

# THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF KNOWLEDGE

## The Function of a University

Contrary to the myth widely promulgated by vested interests, the modern university is a formal institution designed to serve the interests of societal dominants. Whether it is labelled as a university, or a college, or an institute of technology (and the label is largely irrelevant), its function is to:

- distract inquisitive people from posing questions that might seriously inconvenience societal dominants,
- socialize such people into an uncritical acceptance of the hegemonic-society,
- institutionalize enquiry into academic and commercial research that does not embarrass the dominants and which generally promotes their sectional interests,
- institutionalize education into socialization (for professions and trades) which does not embarrass the dominants and which generally promotes their sectional interests,
- institutionalize common-sense understanding into scholarly knowledge (of facts and their authoritative interpretations) and to deny the legitimacy of any interpretations which might seriously embarrass the dominants.

In this task, the university makes use of subsidiary school systems and elitist professions. Together, they tempt able people with the extrinsic rewards of relative status and away from the intrinsic rewards of personal development. It is a temptation that our intellectuals find virtually irresistible and this applies to our left-wing trendies and faddists equally as much as to our right-wing traditionalists and conservatives.

## The Historical Tradition

Essentially, the university supplements the temple which, traditionally, has institutionalized privilege (into official church or lodge), understanding (into dogma) and education (into apprenticeship). Temple and university thus share a common commitment to:

- hermetic knowledge (i.e. facts and their authoritative interpretations, which are known to superordinate people who can transmit them to subordinate people if they can prove their fitness for this privilege),
- the privileged elitism that is associated with varying degrees of mastery over this uncommon knowledge.

The ideology of the university is, hence, supplemented by that of the Freemasons, the Rosicrucians and the Cabalists.<sup>1</sup>

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This institutionalization of privilege derives largely from Asia Minor with its tradition of paternalism, so obvious in the teachings of Zarathustra (Zoroaster), Abraham, Moses and Solomon. This priestly tradition (i.e. a belief that secrets are available to, and obtainable from, a lineage of privileged priests or masters) was absorbed by the Roman Empire via the oligarchical and tyrannical states of Greece. Later, it resurfaced with the Eastern revival that characterized the Renaissance and was reinforced by the consequent Scientific Enlightenment (when the professional scientists became the most authoritative of priests and eventually introduced us to the heavenly delights of battery vibrators, television commercials and fast foods).

In similar fashion, the professionalization of educational administration and management is now used to intimidate parents, teachers and workers who might otherwise be tempted to assume responsibility for coordinating their own activities within collegial organizations (and also to legitimate managerial practices that would not have been tolerated back in the Stone Age).

## Certification

Professionalization depends upon certification. Hence the privileged people who control a modern university, together with those who are privileged to use its facilities for personal advantage, have a vested interest in maintaining the certification myth.

According to this myth, examinations and assignments provide an accurate measure of worthwhile capacities and knowledge. Certification based on these measurements (and recorded on a ninety degree angle or a seven point scale) can then be used to legitimate claims to advancement, personal preferment and the right to exercise authority. The reality, of course, is that the tests merely measure the statistical correlation between the examiner's interpretations of reality and the student's interpretations. I have never yet found a satisfactory answer to the question of who eventually examines the examiners! And, after all any ten year old child can tell you that self-praise is no recommendation!

In any case, the greatest threat to the marketability of this myth is cheating; particularly cheating that can be exposed. The most obvious type of discoverable cheating is plagiarism. Plagiarism threatens the whole structure of the university and the authoritarian society that it legitimates. It opens up a whole can of worms, beginning with the moral issues raised by the claims of bourgeois academics to the private ownership of mental constructs, and ending, who knows where!

As one would expect, the reaction of human clones to this type of threat has been programmed for thousands of years.

Wherever they are faced with a smart-ars'd kid who threatens to expose the indecent obscenity of the emperor, they close ranks to protect the one thing that they have a shared capacity to understand, i.e. the myth. Depending on the size of the audience attracted by the kid, they can either crucify, poison, or banish him or her, or write nasty little words on his or her criminal or academic record.

All of us who have graduated through the various degrees of the academic lodge have found it necessary to 'steal each other's songs' (with acknowledgement to Kris Kristofferson *et al.*) or to 'regurgitate each other's garbage' (source unidentified, but possibly an ancient Babylonian temple official). Some of us are naturally more adept than others at this aspect of adolescence and have been rewarded accordingly.

