Universities and the generation of knowledge:
Knowledge for whom?

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ABSTRACT

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The author argues in this paper that the traditional role of Universities as generators of benign knowledge generation for the cultural benefit of individuals and the populations in which those individuals are a part is now being challenged. The primary drivers of this change are managers of globalization, the war on collective activities and the neo-liberal policies that have been created to justify and rationalize the changes that globalization has produced.

The result of these struggles have been a more corporatist stance in education in the capitalist intensive countries, where students are referred to as customers and professors are rated by the production, in numbers, of their research papers and the ratings of their student evaluations. Job security, once an assumption, is no longer a given. Significantly, public education is no longer seen as a right and the underfunding of universities, like secondary education, has resulted in the deterioration both of educational pedagogy and the physical plants in which universities and colleges exist. While public universities deteriorate, a few elite universities see growing endowments and a more elite student body and professorate. This pattern in the public/private domain is reminiscent of research and education in the neo-colonial states during the 20th century as well as the position of education and research during the period of early industrialization in the capital-intensive countries.

While post-secondary education in the public sector has been devalued, there has been a consequent growth of bureaucratization of research activities. It is now usual for budget and dean’s offices to make decisions regarding the direction of professorial research and publication, resulting in the decline of research methodologies in disciplines in which the growing bureaucracies have no expertise. The author argues that the only way that this progression in the deterioration of research and education can be deterred is by the unionization of teachers and professors and the education of the public on the importance of universities and
colleges in preserving an educated public for the maintenance of collective rights.

Short Biography for Max Kirsch

Max Kirsch is Professor of Anthropology and UNESCO Chair of Human and Cultural Rights at Florida Atlantic University. He is the author of many books and articles on globalization, industrial restructuring and environmental crises, including In the Wake of the Giant: Multinational Restructuring and Uneven Development in a New England Community, Queer Theory and Social Change, Re-Thinking Disney (with Michael Budd), and most recently, Inclusion and Exclusion in the Global Arena (Routledge, 2006). He is currently at work on a monograph on the destruction of the Florida Everglades and its communities, and a textbook for anthropology: Social Transformations in the Integration of the World Order
Universities and the Generation of Knowledge: What Kind of Knowledge?

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I will argue in this paper that the traditional role of Universities as generators of benign knowledge generation for the cultural benefit of individuals and the populations in which those individuals are a part is now being challenged, if it was ever actually true. The primary drivers of a significant change in the public face of universities are the managers of globalization, the war on collective activities and the neo-liberal policies that have been created to justify and rationalize the changes that globalization has produced.

The anthropologist Eric Wolf argued in the 1970s that the theory developed in the social sciences in universities reflected the general environment of the society as a whole. Thus, in periods of upheaval and resistance, theory has been developed that has substantially questioned the rules and regulations by which society functions and in turn, the way that universities represent culture and society. In the 1960s through the early 1980s, this meant that much social science theory developed that questioned the basics of colonial policies and the rules of the
representation of identity and citizenship. Social science, and anthropology in particular, were radically changed by field studies and theoretical positions that challenged existing beliefs and positions of governments and university administrations. Strikes and demonstrations closed universities around the western world and repositioned faculty and students as active members of their disciplines and the way that the disciplines wrote about the subjective “other.” In addition advances in technology and the ease of transportation resulted in the wide access of studies anthropologists and sociologists to the people they studied. The subjects of these studies, members of colonial or former colonial regions and states, began showing up at national and international social science meetings and challenging the conclusions made by those in the academic disciplines.

This was an exciting period. Faculty and students were involved in social change and oriented their research towards change and its consequences. In general, they were successful in involving the universities and federal funding agencies in supporting this research that resulted in many books and monographs questioning the prevailing ideas of the day. These changes and movements were taking
place in both public and private universities and forums. Student and faculty strikes that closed down Universities took place at elite universities such as Columbia and Yale in the United States, for example, just as it shut down public universities such as the campuses of the University of California and the University of Michigan. These movements gave voice to those previously underrepresented in academic departments and centers of power. Women for example, were given voice for the first time; vulnerable peoples were found writing about their experiences and having their views published along with public intellectuals whose intention it was to engage the society at large in the contributions of change. France in 1968 is probably the most famous of the movements that changed society and academic realities, but the massive changes in U.S. education and cultural attitudes towards any number of aspects of daily living were also a result of this period of radical transformation.

