

Race, Class, *and* Academic Capitalism

The Future of Liberal Education

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The following is from a lecture delivered at Antioch College on June 2, 2000.

American higher education is today in the midst of a fundamental transformation, even more profound than during the aftermath of World War II and the passage of the GI Bill, which greatly increased the number of Americans enrolled in universities. Most educators would agree that two of the primary factors behind the current vast changes in higher education are the revolution in high technology and the transitional dynamics of globalization. The creation of cyberspace and new information technologies have transformed how we think about everything related to learning, from classroom instruction to knowledge production and research. Globalization, with the unprecedented integration of international markets, the vast migrations of labor, and the construction of multinational

workforces, also creates a qualitatively new economic environment for colleges. "Competitiveness" can no longer be defined in parochial or traditional terms, but must be defined in the context of increasingly international student populations, rapidly changing labor forces, and new global economic developments.

I would, however, suggest that there are at least three other factors that will have equally profound effects on the future development of American higher education, especially in the context of a racially diverse, multicultural society. In brief, these factors are (1) the triumph of the politics of neoliberalism, the rapid dismantling of public institutions of all kinds, from human services programs and state universities, to public works and public housing; (2) the glaring and unprecedented class stratification in the contemporary United States, the vast concentrations of

wealth and affluence among a very small percentage of America's population, which co-exists with millions of working poor people, the unemployed, and people on fixed incomes; and (3) the polarization of racialized ethnicity, the socioeconomic marginalization of blacks, Latinos, and immigrants from Third World countries, the elimination of affirmative action and race-based scholarships, and the decline of educational opportunity and access to millions of nonwhite Americans. One could perhaps characterize these three factors as dimensions of a larger problem or social contradiction: the problem of human inequality, which now masquerades as "progress."

With the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the collapse of communism as an alternative social system, capitalism appeared to triumph across the globe in the 1990s. Policymakers and governments throughout the world backed away from central planning, regulatory agencies, wage and price controls. European social democrats and some ex-communists began embracing conservative fiscal policies that had been identified with Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher only a decade before. In the United States, what emerged was an ideological consensus between both political parties and the ruling elites that is now widely described as "neoliberalism." Neoliberalism places the interests of those who own or manage the major means of production at the center of all major public policy considerations, and adopts market techniques and mechanisms in carrying out the routine functions of government. Market forces, not the state, should determine the accessibility of services and resources, including health care, employment, housing, and public transportation.

What neoliberalism meant in the field of education has been experienced most glaringly in the public schools. In Cleveland, Milwaukee, and the state of Florida, tens of

millions of dollars were reallocated from public school budgets to pay for tuition for a small number of students at private schools, even religious schools. More than twenty states are currently considering the adoption of voucher schemes based on the Florida model. Although conservatives argue that vouchers create competition between private and public schools, enhancing the quality of education for all children, there is no clear evidence that voucher schools improve academic performance. What is undisputed, however, is that in academic year 1999–2000, \$39 million in public funds were redirected from Milwaukee's starved public schools to finance 8,000 students in private schools.¹

In this neoliberal political environment, federal and state governments have moved to limit and reduce expenditures to public colleges and universities. As the education researchers Sheila Slaughter and Gary Rhoades have noted, in 1973 states contributed about one-half of the operating budgets of public colleges. By the mid-1990s, that level of support fell to 33 percent. Tuition at public universities accounted for roughly 15 percent of institutional revenue streams in 1973, but increased to 22 percent today.² Working-class and low-income families making tremendous sacrifices to send their children to public universities were now expected to assume a significantly greater share of the costs. For example, the total annual cost for an average undergraduate student to attend a school in the State University of New York system, including tuition, books, and room and board, rose from \$7,319 in 1991 to \$11,201 by 1997, a 35 percent increase. At the City University of New York (CUNY), where the students are overwhelmingly black, Latino, working-class, or poor, tuition and fees for undergraduates doubled between 1988 and 1998. At the same time, the state's share of the CUNY operating budget fell from 77 percent to 49 percent. In *Culture of Intolerance*,

The vast majority of black and Hispanic students continue to function under a kind of educational apartheid, more than a generation after the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

The investment policies of these institutions also acquire an increasingly speculative character, in sharp contrast to the fiscal conservatism of the mid-twentieth century. New York University (NYU) provides an excellent example. Back in 1990, NYU's then \$300 million endowment was 85 percent invested in cash and short-term bonds, and only 15 percent in equities, according to the researchers Kimberly Quinn Johnson and Joseph Entin. Between September 1998 and August 1999, NYU raised \$247.3 million. Where did it invest its money? About 25 percent is now allocated to bonds and three-fourths put in equities, with one-third of the latter amount "into high-risk private equity, including venture capital."¹⁴ Although Yale University reinvests much of its endowment in highly speculative but high-yielding areas such as international investments and real estate, between 1985 and 1995 it spent only 3.9 percent of its endowment's growth on immediate operating expenses devoted to education. As the Yale Law School professor Henry Hansmann observed: "A stranger from Mars who looks at private universities would probably say that they are institutions whose business is to manage large pools of money and that they run educational institutions on the side."¹⁵

