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What Comes After the Critique of the Corporate University? Toward a Syndicalist University

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Whoever labors becomes a proprietor...
I mean proprietor of the value which he
creates....Many persons talk of admitting
working-people to a share in the products
and profits; but...they have never shown
— perhaps never suspected — that it was
a natural, necessary right, inherent in labor,
and inseparable from the function of producer.

- Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *What is Property?* (1840)

Who Owns the University?

During the last three decades, an ever-burgeoning group of multi-disciplinary scholars has generated an eclectic field of study known as “critical university studies” that has devoted most of its effort to critiques of “the corporate university” and, more recently, to critiques of “the neoliberal university.”¹ This contemporary literature of protest routinely criticizes the emergence of the knowledge factory, academic capitalism, managed professionals, college for sale, the university in ruins, the corporate corruption of higher education, University, Inc.² University professors are regularly warned that this transformation of higher education is resulting in the fall of the faculty, the last professors,

¹ Timothy V. Kaufman-Osborn, “Critical University Studies,” in Clyde W. Barrow, ed., *Encyclopedia of Critical Political Science* (Cheltenham, U.K.: Edward Elgard Publishers, Ltd., 2024), pp. 167-71.

² Barbara Ann Scott, *Crisis Management in American Higher Education* (Westport, CT.: Praeger Press, 1983); Janice Newson and Howard Buchbinder, *The University Means Business: Universities, Corporations, and Academic Work* (Toronto: Garamond Press, 1988); Clyde W. Barrow, *Universities and the Capitalist State: Corporate Liberalism and the Reconstruction of American Higher Education, 1894-1928* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990); Sheila Slaughter, *The Higher Learning and High Technology: Dynamics of Higher Education Policy Formation* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1990); Lawrence C. Soley, *Leasing the Ivory Tower: The Corporate Takeover of Academia* (Boston: South End Press, 1995); Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996); Wesley Shumar, *College for Sale: A Critique of the Commodification of Higher Education* (Oxfordshire, UK: Routledge Falmer Press, 1997); Sheila Slaughter and Larry L. Leslie, *Academic Capitalism: Politics, Policies and the Entrepreneurial University* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997); Gary Rhodes, *Managed Professionals: Unionized Faculty and Restructuring Academic Labor* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998); Geoffrey White, ed., *Campus, Inc.* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2000); Stanley Aronowitz, *The Knowledge Factory* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2001); Sheila Slaughter and Gary Rhoades, *Academic Capitalism and the New Economy: Markets, State, and Higher Education* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004); Jennifer Washburn, *University Inc.: The Corporate Corruption of Higher Education* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2005).

and the last intellectuals.³ Moreover, this critique intersects with a critique of capitalist society because it inevitably concludes with the question of “who rules the university?”⁴

My analysis of the contemporary university starts from the premise that faculty, or faculty labor power, is the only creator of value at a university even when value is narrowly defined as what people are willing to purchase from a university.⁵ Faculty are the *sine qua non* of a university—that without which it would not be a university. This is why Thorstein Veblen defined the university as “a corporation of learning -- a body of mature scholars and scientists, the faculty—with whatever plant and other equipment may incidentally serve as appliances for their work.”⁶ In other words, according to Veblen, the faculty *is* the university and the campuses where intellectuals assemble as a social category are merely incidental appliances that support their work.⁷ These incidental appliances – offices, classrooms, libraries, laboratories, computers, etc. – are what Karl Marx called “the material means of mental production”⁸ and, as I have argued elsewhere, the question of who rules the universities is always a question of who owns the material means of mental production,⁹ because these material means are not “incidental appliances” as claimed by Veblen. They are the necessary material conditions for the

³ Russell Jacoby, *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe* (New York: Basic Books, 1987); Frank Donoghue, *The Last Professors: The Corporate University and the Fate of the Humanities* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2008); Benjamin Ginsberg, *The Fall of the Faculty: The Rise of the All-Administrative University and Why It Matters* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁴ David N. Smith, *Who Rules the Universities? An Essay in Class Analysis* (New York, NY: Monthly Review Press, 1974); Timothy V. Kaufman-Osborn, *The Autocratic Academy: Reenvisioning Rule within America's Universities* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2023). For earlier works, see, James McKeen Cattell, *University Control* (New York: Science Press, 1913); Thorstein Veblen, *The Higher Learning in America: A Memorandum on the Conduct of Universities by Businessmen* (New York: Sagamore Press, 1957); Upton Sinclair, *The Goose-Step: A Study of American Education*, Revised Edition (Pasadena: Privately Printed, 1923); Earl J. McGrath, “The Control of Higher Education in America,” *Educational Record* 17 (April 1936): 259-72; Hubert Park Beck, *Men Who Control Our Universities* (New York: King's Crown Press, 1947).

