

Knowledge and Power in academia

Why have there been such bitter battles over political economy at the University of Sydney and over law at Macquarie University? Why have women's studies and peace studies been so controversial? Why was Professor Sydney Orr dismissed from the University of Tasmania? Why was there an attempt to dismiss Professor Clyde Manwell from the University of Adelaide? Each of these cases illustrates the connection between knowledge and power in academia.

Higher education is, of course, supposed to be about knowledge. Research is the creation and testing of knowledge claims. Teaching and learning are concerned with the transmission of knowledge. But none of this happens in a vacuum. Other factors are always involved in dealings with knowledge.

To get at these factors, it is useful to ask, whose interests are served by academic research? The knowledge produced by academics is most useful to three kinds of groups: corporations, governments and professions. A large fraction of the technical investigations done in departments of science, engineering, commerce and agriculture are valuable to corporations and governments. The professions of law and medicine are served by relevant professional faculties. Last of all, the academic profession itself is the main beneficiary of much academic activity.

In this article I focus on research, leaving for another occasion the vital related issue of teaching, credentials and the reproduction of privilege.

How does it happen that academic research serves some groups in society more than others? To begin, it is important to recognise that the complexity of the academic community, which is splintered by internal hierarchies, disciplinary boundaries, bureaucratic and professional sources of status and advancement, diverse sources of external funding and legitimacy, and the familiar categories of gender, ethnicity and age. Academia, in a distorted way, reflects a wide range of power structures and perspectives in a wider society. Academia's enormous diversity, in the context of limited funding and the inherently scarce resource of status, provides a fertile ground for conflict: conflict between different disciplines, between different paradigms and between different personalities.

In outline, the academic research system can be looked at in the following way. There are many groups in the wider society with an interest in particular types of knowledge, both for practical use (such as chemistry) and for ideological use (such as political science). Most of higher education is funded by the government, and all of it is regulated by the government, through licensing of institutions and degrees, etc. Politicians and government bureaucrats provide a focus for the diverse pressures on higher education.

The result is that powerful corporations and professions get much of what they want: engineering and law faculties for example. Parents get a chance for their children to obtain degrees and an inside track to a better job. But other groups push in to have a say too. For example, with the rise of the environmental movement in the 1960s, higher education came under pressure to mount research and teaching into environmental issues. Similar processes led to the establishment of women's studies and peace studies.

Pressure from the outside for certain kinds of teaching and research always has to be filtered through academic power structures. Academic are not passive pawns. They have their own interests to look after: jobs, status, conditions. The basic system which has developed to serve academic interests is knowledge specialisation. Knowledge is divided first of all into disciplines, which are supposed to be coherent bodies of theory for explaining parts of the world: physics, psychology, philosophy. Academics protect their territory by becoming disciplinary specialists: those from other disciplines are excluded from making decisions within the discipline.

Usually teaching and research are carried out without too much fuss. Research papers are written which are professionally useful to academics themselves, sometimes useful to outside groups (who have the expertise to understand and the money to apply the research) and very seldom to anyone else. Students graduate to obtain jobs in the usual range of careers. Amidst all of this, it is easy to be oblivious to the role of power structures in influencing the

creation and transmission of knowledge.

Occasionally, though, this routine is disrupted. The struggle over knowledge becomes public. The normal exercise of power becomes much more visible.

There have been a number of prominent public struggles involving Australian higher education in the past several decades. In the usual accounts, most of the attention has been on the alleged rights and wrongs of particular personalities or organisations. What this focus misses is the underlying power dynamics. Here I will briefly explore the implications of a few of these struggles in terms of higher education as a power-knowledge system.

The Orr Case

In 1956, Sydney Sparkes Orr was dismissed from his professorship in philosophy at the University of Tasmania. A number of charges were made against Orr, but the most effective and remembered was that he had sexual relations with a female undergraduate. The correctness of the charges, and the university inquiry and subsequent court case, have been analysed exhaustively. What is relevant here is the reason why Orr was charged in the first place.

