

Another front in the attack on education

Prominent academic offers modest proposal for reorganizing universities

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The *New York Times* recently published an opinion column titled “End the University as We Know It”. In this article, Professor Mark C. Taylor, chairman of the religion department at Columbia University, takes as his point of departure a series of real problems that affect the university system in the United States.

Professor Taylor’s understanding of the nature of these problems, however, begins from the premise that the university must be aligned more closely with the logic and demands of the market. This perspective inevitably leads the author to a series of reactionary proposals. Taylor effectively advocates the destruction of job security for a substantial layer of educators, the bureaucratic squelching of academic freedom, and the curtailing of scholarly work to fit a narrow criterion of utility.

A sober assessment of the problems raised in Taylor’s article would point instead to quite opposite conclusions. It is exactly the power of the capitalist class and its ability to impose its own priorities—in the sphere of higher education as everywhere else—that have made it increasingly difficult to teach and to learn in a college classroom, as well as to freely and meaningfully pursue scholarly investigations.

Demanding a flexible labor market

Professor Taylor’s article begins with the phrase, “Graduate education is the Detroit of higher learning,” and then goes on to extend this criticism to the entire university system. In a certain sense, this is a correct and revealing statement.

The ongoing crisis of capitalism has not left the university unscathed. In state after state, this is a period of unsparing attacks against education budgets and skyrocketing student fees.

If one takes as a given the essential parameters of the profit system, the modern American university is indeed as doomed as the automotive industry. In the same way that the burden of the economic crisis is now being placed on the working class as laborers, taxpayers, and consumers, in the educational sphere working people are being compelled to work more for less, and to pay more for their education.

There is, moreover, a profound historical connection between the modern university system and the post-World War II model of American capitalism. Beginning with the G.I. Bill, the concessions won by the working class in that period of unprecedented American hegemony were predicated on a definite policy of reorganizing intellectual labor, expanding access to college, and lifting, in part by means of education, substantial sections of the working class into a life of greater comfort and

opportunity.

That period has been drawing to a close for years, and is now culminating in the current economic crisis.

Professor Taylor’s response to the crisis articulates the logic and demands of the capitalist class. His language is their language. In higher education, the “market” is shrinking, the “product” no longer sells, and “demand” is insufficient.

According to Taylor, the main problem from the standpoint of the economic viability of the university is the “intransigence of tenure.” The institution of tenure, that is, disrupts market relations, removing the incentives necessary for professors to continue to develop professionally. As is often the case, this argument evokes the figure of the untouchable older professor who stopped trying long ago and yet continues to draw a paycheck.

Professor Taylor’s solution is to abolish tenure altogether and replace it with contracts that can be terminated or renewed at the whim of the administration. This is a longstanding right-wing demand, which Taylor extends from individual faculty members to entire departments.

Professor Taylor’s proposal is of course put forth in the spirit of eventually saving jobs, exactly in the same way as the political and financial elites currently overseeing the dismantling of American manufacturing. Tenure, he argues, actually diminishes the job prospects of young graduate students.

According to a recent study of the decline of the university, in 1975 57 percent of college faculty was eligible for tenure. Today, tenured and tenured-track professors only account for 35 percent, and that number continues to decline. (Frank Donoghue, *The Last Professors: The Corporate University and the Fate of the Humanities*. Fordham University Press, 2008).

The university, as Taylor notes, actually does depend on the exploitation of a substantial layer of graduate students and adjunct instructors. These people work under very difficult conditions that include inadequate salaries and virtually no job security. But the argument that tenure is to blame for their situation is absurd and reactionary. Taylor’s “solution” demagogically pits younger aspiring educators against an older generation in order to enforce precarious jobs and low salaries across the board.

These types of arguments are routinely advanced by unsavory figures in government, think tanks and various bureaucracies. But in this case one must note certain aggravating circumstances.

Taylor is an older, tenured academic, gainfully employed by a prominent Ivy League school, and currently serving as the Chair of his department. The vagaries and uncertain prospects of the job market ceased to concern him long ago.

Taylor, moreover, is no mere literary representative of the bourgeoisie, trying his best to ape their style. He is actually what one might call an

“educational entrepreneur.” Such individuals apply various business models and techniques to higher education, in pursuit of profits. This growing phenomenon is often characterized by grotesque forms of philistinism and hucksterism, perhaps best expressed by the founder of the virtual University of Phoenix, who once articulated his philosophy of education in the following manner: “This is a corporation ... We are not trying to develop [students’] value systems or go in for that ‘expand their minds’ bullshit.”

Taylor joined this august company in 1998, when he cofounded a for-profit outfit called Global Education Network. Should someone point out that Professor Taylor’s wish to deprive educators of protections and benefits he himself enjoyed in his career is a form of hypocrisy, he could with some justice reply that it is primarily a business strategy. Having consciously adopted this standpoint, Professor Taylor is compelled to present reality upside down.

Academic research and self-governance

Professor Taylor’s criticism extends to the kind of research work that takes place in the university. The current model suffers from excessive specialization and narrowness, so that “Each academic becomes the trustee ... of limited knowledge that all too often is irrelevant for genuinely important problems.”