Although most liberal arts colleges are largely excluded from full participation in academic capitalism, they are nevertheless deeply influenced by it. Both public and private institutions have also gravitated toward what Slaughter and Rhoades term "managed

professionals," or the "rapid expansion of nonfaculty support professionals and a reduction, through outsourcing, in the number of nonprofessional, traditional blue-and-pink collar employees." Slaughter and Rhoades observe: "These support professionals—in student services, computer services, fundraising, technology transfer, assessment, and instructional support—can be called managerial professionals in that they have some characteristics of traditional professionals such as faculty . . . [but] are more closely linked to and dependent on management than are faculty."¹⁶ Neoliberal management strategies on college campuses include the reduction of salaries and benefits to college employees by aggressively outsourcing services, especially in food service, custodial maintenance, bookstores, and security, and by reducing or eliminating unions.

The impact of neoliberal academic management may be best measured by an examination of what is happening to the faculty. When I entered graduate school at the University of Wisconsin in the fall semester, 1971, I did so with the expectation that if I successfully completed the doctoral requirements in my field of study I would be employed in a full-time teaching position at a college or university. Further down the road, if I proved to become a productive scholar and an effective teacher, I could anticipate tenure. At that time, the vast majority of faculty members I knew and worked with were full-time, either tenure-track or tenured. According to the National Center for Education

Statistics, only 22 percent of all faculty in higher education were employed part-time as of 1970. Near the end of the Reagan era, in 1987, that figure had increased to 33 percent; and by 1993, it reached 42 percent.¹⁷ Today, about 60 percent of higher education's teaching workforce comprises what the education researcher Gary Zabel terms "contingent faculty." These include career academics who teach part-time jobs on multiple campuses, half-time instructors who hold full-time jobs outside of academe, and non-tenure-track full-time faculty hired on term appointments. This latter group by itself comprised 17 percent of all university and college faculty. The elimination of thousands of full-time faculty jobs in recent years has had the effect of greatly increasing the power of the administration at the expense of faculty governance and authority. Decisions over employment and curricula that were once defined solely by faculty have increasingly shifted to academic management.¹⁸

Finally, there is within the changing politics of American higher education the reconfigured reality of race: the deteriorating public support for affirmative action and race-based scholarships, a retreat from needs-blind admissions, and the implicit "writing off" or elimination of most low-income and urban poor students from having access to elite schools. There is also a curious paradox in how racial diversity is perceived as a goal in most colleges and universities. From my anecdotal experiences, I have generally found administrators to be strong supporters of racial and gender diversity in hiring policies and faculty and student recruitment. A recent national survey conducted by the American Council on Education and the American Association of University Professors indicates that faculty at major research universities overwhelmingly value racial diversity on their campuses. About 85 percent of respondents disagreed with the assertion that "racial and ethnic diversity has

lowered the quality of their institutions," with less than 6 percent agreeing. More than 90 percent of all faculty said that diversity did not impede "discussions of issues in classrooms," illustrating that "political correctness" is largely an invention of the far right. More than one-fourth of all faculty respondents even claimed that racial and ethnic diversity had "caused them to adjust course syllabi to include such issues."¹⁹ By contrast, white students are far less supportive of affirmative action and diversity programs designed to recruit and retain minorities. A recent survey of freshmen at the University of California at Los Angeles conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute reported that almost 50 percent "believe affirmative action should be abolished." A national telephone survey commissioned in 2000 by a conservative group, the Foundation for Academic Standards and Tradition, reported that 79 percent of the 1,004 respondents said that "lowering the entrance requirements for some students, regardless of the reason, was unfair to other applicants." Nearly the identical number, 77 percent, stated that it was "not right to give preferential treatment to minority students, if it meant denying admission to other students."²⁰ The evidence suggests that the majority of white Americans favor multicultural and racial diversity, so long as they do not have to pay for it.