Orr was one of the leaders of academic staff at the University of Tasmania who openly challenged the University administration, accusing it of restricting academic salaries and meddling in strictly academic matters. Orr and others called for an outside investigation into the University. This led to a Royal Commission in 1955 which was quite critical of the University.

The attack on Orr served conveniently to divert attention from the findings of the Royal Commission (only some of whose recommendations were implemented). Orr was the sacrificial victim, and with him went any who stood up in his favour. What was extraordinary about the Orr case was the willingness of the University administration to violate so many academic norms in its campaign.

The Orr case was basically an outgrowth of the power struggle between authoritarian university administrators and protesting academics. This power struggle continues every day in every university, but seldom receives much public attention.

The Manwell Case

In 1971, an attempt was made to dismiss Clyde Manwell from his position as professor of zoology at the University of Adelaide. It took five years, numerous investigations, court challenges and a student sit-in before the attempt failed. This was, after the Orr case, one of the most widely publicised and bitterly fought dismissal cases in Australian academia. Most of the attention has been on the question of whether the charges against Manwell were sustainable.

What were the charges? The dismissal attempt began after a complaint to the Vice-Chancellor from the senior professor of zoology, H.G. Andrewartha. The core charge was that Manwell had misused his position by speaking out against pesticides. Manwell and his wife, Ann Baker, had written a letter to the Adelaide Advertiser critical of some aspects of South Australian government spraying against fruit fly. This led to vicious attacks against Manwell by some conservative members of the South Australian Parliament, and to Andrewartha's letter. It may seem amazing that writing a letter about pesticides could trigger an attempt at dismissal, but that is what happened.

The quality of Andrewartha's criticisms can be judged by his claim that a book by Manwell and Baker included four errors in the use of statistics. Andrewartha later admitted in court that only one of these was actually an error and that anyway it was of no significance. What was of significance was that Andrewartha had raised none of his criticisms with Manwell until after Manwell had gone public with his criticisms of fruit-fly spraying.

The industry that produce agricultural chemicals is a powerful one, but also vulnerable because of the effects of the chemicals. The industry has little fear of critics within its own ranks because they can be sacked. The industry has cultivated relations with politicians and government bureaucrats who are meant to regulate pesticide use. Finally, the industry provides research monies to academics. The result is that there are very few independent critics of the industry who have the status of experts.

The usual exercise of power by industry vis-a-vis academics involves research grants, consultancies and possible jobs. Andrewartha was part of this system, tied in with the South Australia Department of Agriculture which strongly supported pesticides. Other academics knew that their careers depended on not bucking the system: they kept to safe topics.

Manwell was a newcomer, appointed to the second chair of zoology from the United States not long before. He spoke out in public. Because of the whims of personalities and local politics, a major attack was mounted against him. But this was an exceptional case. Usually the industry line is enforced in a more subtle way.

Political Economy at the University of Sydney

The dominant approach to economics in Australian higher education is neoclassical economics, which is based on the mathematical model of the capitalist market system. A modification is Keynesianism, which is based on the use of government interventions in the economy to manipulate consumer demand in order to avoid recession. Whatever the value of these approaches for practical policy-making they are certainly useful for justifying the present economic system.

The neoclassical and Keynesian are not the only ones though. Various critiques of these approaches have been mounted, of which the most prominent has been called 'political economy'. Political economy is based on the observation that the exercise of political power is central to the operation of the economic system, for example in the use of laws to regulate wages and trade unions.

In many university economics departments, political economy is not represented in teaching and research at all, and in other cases there are only a token few courses. This has rarely led to an uproar. The exercise of power has been a quiet one, allowing academic theory to avoid critical examination that could be detrimental to the interests of governments and large corporations.

In the wake of the surge of student activism in the 1960s and early 1970s, there was a push for greater teaching of political economy. At Sydney University, there were a number of sympathetic staff and many student supporters. In the face of this challenge, the traditional economists made strong attempts to maintain their own dominance. The result was a power struggle that made headlines for over a decade.

The traditional economists used a variety of techniques to attack their opponents: blocking course proposals, dismissing tutors, hindering tenure and promotion, blocking appointments. Given the differences in perspectives and the conflicts over aims and methods, the political economists push for autonomy. But the then Vice-Chancellor, Professor Bruce Williams, himself trained as a traditional economist, refused to create a separate political economy department.