Much has changed since that time. What was substantially missing during the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s and the changes in the disciplines that resulted from was sustained theoretical debate or for that matter, a school of thought. Particularly in the United
States, these movements were more cultural in nature than actually transformative. They did not engage working men and women and thus the productive side of social relations. Instead, they concentrated on questioning prevailing beliefs and cultural practices that had been dominant until that time.

Because there were no sustained theoretical foundations, however, long-term change was easily thwarted by incorporation. Universities easily institutionalized questions of identity and social change: departments that now were named Black Studies, Asian Studies, Women’s Studies, Gay and Lesbian Studies, colonial and post-colonial studies, etc. all institutionalized the resistance that had resulted in social movements and transformed them into academic subjects and departments. Many of the leaders of these movements became academic faculty members and thus obligated to publish or perish, to enter the academic arena and play the game in the hope of keeping their jobs. While their subject matter still contained the language of resistance, their writing and daily living belied their new status. Security has its benefits.

While this change was occurring, the society at large was undergoing a major transformation that was both making
governments and peoples more conservative while globalization resulted in new strategies for capitalist managers to accumulate capital. If resistance was met in any area of the world, companies and factories could simply move. In the United States, what is now referred to as the Rust Belt—the area of the country that used to be populated by steel and iron plants, became deindustrialized as multinational companies found cheaper and less resistant labor first in other parts of the country and finally in other countries entirely.

The object of capitalist relations is profit and the accumulation of capital it meets those ends by finding the cheapest sources of labor, and it therefore that women and lower-paid segments of the labor force are the primary targets of multinational corporations. Through movement, deskilling, the destruction of communities and through forced labor, capitalist managers attempt to maximize their positions. In the present era of globalization, the current processes of neo-liberalism has substantially weakened the government and public sectors—the very sectors that have traditionally overseen and funded public education. As wages drop as a results of global competition, politicians win office by promising to cut
back on government intervention and taxes; the reigning ideology is that it is the government’s spending practices that are causing the problems of everyday life and the instability of families, not the constructions of capitalist competition that have transformed formerly industrial areas into low-paid service economies or regions of under- and non-employment. Communities struggle to exist as basic services are cut and particularly in the urban areas, primary and secondary education are in complete ruins.

**What does this Mean for University Research?**

Public Universities in the West have had their budgets and the research of their faculties under fire since the era of neo-liberalism has entered the global scene. Public universities in the capital intensive countries have adopted a more corporatist stance in education, where students have become customers and professors are rated by their production of research papers and student degrees. Job security, once an assumption, is under attack, and many public universities now have substantially more part-time “adjuncts” than they do full-time professors. Permanent employment is no longer a given and tenure is becoming increasingly rare. Budget cuts and expense inflation has
forced the closing of many financially insecure institutions while classes at public institutions have become fewer and larger. The ironic process in which this results is that while the ideology of neo-liberalism and free-market economics calls for the non-intervention by government, more attention has been paid to the teaching and research in universities than to substantial social problems such as the consequences of hurricane Katrina. In both instances, the ideology calls for more accountability but less help from government sources. While press reports lamented the mess that the emergency response created in New Orleans, for example, the incompetence of the managers was made more understandable when we include the ideology of neo-liberalism as the primary vector of governmentality, where the state’s role becomes one of reducing itself rather than serving as a regulator of goods and services and a vehicle for providing leadership. Too, if the ultimate goal is to diminish the role of government, then those marginally in charge of its institutions can use their positions to enable the growth of their own corporate connections without the responsibility of upholding past expectations of their agencies; their offices become playgrounds for their own entitled social networks.
For public universities this means that while accountability is being demanded by a public made suspicious by government statements on waste in research, less money is being awarded to universities for precisely those needs. The growing expense of private universities has meant that public universities are growing at an exponential rate; at the same time, the funds are dropping considerably.

We can analyze this new position of public universities from two separate but connected perspectives in this era of neo-liberal globalization. The first is the simple greed of capitalists who do not want money spent on public activities. While the difference in wages between the top 1% of the U.S. population was something in the range of $1/$150 in the 1960s, for example, it is not more in the range of $1/$18,500 according to figures gathered by a leading economic think tank in the United States and reported on by National Public Radio. Neo-liberalism has become a code-word for capitalist accumulation, as in the age old adage that tells us, “the rich get richer.” The second mode of analysis is more complicated but adds to the same result. Capitalist competition no longer requires an educated populace, certainly not those trained in pubic
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universities. Uneducated and uninformed citizens are easier to control, and one easy way to approach that issue is simply to ignore the system of public education. This is true on the global level as it is in the local arena. The World Bank has downplayed its own development programmes such as K4D (Knowledge for Development) and K4D (Knowledge Assessment Methodologies) by proclaiming that education is but one variable leading to the successful use of knowledge in, for example, development schemes. The obvious question this raises is whose knowledge, and knowledge for whom? If the referent is the managers of development programmes that enrich local elites and capitalist managers, then of course an education policy that enriches the public is a dangerous plan. Secondary education in the major cities of the United States has been all but totally destroyed. Public Universities are the next target by State legislators and funding boards ruled by capitalist managers and owners.

