change the nature of higher education very much?

In one area it would: the role of higher education in preparing men and women for jobs normally considered to be masculine and feminine (male engineers, female primary school teachers). But otherwise it is possible that things would be much the same. Teaching and research could still be geared to the interests of corporations and the state. The hierarchy and competition within academia could remain just as entrenched. The role of credentials in justifying status and inequality could persist as before. My conclusion is that EEO is vitally important but not enough.

**Assessment.** Until the 1970s, most Australian students were assessed by massive end-of-year exams. There were many complaints about this, such as the lack of feedback during the year and the intense pressure at exam time. One of the key student demands was for a change in the assessment system, with more student choice over assessment methods.

The net result of student agitation over this issue was a move toward so-called "continuous assessment." This means giving less weight to final exams and more weight to assignments, exams and participation throughout the course. However, students now complain about continuous assessment. It ties them down to lots of work. Some argue that the old system, while strenuous, nevertheless allowed leeway during the year. Students could choose how and when to study, or could devote large chunks of time to political issues. Lost in the shuffle was the objective of student influence over the form of assessment. What happens in many cases is token consultation by teachers with students about assessment, or choice between some very similar options.

In any case, changing assessment does not challenge the basic structure of higher education.

**Curriculum.** Campaigns for a broader, more socially relevant curriculum definitely hold the potential for changing course content away from direct service to corporations and the state. Many programs in women's studies, environmental studies and peace studies provide critical perspectives and stimulate political action. But such programs are vulnerable. They are often attacked if they are conspicuous or radical. They have few allies because most disciplinary departments find interdisciplinary programs a threat to their monopolies over subject matter. In the process of avoiding attack and just surviving, many such programs lose their critical edge. They may end up simply providing credentials and experience more suitable for modern styles of open management.

Another way to change the curriculum is for teachers to do "critical teaching" in any class. Teachers often do have a considerable degree of freedom in how they run their classes. This path is admirably presented by Ira Shor in *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life*. Shor describes how he used methods inspired by Paulo Freire for promoting learning through dialogue and for promoting critical literacy.

Personally, I recommend Shor's book to all teachers, and indeed to students who would like to know what is possible. But Shor's initiatives are difficult to implement in many situations. There are two main obstacles: teachers and students!

Many teachers are not given the freedom to alter teaching methods that Shor used so effectively. In some cases the restraint comes through peer pressure, in others through formal requirements for covering certain subject matter in certain ways. While Shor's approach could be adapted to teaching science, it would require a highly sympathetic departmental environment.

Students can also thwart Shor type initiatives. While some students will respond well to learning based on dialogue, others demand traditional methods. This is especially the case when students want credentials with the minimum amount of work and learning. Some of these students may be won over. The problem is that no lasting structures for critical teaching are established. When the Ira Shors of academia retire, burn out or move on to some other activity, curriculum is likely to revert to the usual methods and materials.

It is still worth making educational innovations, and persisting with previous innovations. I strongly believe this. But that should not blind us to the limitations of even the most exciting of initiatives in critical teaching, limitations built into the overall structure of higher education.

## What to do?

After this series of criticisms of campaigns within higher education, it is reasonable to ask, is it worth putting effort into any of them at all? Or is it better to avoid wasting energy on them? I should make it clear that I support all the campaigns I've described and criticized. It is "progressive" at some level for tuition fees to be abolished, for students to be represented on academic committees, for equal employment opportunity measures to be implemented, for students to help decide on assessment methods, and for the curriculum to be made more critical and socially relevant. Compared to the old (and continuing) authoritarian systems, moves in these directions open up opportunities for further action. At the same time it is important to realize the limitations of campaigns in such areas.

One key limitation to many present campaigns is that they are organized almost entirely within educational institutions themselves, for example, by students who push staff or administration for changes in curriculum. The key feature of educational institutions which is not challenged by this approach is their monopoly over certification of knowledge.

To overcome this problem I think it is vital for efforts from within educational institutions to be linked with social campaigns outside them. Groups on the outside, such as trade unions and feminists, can help challenge the hierarchy, monopolization of knowledge and the service to vested interests found in educational institutions. Groups on the inside can help those on the outside to develop and strengthen self-reliance in knowledge, both learning and research.

The interaction of efforts in these two directions is a combination of action and learning/research, relevant both for social action and education.

To illustrate the possibilities here, I will describe some of my experiences in the campaign against nuclear power and uranium mining in Australia. In the late 1970s this was one of the foremost social issues in the public eye, and certainly the most prominent environmental issue. A large number of activist groups took up the uranium issue, initially Friends of the Earth and then later groups such as Movement Against Uranium Mining. There were anti-uranium groups of all sorts, including suburban groups and groups made up of doctors, public servants, feminists, secondary students and university students. Many trade unions led the struggle by holding short strikes to publicize the issue and by refusing to handle goods or perform services that could help the uranium industry. The Australian Labor Party and the Australian Council of Trade Unions in 1977 each adopted stands against uranium. (The Labor Party has since virtually abandoned its platform.)