## State Legitimation

In promoting the professional specialization in which they have a vested interest, universities require access to the institutionalized violence of the state. Roman codified law (not Celtic common law) is used to ensure that the monopolies enjoyed by professions and universities can, if necessary, be safeguarded and enforced by the official violence of the state. The legal profession (of Roman, not Celtic origin) is an essential instrument in maintaining institutionalized privilege and its members are rewarded accordingly with status and privilege.

## The Barbaric Alternative

It should be recognized that Europe also inherited a second tradition, via the ancient *gentes* of the Celts and other 'barbarians'. This egalitarian tradition was overshadowed by the paternalistic Roman Empire, but, as Kropotkin<sup>2</sup> has shown, it was revived in Medieval Christianity (in monasticism, moots and guilds). This common-weal culture was submerged again with the Roman Renaissance that was sponsored by the *haute bourgeoisie*.

This alternative culture was an expression of the *demos* (i.e. the consensual will of the people) and it was expressed cooperatively (in monasteries, folk moots, artisan guilds and round tables) in a manner quite distinct from the institutionalized privilege of paternalistic society. A similar communal, mutual-aid society was found among barbarians throughout the world (e.g. among Australian aboriginals) before they were submerged by paternalistic civilization.

It seems reasonable to expect that this alternative tradition will reassert itself with the inevitable collapse of managerial capitalism at the end of our current Dark Age.

The dominants of our Dark Age have manipulated

knowledge in order to maintain their dominance. With the assistance of academics and professionals and school teachers, they have enshrined the paternalistic legacy of the civilized Semites, Greeks, and Romans, and downgraded and falsified the egalitarian legacy of their rivals (e.g. common-wealth barbarians, communistic aboriginals and monastic Christians).

The university has been crucial (and still is) in imposing this one-eyed, value-laden hegemony on the people.

## Paternalistic Techniques

The institutionalization of knowledge within a university is based on four manipulative techniques:

- scholarly discipline,
- professionalization,
- certification,
- state legitimation

## Scholarly Discipline

By setting up scholarly disciplines or schools of thought (e.g. sociology, anthropology), certain scholars are able to claim a monopoly of knowledge and skill within certain parameters (although they must continually fight to maintain these boundaries against acquisitive rivals). Such scholars can then claim the right to dictate what knowledge can be presented as authoritative to both children in schools and adults in universities.

By building up the relative status of some disciplines (e.g. the sciences) at the expense of others (e.g. the arts), scholars with vested interests can inhibit many types of enquiry. In this, they behave in essentially the same way as their counterparts with vested interests in particular detergents, breakfast cereals and fly sprays.

## Professionalization

Almost all scholars have a vested interest in promoting specialist, hermetic knowledge at the expense of general, popular knowledge, and in ranking the narrow professional as more valuable than the enthusiastic amateur. Name dropping (of authorities and their particular methodologies and their peculiar classificatory schemes) is crucial to (and sometimes sufficient for) the mastery of these disciplines.

An unfortunate result of this is the widespread feeling of powerlessness and inadequacy among laypersons. For example, how many aboriginals have been fooled into believing that qualified white anthropologists (who don't even understand themselves and their own society) are qualified to give them paternalistic advice? How many unhappily married couples seek solutions from neurotic, divorced professional counsellors?

If we look, for example, at the professionalization of education, we find that parents are brainwashed to

mistrust their natural ability to educate their own children. They are intimidated to depend on experts (even though many of these so-called experts have children of their own who are unmitigated disasters).

#### *The Faceless Men*

Who are the dominants serviced by the universities and the professions? They are the controllers and directors of society; the bureaucratic managers of commerce and industry and service in capitalist countries and their counterparts in 'socialist' lands, together with the elitist professionals most closely associated with them in the professions of law (enactment and enforcement) and accountancy and the military.

The modern state (with its institutionalized government, trade, law, education, communication, health and amusement) is most sensibly understood as an institution for the preservation and maximization of sectional privilege. Alternatively, it may be viewed as a mechanism for the institutionalization of corruption.

Crucial to this conspiracy are the university academics who structure knowledge in such a way as to perpetuate the hegemony, and the legal professionals who structure and enforce laws in such a way as to perpetuate the system. In both cases, what is not done is much more important and consequential than what actually is done.