The vast majority of black and Hispanic students continue to function under a kind of educational apartheid, more than a generation after the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. The apartheid begins in the public schools, with the underfunding of urban education. Advanced placement (AP) and honors courses are widely available at private and suburban schools, but frequently unavailable in mostly black and brown public high schools. The so-called racial achievement gap in most standardized tests that determine admission to colleges is more than anything else a measurement of unequal treatment. Even

when minority students do attend schools that offer large numbers of AP and honors courses, the educational researchers Pedro Noguera and Antwi Akom have found that

they are more likely to be actively discouraged from taking them by teachers and counselors. . . . And with the rollback of affirmative action at colleges and universities, there is little doubt that students who possess entertainment value to universities, who can slam-dunk or score touchdowns, will be admitted regardless of their academic performance, even as aspiring doctors and lawyers are turned away.²¹

At working-class, public universities like the City University of New York, new rules prohibit students who need remediation from gaining admission. In the CUNY system's eleven senior colleges, this is likely to reduce the overall number of black and Hispanic undergraduates by one-third or more.²² In the aftermath of the passage in California of Proposition 209 in 1996, the number of black, Hispanic, and American Indian freshmen at the University of California at Berkeley in fall 2000 dropped to 1,169 from 1,778 admissions in 1997. At the University of California at Los Angeles, racial minority admissions declined from 2,010 to 1,449 between fall 1997 and fall 2000.²³ In the same way, since the 1998 passage of Initiative 200 in Washington state outlawing affirmative action, racialized minority enrollments have fallen across the board. In the fall of 1999, the University of Washington enrolled one-third fewer Latino and African-American freshmen, and nearly one-quarter fewer American Indian freshmen.²⁴

How do we reverse the patterns of educational apartheid and class inequality in higher education? How can we achieve the ideal that access to advanced learning should be an entitlement in a democratic society? Liberal arts

colleges can have a critical role to play in this regard, in fostering the values of hope and opportunity.

Higher education in the twenty-first century will increasingly become an important battleground around issues of class, pitting labor and management around a host of concerns. At Harvard University in May 2000, a coalition of students and faculty rallied in a campaign to increase hourly minimum wage levels to \$10.25 for Harvard employees. Harvard administrators may find it difficult to explain to students why an institution that raised \$451.7 million in academic year 1998–1999 cannot pay many of their employees a living wage.²⁵ Over a three-year period beginning in 1996, students at Johns Hopkins conducted a vigorous campaign to support a living wage for all university employees. More than one hundred faculty signed the petition, calling for annual cost of living adjustments; health benefits; and the establishment of an oversight committee of students, workers, and community representatives to guarantee compliance. In February 1999, the university finally agreed that it would implement an hourly wage rate of \$7.75 phased in over three years but refused to make any promises on health benefits or cost of living adjustments. Johns Hopkins president William Brody declared publicly that a living wage was “a moral imperative,” yet the university maintains its own for-profit subsidiary, Broadway Services, through which it contracts most of its custodial, security, and parking lot services at starting wages of \$6 per hour. Meanwhile, in academic year 1998–1999, Johns Hopkins University's fund-raising efforts totaled \$207 million.²⁶ What kind of “values” are Hopkins undergraduates learning from university policies toward the working poor?

A college committed to liberal values should address in a thoughtful and creative manner American society's growing racial di-

vide. This requires more than concerted efforts to recruit and retain racialized minorities in its student body. It should also initiate proactive measures to diversify its faculty and administrative staff. It could, for example, establish exchange programs with students and faculty at historically black colleges and universities or predominantly Hispanic institutions. It could reach out to nearby urban communities and, working with public school officials, create mentorship programs, encouraging minority students to pursue post-secondary education. Administrators should set clear guidelines and expectations for the implementation of diversity policies in their institutions.

A more challenging task for liberal education is the deconstruction of the intricate patterns of social privilege, which are obscured from critical scrutiny by the ideology of meritocracy. Part of the historic difficulty in uprooting racial and gender inequality in the United States is that whites generally, and especially white middle- and upper-class males, must be taught to recognize how the omnipresent structures of white privilege perpetuate inequality for millions of Americans. As Mark Nathan Cohen, in *Culture of Intolerance*, eloquently states:

If, historically, any working-class or middle-class group has received affirmative action it has been white males with their defacto monopoly of jobs and education. In their world, competition has clearly been limited and quality has suffered as a result. White men . . . have benefited from the fact that women and minorities could not compete on equal footing for a job.²⁷

The classical liberal ideal of free and fair competition in the marketplace has always been a lie. Private colleges "privilege" the

children of their alumni through the policy of legacies, preserving traditional class and racial hierarchies.

One hundred and fifty years ago, educators established colleges like Oberlin, Antioch, and Bowdoin with the belief that such institutions could become catalysts for the making of a more racially just society, in which human bondage did not exist. A generation ago at the height of the black freedom movement, black and white students at Antioch's campus trained to engage in civil disobedience and nonviolent direct action to protest racial segregation across the South. As an undergraduate student at Earlham College in Indiana, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, I witnessed the entire campus community—administrators, faculty, and students—critically engaged in teach-ins, discussions, and public demonstrations over the Vietnam War. What example of praxis, the unity of critical theory and principled action, do we now give to the next generation of students, who are entering this brave new world?

