

## **Stealth Social Democracy in US Higher Education**

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Neoliberal education policy makers around the world regularly turn to US higher education in order to justify far-reaching attacks on public universities. In the latest version of this now familiar ploy, the UK's Browne Report focuses on the fact that a disproportionate number of the world's top universities are US private institutions. So why not defund the UK's impressive array of public universities, allow the magical power of the so-called "free market" to do its miraculous work, and let competitive pressures sort out excellent from mediocre universities? Radical budgets cuts are really in everybody's best interests: soon the UK's top universities will join the ranks of Princeton, Harvard, and Yale in the Times Higher Education "world university rankings." Best of all, this will all happen while saving the taxpayer loads of money.

A number of devastating critiques of this disastrous strategy have already appeared.<sup>1</sup> But its most obvious failing is that misrepresents core features of US higher education. Like many other versions of right-wing utopianism, it simply ignores the facts on the ground.

Social welfare provisions in the US have remained infamously meager when compared to those provided by most advanced west European welfare states. But at least when it came to achieving one item of T.H. Marshall's famous list of social rights –a right to a decent education—the US arguably did pretty well after 1945. Unlike their historical predecessors, and in contrast to their peers in many other developed capitalist countries, Americans were able to attend institutions of higher education in relatively impressive numbers. In good social democratic fashion, the US realized a measure of "stealth" social democracy via a mixed economy in higher education. Private institutions were forced to compete with well-funded public colleges and universities, with state support for public education increasing regularly and oftentimes substantially well into the 1980s. Chiefly because of this surprisingly generous public support, oftentimes outstripping the measly state funding provided by many otherwise more developed welfare states, high quality but inexpensive public universities opened their doors to large numbers of students who otherwise would never have been able to attend. Public colleges and universities not only enrolled the vast majority of undergraduate university students and provided them with a decent basic education, but they dominated the ranks of quality professional and Ph.D programs.

For many, attending "the U" (as Minnesota's flagship public university is still revealingly described by state residents there) was an important stone on the path to social mobility. For others, "the U" meant a chance to pursue world-class graduate education at least as good as anything provided by private universities. Those hoping to do top-quality graduate research in sociology looked to Berkeley

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<sup>1</sup> For example, see Howard Hotson, "Don't Look to the Ivy League," LRB (19 May 2011).

and Wisconsin; the best philosophers were (and perhaps still are) found at the (public) University of Pittsburgh; graduate education in political science was dominated by "Big Ten" public institutions like Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio State, and Indiana.

Interestingly, it was also in the public sector that innovative and unconventional research was found. Radical economics was taught at the University of Massachusetts; progressive scholarship on US history flourished at Wisconsin; the latest trends in Marxist world systems theory could be pursued at SUNY Binghamton. Radical social science thrived at the City University of New York, where working class kids --like my dad, whose father was an auto mechanic and mother a floral arranger--could attend night classes with famous scholars (e.g., Hans Morgenthau) while working during the day. The purportedly "bureaucratic" and "top-heavy" state sector provided extensive space for those who wanted to think outside the box. And it provided historically unprecedented possibilities for people of modest means to do something different with their lives than what the accident of birth might otherwise have predestined for them.

So the most obvious fact ignored by neoliberal ideologues is that the widely touted strengths of US higher education derive to a great extent from a long history of massive public investment, which even today remains relatively sizable in comparative terms. Yes, "competition" sometimes played a fruitful role, but only because well-funded public institutions not only could rival private universities, but because they performed indispensable educational and political functions unmet by private institutions. Today's neoliberal "reformers" conveniently forget, for example, that "elite" private institutions did not really open their doors to significant segments of the population until the early 1970s (when, for example, Ivy League universities finally agreed to admit women). They did so not only because of the upheavals of the 1960s, but arguably because they faced competitive pressures from top public universities which long had been relatively inclusive in gender, racial, and class terms. The fundraising frenzy that has fed the recent development of a group of overbloated private universities was generated at least in part by a desire to distinguish themselves from "mere" public universities, many of which had successfully attracted the most creative minds in the country, and whose research achievements put old-line private universities (e.g., Brown or Penn) to shame.

This system is now under attack. To be sure, the US still has a "mixed economy" in higher education. However, it is one in which public universities increasingly face severe structural disadvantages. The most obvious sources of the shift are massive cuts in public financial support since the 1980s, with state appropriations (the main source of public funding) having been halved (from 45.6% in 1980 to less than 25% at the present).<sup>2</sup> The numbers are even worse for leading public universities, which are able to attract out-of-state students who pay increasingly exorbitant fees. Consequently, strapped state legislatures looking to cut state budgets increasingly leave these institutions to their own financial devices: the prestigious University of

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<sup>2</sup> Glenn C. Altschuler and David J. Skorton, "Not So-Public Colleges," *Forbes* (August 11, 2010).

Virginia, for example, now receives less than 8% of its operating budget from the state government. The very best public institutions, in short, are undergoing a de facto privatization, while weaker public colleges are subject to many of its pressures and pathologies as well.

Not surprisingly, the US no longer does particularly well in guaranteeing a social right to education. According to most estimates, we no longer do better than most advanced democracies in enrolling broad swaths of the citizenry in institutions of higher education. Perhaps more alarming, many prospective students are simply being priced out of the market: public universities are forced to compensate for constant cuts in state support by charging massive tuition fees. (At my university, for example, they are approaching \$10,000 annually for state residents and over \$25,000 for those from outside the state). Even with generous financial aid packages being made available, growing numbers of students are falling between the cracks. At another prominent public university here in the Midwest, over half of the incoming class stems from families having six-figure incomes, even though only 13% of all families earn similarly well. So even public universities increasingly exclude students of modest social means. Decent higher education risks again becoming –as it was before the postwar “golden age”—a social privilege but not a universal right.

Meanwhile, faculty salaries and research perks in the private sector continue to grow at faster rates than those in the public sector. Public university administrators now find themselves facing a brain drain with their best or at least most marketable faculty able to gain employment at prestigious private universities that simply have more to offer. Admittedly, it doesn't seem to bother many of them: they too hope that if they play their cards right they can someday jump ship and get a better paying Deanship at a private university.

Despite these setbacks, those still enthralled by neoliberal educational philosophy would do well to keep two facts in mind. First, and most obviously, the university rankings which they tend to fetishize unfairly favor selective private institutions: because public universities quite rightly recruit a relatively diverse student body, they do poorly on some important measures (e.g., “student retention” and/or “alumni giving”). So the rankings too often simply reproduce class and social privilege. Second, and oftentimes forgotten especially abroad, US public institutions continue to do quite well in those university rankings which arguably count for something. In the reputable and methodologically rigorous National Research Council survey of graduate education, public universities have managed to hold their own against vastly better funded private institutions. In my own field of political science, for example, in the latest rankings thirteen of the top twenty-five spots are occupied by public universities.

Although now widely considered impolite to say so, in part because it challenges the governing neoliberal consensus, even some of the wealthiest private institutions continue to offer mediocre education and support second-tier research, whereas underfunded public institutions regularly outshine them. Perhaps on its last legs, the US mixed economy in higher education has not yet been totally destroyed.