The inhibition of free enquiry, whether enforced by or for societal dominants, inevitably breeds and maintains corruption. For example, to identify clearly societal dominants in Australia would require free access to company records and taxation returns and the right to subpoena witnesses, yet the secretive hegemony makes this virtually impossible. Nevertheless, an educated guess can be made if one examines political patronage (e.g. via mining leases, gambling concessions, statutory appointments, industry concessions, crown land transactions, taxation concessions, imperial honours).

However, with the possible exception of the occasional vice-chancellor, university academics are mere hacks and functionaries, in unwitting, witless service of the dominants.

#### **Social Science**

As an example of academic contribution to the welfare of societal dominants, we might consider the role of social scientists. Most of the research carried out by social scientists merely confirms the old cliché that 'garbage in means garbage out' as far as empirical research is concerned.

Social scientists can 'prove' virtually anything (and do) by being selective in the questions they ask and the methods they use for collecting and interpreting data (and it is impossible for them to carry out their

number-crunching in any other way than by using the technique of selective ignorance). This was clearly established in the early studies of community power in the U.S.A.<sup>3</sup> and probably dozens of times since.

What is more, these ambitious fellows normally don't get funding until their detailed research proposal is perused by their sponsor.

It is not that our social scientists are necessarily sinister. Most of them are merely naive. And so is anybody who accepts their findings as authoritative.

For example, if an academic concludes that Australian society is relatively fluid in relation to most of its jobs, this may be interpreted to mean that the country enjoys a remarkable equality of opportunity.<sup>4</sup> However, this interpretation of the facts may hide the more important fact that a small clique has a monopoly of the relatively few jobs where the vast majority of society's crucial decisions are made (e.g. concerning tax laws, corporate law, libel laws).

Anybody seriously concerned about equality of opportunity in Australia might ask a more pertinent question: i.e. did 200 families (local and foreign) control the Australian economy in 1970, for sectional advantage, and if so do they still control it now, and if so how is this dominance maintained, and what role do universities play in maintaining this inequality of opportunity?

But then, neither I.C.I. Ltd., nor C.R.A. Ltd., (nor the C.I.A. nor Queensland University for that matter) would be prepared to sponsor research into that question, would they?

And when somebody like Raskall does and finds that 46% of the country's wealth is in the hands of 5% of the population, and that the richest 2000 people in Australia own as much as the poorest 2¼ million Australians<sup>5</sup>, the findings are easily ignored and our institutionalized academics get back to the trivialities that gain them professional recognition and scholarly status.

#### **Conclusion**

If we are seriously concerned about equality of opportunity and the search for truth, we need to review the role of the university in institutionalizing our current system of privilege. I suggest that:

- the appropriate role for a university is the cultivation of enquiring minds (in both staff and students) rather than professional socialization as at present,
- the research that is most in the public interest is enquiry that is independent of vested interests (i.e. eclectic, dialectic enquiry which does not require massive funding (from vested interests) or high technology (from vested interests) or refereed publication, (by vested interests),

- the appropriate organizational structure for such enquiry is collegial (i.e. egalitarian and consensual) in place of the present mix of academic feudalism and administrative bureaucracy),
- the appropriate candidates for such enquiry are inquisitive adults motivated by curiosity, rather than acquisitive adolescents motivated by greed or the craving for relative status,
- the time to do something about all this is now, while some of us are still tenured rather than contracted; and the place is here, where some of us are still enjoying academic freedom instead of managed efficiency.

I will not hold my breath waiting for an enthusiastic response to this from either authoritarian vice-chancellors, or feudal professors, or bolshevik revolutionaries, or journal referees, or Queensland cabinet ministers. We Celts, by definition, are not found in the halls of power, either going in or coming out.

However, sometimes we remember, with Tom,

*'... how our folks took care of themselves, an' if they was a fight, they fixed it theirself; an' they wasn't no cops wagglin' their guns, but they was better order than them cops ever give. I been a-wonderin' why we can't do that all over. Throw out the cops that ain't our people. All work together for our own thing — all farm our own lan.'*<sup>6</sup>

But, this They call romantic nonsense or communistic subversion, don't They?

I wonder why?

#### **REFERENCES**

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4. See *National Times* 19/9/82.
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6. J. Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1964, p. 384.