Knowledge, from the vantage point of the oppressed, must not only inform, but transform, the real conditions of daily life in which people live. A humanistic, liberal education must do the same thing. It must provide new perspectives and insights for young people, usually of privileged backgrounds, to understand the meaning and reality of hunger and poverty. It should create and nourish a commitment to a society committed to social justice and a culture of human rights, which has the potential for including all of us. It should foster an impatience with all forms of human inequality, whether based on gender, sexual orientation, or race. The knowledge to help to empower those without power, to bridge our social divisions, to define and to enrich our definitions of democracy, should be the central aim of a liberal education for the twenty-first century.

Notes

1. Barbara Miner, "Who's Vouching for Vouchers?" *Nation*, Vol. 270, no. 22 (June 5, 2000), pp. 23-24.
2. Sheila Slaughter and Gary Rhoades, "The Neo-Liberal University," *New Labor Forum*, No. 6 (Spring/Summer 2000), p. 75.
3. Mark Nathan Cohen, *Culture of Intolerance: Chauvinism, Class and Racism in the United States* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 264; also see Report published by the Correctional Association of New York and the Justice Policy Institute, Washington, D.C., October 1998.
4. Colin Woodard, "Worldwide Tuition Increase Sends Students into the Streets," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Vol. 46, no. 35 (May 5, 2000), pp. A54-A56.
5. Joni Finney and Kristin Conklin, "Enough of Trickle Down: It's Time for a Flood of Aid for Needy Students," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Vol. 46, no. 35 (May 5, 2000), p. A68.
6. Sara Hebel, "Pending: A Snapshot of a New Bill Facing Higher Education," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Vol. 46, no. 34 (April 28, 2000), p. A39.
7. Robert J. Samuelson, "Rule by the Rich? No," *Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, April 24, 2000.
8. Finney and Conklin, "Enough of Trickle Down."
9. Kit Lively, "Giving to Higher Education Breaks Another Record," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Vol. 46, no. 35 (May 5, 2000), pp. A41-A42.
10. Jodi Wilgoren, "A Man of Big Achievement but Very Little Fanfare," *New York Times*, May 27, 2000.
11. "Give and Take," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Vol. 46, no. 34 (April 28, 2000), p. A40.
12. Slaughter and Rhoades, "The Neo-Liberal University," p. 73.
13. John L. Pulley, "Patent on a Painkiller Could Be Worth Billions to the U. of Rochester," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Vol. 46, no. 34 (April 28, 2000).
14. Kimberly Quinn Johnson and Joseph Entin, "Graduate Employee Organizing and the Corporate University," *New Labor Forum*, No. 6 (Spring/Summer 2000), pp. 100-101.
15. Henry Hansmann quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 101.
16. Slaughter and Rhoades, "The Neo-Liberal University," pp. 73-74.
17. *1993 National Study of Postsecondary Faculty* (Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, 1993).
18. Gary Zabel, "A New Campus Rebellion: Organizing Boston's Contingent Faculty," *New Labor Forum*, No. 6 (Spring/Summer 2000), pp. 90-91.
19. Peter Schmidt, "Faculty Members Say They Prize Diversity," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Vol. 46, no. 38 (May 26, 2000), p. A38.
20. Ben Gose, "Most Students Oppose Racial Preferences in Admissions, Survey Finds," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Vol. 46, no. 35 (May 5, 2000), p. A52.
21. Pedro A. Noguera and Antwi Akom, "Disparities Demystified: Causes of the Racial Achievement Gap All Derive from Unequal Treatment," *Nation*, Vol. 270, no. 22 (June 5, 2000), pp. 29-31.
22. If the remediation ban had been in effect during academic year 1998-1999, 34 percent of all African-American freshmen and 38 percent of all Latino first-year students would have been eliminated. See Sara Hebel, "Agency Will Monitor CUNY Remediation," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Vol. 46, no. 38 (May 26, 2000), p. A38.
23. Racialized minorities' enrollments have increased at less prestigious state schools, perhaps leading to a two-tiered racial system in the university. See Barbara Whitaker, "Minority Rolls Rebound at University of California, but Disparity Persists at Main Campuses," *New York Times*, April 5, 2000.
24. Sara Hebel, "From Seattle Central Community College, the View of the Big University," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Vol. 46, no. 38 (May 26, 2000), p. A36.
25. See graph, "Voluntary Support of Higher Education, 1998-99," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Vol. 46, no. 35 (May 5, 2000), p. A42; and John Nichols, "Unfair Harvard," *Nation*, Vol. 270, no. 22 (June 5, 2000), p. 9.
26. Jess Walsh, "Living Wage Campaigns Storm the Ivory Tower: Low Wage Workers on Campus," *New Labor Forum*, No. 6 (Spring/Summer 2000), pp. 80-89, and graph, "Voluntary Support of Higher Education."
27. Cohen, *Culture of Intolerance*, p. 265.