In Canberra, where I worked at the time at the Australian National University, there was a student anti-uranium group. Many academics privately opposed uranium mining but only a tiny number took a conspicuous public stand (by, for example, writing a letter to the newspaper). The people at the university who most actively supported the anti-uranium struggle were, first, undergraduate students and, second, a small number of others low in the hierarchy: graduate students, tutors and research assistants. The professors who took the most active public roles were pro-uranium. So far this may seem to confirm the worst analysis of academia. Most faculty members avoided being involved in a highly controversial issue. The uranium issue did not stimulate curriculum changes to make it a focus of study. Academics did not rush to do research which might bear on the crucial issues being raised.

Nevertheless, there were some useful interactions. The strength of the environmental movement helped sustain the Human Sciences Program, an innovative set of courses in environmental studies with a critical perspective on science and social institutions. Human Sciences had been attacked by traditional academics from its inception, although it was highly regarded by students. Human Sciences offered a course of study which provided the intellectual tools for examining the full dimensions of the uranium issue, and many other issues. Human Sciences did not formally campaign against uranium. But it did encourage the sort of study and critical thinking which led quite a few students (and faculty) to support the campaign. Conversely, the strength of community concern about uranium helped legitimize Human Sciences by showing the importance of the issues it addressed, and helped stimulate resistance to attacks on Human Sciences from the more traditional, discipline bound parts of the university.

Another useful interaction was the contribution of some academics and scientists to the arguments used by anti-uranium campaigners. There was a tendency in the movement to rely on emotional appeals, typified by cartoons showing two headed animals caused by radiation. While emotion is an important force in campaigning, it can be counter productive if poor arguments are



used.

Speakers for the Canberra anti-uranium movement were offered practice and training in the arguments by some of those in the university. A number of people had studied the arguments and read some of the technical literature, for example on nuclear reactor safety, proliferation of nuclear weapons and threats to Aboriginal culture from uranium mining. Much of this literature was written, in Australia or overseas, by academics and scientists. Many of those in Canberra who studied this literature were themselves academics or scientists, with the training and inclination to develop rigorous and effective arguments.

This moderately organized effort in Canberra to study the literature and encourage a range of people to learn the arguments and be able to speak on them was not duplicated everywhere. In some places the campaign had a much more "hippie" flavor, with more "spontaneity" and less concern for rigorous argument. This style, whatever its advantages for its participants, is not effective in convincing some audiences and on occasion was disastrously counterproductive.

In 1983 a Labor government was elected and suddenly there was hope that uranium mining could be stopped. In Friends of the Earth in Canberra we perceived that after these hopes were dashed, an anticipation soon confirmed, there was a danger that the anti-uranium campaign would languish again. It so happened that most of our small group had some connection with the university. When we set out to collectively write an article about strategy for the anti-uranium movement, it might almost be said that this was simply a group of academics. But there was a vital difference in our experience in Friends of the Earth and our usual academic experiences. We were writing to encourage dialogue and promote a cause, away from the competition and highly critical atmosphere of the university. But without our academic backgrounds, we might not have been as well prepared to address the issue using the tools of anarchist, feminist and Marxist analysis.

I am acutely aware that our intellectual stimulation in writing about uranium mining is what should be happening in academia routinely. Indeed, the lack of such experiences is an indictment of the way universities are structured. What is to stop a group of activists, with no connection with academia, doing just what we did? In theory, nothing. In practice, it is the monopoly over intellectual skills and resources by educational institutions which often discourages intellectual activity on the "outside." The unfortunate tendency in many environmental groups to disdain critical analysis and to rely exclusively on feelings is a symptom of this monopoly. They reject critical thinking along with the structures which have institutionalized it.

I think it is precisely the interaction between those "inside" higher education and those "outside" given that many people are in both places at the same time which provides the best opportunity in the long run to challenge the division between inside and outside itself. Activists inside academia need to realize that there is more to politics than academic in-fighting. There are useful things students and faculty can do in support of social movements. There are also a lot of things they can learn. Activists on the outside should not

"write off" all of higher education, rejecting the good along with the large amount of bad. Remember that student protest has stimulated the toppling of regimes.

The issue here is not simply one of choosing whether to work on the inside or the outside. It is also one of developing collective strategies which can help remove control over intellectual resources from the hands of academics and their patrons. It won't be easy but I think it is worth trying.

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