⁵ On the concepts of value and surplus value, see Karl Marx, “Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1,” in *Marx-Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 35. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2010 [1867]), Chaps. 1-2.

⁶ Thorstein Veblen *The Higher Learning in America: A Memorandum on the Conduct of Universities by Businessmen* (New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1968 [1918]), pp. 59, 18.

⁷ Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure*, pp. 299-300, defines a social category as an aggregate “of social statuses, the occupants of which are not in social interaction,” but “having like statuses, and consequently *similar* interests and values, social categories can be mobilized into collectivities or into groups.” Thus, by identifying the intellectuals as a social category, I am simultaneously calling attention to the problem of *organizing* the intellectuals.

⁸ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology* (New York: International Publishers, 1970), p. 64.

⁹ Clyde W. Barrow, *Universities and the Capitalist State: Corporate Liberalism and the Reconstruction of American Higher Education, 1894-1928* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), Chap. 2.

possibility of conducting intellectual work.¹⁰ Consequently, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels argue that “the class which has the means of material production at its disposal, consequently also controls the means of mental production, so that the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are on the whole subject to it.”¹¹

Adam Smith, the founder of modern economics, traces the origins of the modern university to the corporate structure of medieval guilds. He notes that all incorporations—whether of scholars, bakers, smiths, or tailors—“were anciently called universities, which indeed is the proper Latin name for any incorporation whatever.”¹² Universities were historically, and in principle I argue they remain, a guild (corporation) of scholars, albeit one that has been incrementally expropriated by the capitalist class over the last 120 years through a political strategy of accumulation by dispossession.¹³

However, once this fact is recognized -- and perhaps it has still not been recognized by most university faculty -- the critique of the corporate university exhausts itself in an endless cycle of repetition. Moreover, the critique of the corporate university will continue to repeat itself on an endless feedback loop if it does not take next step of asking what comes after the critique of the corporate university? Consequently, in this article, I briefly review the historical development of the corporate-neoliberal university in the United States, but only for the purpose of taking the next stop of proposing a new type of “syndicalist university” that would radically transform the social relations of intellectual production in contemporary universities by creating an educational enterprise that is legally owned and directly administered by faculty. This “new” type of institution has continuities with past practices in higher education going back centuries and these past practices may still resonate with faculty if only as myth or repressed memories.

¹⁰ For a lengthier analysis, see, Barrow, *Universities and the Capitalist State*, 13-14, 267.

¹¹ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, “The German Ideology,” *Marx-Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 5 (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1976), 59.

¹² Adam Smith, *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (New York: Modern Library, 1965), pp. 120-25.

¹³ On the concept of accumulation by dispossession see, David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). For a longer version of this argument, see, Clyde W. Barrow, “The Contradiction of the Corporate University: Academic Inefficiency and the Iron Cage of Bureaucracy,” in Glenda Strachan, ed., *Research Handbook on Academic Labour Markets* (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishers, Ltd., forthcoming 2024).

The Problem of Corporatization and Neoliberalization

Corporatization and neo-liberalization are often conflated as synonyms in analyses of the contemporary university, but the concepts designate two distinct processes and phases of development in the history of contemporary higher education. While corporatization was a process focused on the internal structure and organization of the university, neoliberalization is a process that seeks to monetize educational assets and products by selling them as commodities in a competitive market. The corporate university is defined “as an institution that is characterized by processes, decisional criteria, expectations, organizational culture, and operating practices that are taken from, and have their origins in, the modern business corporation.”¹⁴ As Henry Steck observes, a defining aspect of the corporate university is that it is “administered by managerial and fiscal practices drawn from the corporate sector”¹⁵ and these corporate-bureaucratic practices are typically juxtaposed to the competing academic ideal of a self-governing and independent corporation of scholars that Max Weber nostalgically called “the old constitution” of the university.¹⁶