What these changes have resulted in bring us back to Wolf’s statement about the position of Universities and the creation of theory. It represents the wider society in general. The theory that is now being created in public universities (and private ones as well) is conservative as it is critical of the radical histories of university
departments. I have argued (2001) that current theory in social science mirrors the social stratagems of late capitalism (Mandel, 1972). In the social sciences, identity has once again become an increasingly contested concept as it has in academia as a whole. The idea that identity, for example, does or does not exist normally has little place in public spheres where politics and the access to, and distribution of, resources are more noteworthy subjects. None-the-less, the question of identity has become a major part of the postmodern debate, and significantly engaged our analyses over the past twenty years, while influencing a whole generation of social scientists. This debate is non-political; the argument about identity in social arenas takes the realm of research out of everyday activities and into the realm of abstraction that incorporates institutionalized identity studies (black studies, Asian Studies, Gay and Lesbian Studies, Women’s Studies, etc.) while concretely depoliticizing the questions themselves. It is very difficult to organize around abstract notions of individual identity, particularly when they are being deconstructed. It is also difficult to directly attack this kind of
research, making it safe for university classrooms and funding sources.

Inside the public university, another kind of reality has evolved. Because research is no longer respected and faculties are seen in the corporatist light of workers rather than privileged and respected scholars, it is the bureaucrats of the university administration that often take the power to direct research, approve or disapprove grants and funds obtained by faculty members, and demand the reports and accounts that micromanage research activities. In my own case, I was criticized, as an example, for spending money on Christmas cards for my research subjects at a price that was more expensive than purchasing them at the local Walmart. This kind of micromanaging becomes at time so ridiculous that it becomes funny. But the reality of the situation is that the faculty no longer has control over their research or their funds, and this has resulted in weaker research and more time spent in countering bureaucratic activities.

Elite private universities (and these are the universities that have survived the financial emergencies of the present period), in contrast, exist to train future leaders—those who will be the future managers of capital or
those sons and daughters of capitalist owners. These are the students who will, through internal networks, be in the jobs and positions that will further enrich themselves and their friends, while the prestige of their positions also leads the way for the direction of academic research in the Universities themselves. They are maintained by the dollars that maintain the rich endowments that ensure their future and the quality of the present. Physical plants are maintained and the educational process is viewed as a sacred and important endeavor rather than a corporate process. Research is encouraged and supported, and the administration at these elite institutions rarely interfere in the research process. Rather, they expect that substantial research will be accomplished, and faculty are not tenured without major contributions made to their various disciplines. The faculty who populate these institutions are precisely those who do not challenge the system of education or the basic tenets of society’s relationships of power and opportunity. They do, however, often hold great power in the direction of disciplines and the funding of research in university systems, both public and private, and they do exercise those positions of power.
What Can Be Done?

We conclude with what can be done. In the present era of neo-liberalism embedded in Late Capitalism research and teaching in public universities is under attack and in a weakened state. Often much of this attack can be countered by the forming and maintenance of strong unions acting as a collective force against bureaucratic offices and managers that would direct faculty teaching and research. The so-called “professional” past of university and college professors has worked against the formation of unions that have been viewed more as a part of a blue-collar culture than the reified world of advanced degrees. It also goes against the current post-modern view of the individual as sole entity, where collective identity is deconstructed into apolitical units of analysis (Kirsch, 2001) Yet unless collective action is formulated and inacted, professors will find themselves increasingly pushed out of the system of power and departments and disciplines will be further weakened by the hiring of part-time and adjunct faculty at exploitative salary rates, often paid per course taught. Research, particularly in the social science and humanities is no longer seen as an important endeavor except as an excuse not to grant tenure or promotion. The act of
research itself is more of a burden to the present public university structure than it is an assumed academic and important endeavor.

If public universities are to have an on-going part to play in the education of a thinking and critical public then the present attack on public education will need to be addressed and fought. Any hope for the future must include a public that can counteract the degradation of human rights that is part of the capitalist schema. Education as a human right must be continually fought for and won.

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