Ironically, students specialising in political economy seem to have had no more difficulty in obtaining jobs than other graduates. The conflict is between groups of academics each using a body of knowledge to stake a claim for priority in teaching and research and for intellectual status.

Struggles over knowledge and for control of syllabus are found throughout academia. The struggle between traditional and political economists has been different mainly in being public and, perhaps, particularly bitter.

A very similar dispute developed in the Philosophy Department, again at the University of Sydney in the 1970s, between traditional and radical philosophers. The radicals used feminism, Marxism and other critical perspectives which were anathema to the traditionalists. In contrast to the Economics Department, in the Philosophy Department the radicals gained control for a time. Also in contrast to the Economics Department, the same Vice-Chancellor split the Philosophy Department. This protected the traditional philosophers, who had their own department, from being outvoted by the radicals.

Women's Studies

Higher Education is dominated by men and male perspectives. Most academics, especially those in top positions, are men, and women's perspectives are seldom found in teaching or research. This situation was not considered worthy of comment until the resurgence of the feminist movement in the late 1960s. Feminists demanded that higher education address women's needs and perspectives. Some staff and many students expressed these concerns, and they were backed by the influential women's movement.

In principle, feminism contains far-reaching implications for higher education. It could lead to changes in teaching and research methods and content in every discipline, and to a reorientation of the competitive specialisation of academia towards a more collegial, cooperative search for knowledge. It also contains the image of a society in which the split between the public and private life, including the split between paid intellectual work and unpaid domestic work, is superseded.

In practice, academia has responded to the challenge of feminism by avoiding structural change. Feminism, in its form as a transdisciplinary restructuring of knowledge and

of methods of learning and teaching, could hardly be accommodated. Instead, the traditional disciplines were left intact (aside from the efforts of individuals), and feminist initiatives were channelled into separate women's studies units. These enclaves of feminist analysis were threatening enough, and it took enormous struggles to introduce and defend them. They are 'transdisciplinary' and thus contrary to the disciplinary mould of academia. Also, in spite of the high quality and great social significance of much feminist scholarship, women's studies programmes have remained vulnerable to cutbacks due to the discipline-based organisational structure of higher education.

The struggle to promote women's studies is the visible tip of the iceberg of a much wider struggle against male domination in higher education and in society generally. This struggle is carried out in day-to-day interactions between male and female staff and students, decisions about teaching and research, appointments, and 'private' arrangements concerning housework and childcare.

The Peace Research Centre at the Australian National University.

Prior to the 1980s, there was almost no peace research or peace education in Australian higher education. One pioneer programme at Murdoch University did not survive. With the rise of the enormous peace movement in the 1980s, this changed. Many academics were involved from an early stage, and one of their activities was to push for peace research and peace studies. One particular push was for the federal government to set up an institute dedicated to peace research, perhaps in the style, scale and prestige of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. After the Australian Labor Party was elected it still took a couple of years of pressure before the small Peace Research Centre, based at ANU, was established in 1985.

Even before its birth, the proposed centre was the target of attacks from right-wing opponents. These attacks escalated in intensity and viciousness after the appointment of Andrew Mack as the head of the Centre. The critics claimed that peace research was vacuous academically, that Mack was an apologist for communist militarism, and generally that peace research was a dangerous and subversive activity, constituting little more than peace movement ideology in academic guise.

To peace researchers and peace activists, this attack was ludicrous: there is a long standing tradition of scholarly peace research; the Centre was not crucial to the peace movement; and Mack capably exposed the personal attacks on himself as false and intellectually shallow.

Although the right-wing attack had little intellectual credibility, it could only make the Centre academics more cautious, and certainly took up their time and energy. More importantly, it poisoned the atmosphere politically. If the Liberal Party had been elected in the interim, the future of the Peace Research Centre could have been put in jeopardy.