There is some truth to this complaint. But this is a very delicate question, and Taylor betrays a retrograde pragmatist attitude that flows from his general premises. The relationship between specialization and synthesis in scholarly work is a complex one. Taylor amuses himself by recalling how “A colleague recently boasted to me that his best student was doing his dissertation on how the medieval theologian Duns Scotus used citations.”

The sort of scholarship that today appears to be excessively narrow and esoteric can later emerge as the necessary foundation for the kind of synthetic masterpieces that decisively advance our knowledge in a field of inquiry. The history of science is full of such instances, illustrating a genuine, and in many ways unpredictable dialectic of specialization and synthesis.

This is not to say that there are no instances of cluelessness and narrow self-satisfaction in certain university circles. But Professor Taylor, who adopts the market as the ultimate arbiter of what constitute “genuinely important problems,” is in no position to advance this criticism. His conception of utility would actually suffocate scientific and scholarly inquiry.

This is particularly clear once we consider Taylor’s proposals concerning the decision-making process in the university.

He writes, “The other obstacle to change is that colleges and universities are self-regulating ... While trustees and administrators have some oversight responsibility, in practice, departments operate independently. To complicate matters further, once a faculty member has been granted tenure he is functionally autonomous.”

This is another standard right-wing complaint, which is usually expressed by outsiders who have little idea of what it is that universities do and how they operate. In a different context, Trotsky made the point that the bureaucracy superstitiously fears whatever does not serve it directly and what it does not understand. Some of the more obtuse and philistine sections of the business and political elite often fulminate against the university in the same spirit. From their perspective, the university seems impervious to the laws of capital—an enemy outpost to be stormed.

But Professor Taylor is no outsider, and must know all too well how

decisions are actually made in a university. While departments and professors often do enjoy certain specific forms of self-regulation that are not typical of most workplaces, they are under constant pressure by a variety of forces, and are in any case at the mercy of budget decisions made elsewhere.

Professor Taylor wants a problem-based curriculum. The question is, who should decide which problems are worthy of investigation, which constitute a pressing social and scientific concern to be addressed, and how they should be taught in a classroom? Taylor insists that it should not be the educators themselves. The curriculum and the university should be “completely restructured” from above.

This of course is already taking place. The university is increasingly controlled by bureaucrats and administrators, private donors and corporations, board of regents and trustees who often consist of businessmen and corporate luminaries. Taylor merely insists that this power should be made absolute.

The ominous political implications of this proposal should be highlighted. Before calling for its abolition, Taylor acknowledges that tenure was “originally intended to protect academic freedom.”

Taylor argues as if we are now in a blessedly post-ideological epoch in which definite forms of political pressures no longer come to bear on people who write controversially about controversial subjects.

The reality is the opposite. Recently, there have been a number of politically motivated firings of professors, including Ward Churchill, Norman Finkelstein, and Sami Al-Arian. A climate of McCarthyism, exemplified by David Horowitz’s initiatives, is a reality in several university campuses. One has to assume that Taylor understands very well the context in which he is operating and the implications of his proposals.

Liberalism, postmodernism and reaction

Taken as a whole, Professor Taylor’s intervention should be regarded as an attack against the working class and democratic rights in general.

He chastises the older, typically overworked generation of tenured professors for their inefficiency. To the younger generation of aspiring academics he offers the satisfaction that, while they will not attain any kind of job security, they can take comfort in the fact that neither will anyone else. Taylor demands an educational system in which knowledge, culture and science would be directly subjected to the control of the capitalist class.

In this sense there is a definite correspondence between Taylor’s argument and the positions of the Obama administration in the field of education. Here too, the fish stinks from the head down. Obama has repeatedly insisted on the need for administrators to have the ability to fire teachers, institute merit pay and facilitate the growth of more “flexible” private schools. He has complained against the teaching of “useless” subjects. His administration has given a blank check to the banks while slashing all essential social services, including education.

The title of Professor Taylor’s article, echoing Bill Clinton’s dismantling of the welfare system in the 1990s, is in this sense no accident. Liberalism, cultured or otherwise, has nothing left to say to working people, except to get with the times, work harder, and expect little out of life.

Professor Taylor’s article is also significant in terms of its philosophical credentials. The author is an important figure in the circles of postmodernist academia. One of his earlier appearances in the pages of the *New York Times* involved a spirited defense of Jacques Derrida on the occasion of his death, and Taylor stands today as one of the leading partisans of “deconstruction.”

This philosophical tendency springs from the extreme political demoralization and disorientation of certain academic circles. Partly on account of its unreadable prose, it is usually completely detached from and unable to function in political discussions that affect broad masses of people. Professor Taylor's academic writing is very much part of this tradition, as demonstrated in the following sample from his book *Erring: a postmodern a/theology*:

"... deconstructive criticism constantly errs along the / of the neither/nor. Forever wavering and wondering, deconstruction is (re)inscribed betwixt 'n' between the opposites it inverts, perverts, and subverts."

Whenever postmodernist academics are compelled to speak in a recognizably human language about actual political questions, however, an interesting phenomenon occurs. Rather than "perverting" and "subverting," these elements invariably reproduce the banalities of reaction.



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