Historically, academics have usually supported the military efforts of their own governments. Academic involvement in military research is so widespread that the phrase 'military-industrial complex' often has academic appended to it. Peace research, some of which is based on a more independent position, threatens to set a model for straying from this position. Hence it triggered vocal denunciations, which are out of line with the usual quiet exercise of power against critical perspectives.

The Macquarie Law School

The law, like every other area of society, has been the focus for social struggles. The dominant use of law is to protect established powerful groups: governments, large corporations, middle and upper-class individuals, men. The law is effective in serving the powerful precisely because it is presented and often perceived as neutral. The law protects the property of the poor as well as the rich, and is used to enforce violations of employment contracts whether by employer or employee. The critics of the neutrality of law point to much evidence that the law is biased not only in implementation, such as the greater imprisonment of Aborigines than whites for the same offences, but also in its construction. The treatment of business corporations as individuals under the law, for example, contributes to the successes and excesses of monopoly capitalism.

In any law school, there are some who emphasise the technical and procedural aspects of law and some who emphasise the political nature of law as indicated above. In most cases the traditionalists predominate, and the struggles over form and content of law teaching and research are restricted to academic channels. The Macquarie Law School was different because the Critical Legal Scholars developed greater strength. But the traditionalists did not have to accept defeats quietly, because they had powerful outside allies, in particular elites from the legal profession and supporters in government, business and the media.

Most of the debate about the Macquarie Law School has focussed on whether studying law in a critical, sociological way is a proper thing to do, and on the various personality, procedural, and power disputes within the School and Macquarie University. By contrast, little attention is given to the routine exercise of power that quietly shapes all legal teaching and research.

The Double Standard Test

In asking why a particular controversy occurred and not some other controversy, it is valuable to apply a simple test. What is different about this case?

The charges against Orr were trumped up out of dubious evidence, pressed forward assiduously and, when found wanting, replaced by new ones. Charges should be precise and stable. If not, there may be a double standard involved.

Charges similar to those against Orr could have been made against many professors around the country, but were not. The difference was that Orr had been prominent in the staff protest against the administration of the University of Tasmania. There was no need to drum up charges against other professors who had not caused any problem for governing bodies.

The charges against Manwell were likewise extremely weak vehicles to justify dismissal. For example, Manwell was accused of making four errors in statistics, but his accuser later admitted under cross-examination that only one was an error and that it was of no importance. Although errors in statistics abound in academic publications, these errors are not triggers for dismissal complaints even when they are flagrant and change the interpretation of the data. The difference is that Manwell had publicly embarrassed the proponents of pesticides.

The radical critics of neoclassical theory do not have powerful backing in the wider society, and so only occasionally develop strength in parts of academia. The dispute over political economy at the University of Sydney became prominent because the political economists were moderately strong and resisted attempts by the traditional economists to subordinate them.

There was never much attention to male domination and male orientation in traditional disciplines until the feminist movement tried to change things. The furore over the tiny resources devoted to women's studies has overwhelmed the feminist insight that most academic disciplines are male-oriented studies that do not openly

acknowledge themselves as such. The treatment of women's studies as intellectually unworthy, or at best unworthy of much funding, has not been matched by similar scrutiny of the traditional male-oriented disciplines.

Whereas the Peace Research Centre at the Australian National University has been viciously attacked, the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre at the same university, which has strong links with the Department of Defence, has not been similarly attacked. The right-wingers who dislike peace studies essentially object to research critical of traditional military preparedness having scholarly status.

In many law schools around Australia, traditional perspectives to the law receive the bulk of attention. While complaints have been made about the teaching at a number of Australian law schools, problems at Macquarie have generated a remarkable degree of consternation in the media and elsewhere. The difference at Macquarie is that academics with a nontraditional perspective are in the majority. This is not liked by traditionalists in the School and their supporters in the legal profession and elsewhere. This is the simple explanation for why Macquarie University, rather than some other place, has been the scene of a long-running and highly publicised dispute over law. The usual attention to personalities, procedural disputes and so forth, hides this basic point.

The cases described here are exceptional in that the usual academic struggles involving power and knowledge became public. It should be remembered that similar although less spectacular struggles take place routinely throughout academia.

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