But what was the source of Weber’s nostalgia for “the old constitution” of the university? If we put the current critique of the corporate university in historical context, it becomes clear that the current critique of the corporate-neoliberal university is really just the most recent response to an extended long-term hegemonic project by the capitalist class to conquer and commodify the university.¹⁷ Critical university studies is new only to scholars who are unaware of its previous iterations throughout the twentieth century. I first articulated this thesis in *Universities and the Capitalist State* (1990), where I document that the origins of the corporate university in the United States can be traced back to a corporate liberal political agenda developed during the American Progressive

¹⁴ Henry Steck, “Corporatization of the University: Seeking Conceptual Clarity,” *Annals of the American Academy of Social and Political Science* 585 (January 2003), p. 74.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 75-76.

¹⁶ Max Weber, “Science as a Vocation,” in Hans H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, eds., *Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946). p. 131.

¹⁷ Henry Giroux, *Neoliberalism’s War on Higher Education* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2014) Henry Giroux, *Neoliberalism’s War on Higher Education* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2014); Sanford F. Schram, ed., *Neoliberalizing the University: Implications for American Democracy* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016).

Era.¹⁸ The structure and processes of the corporate university were first put in place during a reform cycle that lasted from 1894 to 1928. Following the lead of major foundations, such as the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (CFAT) and John D. Rockefeller's General Education Board (GEB), the initial corporatization and systemization of American higher education was promoted throughout the country by the U.S. Bureau of Education, which initiated a "scientific survey movement" (1914-1928) designed to export the corporate model of organization to colleges and universities across the United States.

The idea of the corporate university was first articulated in the USA by Henry S. Pritchett, President of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, in the same year he was appointed President of the newly founded Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (CFAT). In 1905, Pritchett authored an essay in the *Atlantic Monthly* which observed that the American university was tending "more and more to conform in its administration to the methods of the business corporation" mainly because its form of organization was already similar to that of the corporation with a board of trustees, president, divisions headed by subordinate officers, and departments that delivered courses to customers (students). Consequently, Pritchett (1905: 93-97) was convinced that universities would benefit from *becoming* corporations under the leadership of business executives since "no type of man has been developed who is a wiser councilor than the businessman of large sympathy and of real interest in intellectual problems."¹⁹

However, the original blueprint for the reconstruction of American higher education during this time was a CFAT document entitled, *Academic and Industrial Efficiency*.²⁰ In early 1909, the CFAT's executive committee, consisting of leading corporate executives and university presidents, asked Frederick Taylor to conduct "an economic study of education" that would contribute to the "efficient standardization" of the country's higher

¹⁸ Clyde W. Barrow, *Universities and the Capitalist State: Corporate Liberalism and the Reconstruction of American Higher Education, 1894-1928* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990); Clyde W. Barrow, "Corporate Liberalism, Finance Hegemony, and Central State Intervention in the Reconstruction of American Higher Education." *Studies in American Political Development* 6 (Spring 1992): 420-44.

¹⁹ Henry S. Pritchett, "Shall the University Become a Business Corporation?" *Atlantic Monthly* 102 (September 1905): 289-99.

²⁰ Morris L. Cooke, *Academic and Industrial Efficiency*, CFAT Bulletin No. 5 (Boston: Merrymount, 1910). For a summary, see, Clyde W. Barrow, "What is to Be Undone? Academic Efficiency and the Corporate Ideal in American Higher Education." *Found Object*, No. 10 (Spring 2001): 149-80.

education institutions. Taylor recommended Morris L. Cooke, a young mechanical engineer, who was a well-known protégé and personal friend of Taylor's.²¹ Cooke was a leading figure among the corporate reformers of the day and a member of an informal group called the progressive engineers. Cooke already had a long history of political activism as a proponent of social engineering based on the use of scientific survey data and industrial organization strategies. Cooke's ideal for the American nation, which was not unusual among progressive engineers was to build a smoothly functioning social system in which each of its component parts – industry, government, family, and education – were reconstructed as socially efficient units that would each be coordinated with and subordinated to the imperatives of the capitalist economic system.²²

In 1910, Cooke completed the requested study, entitled *Academic and Industrial Efficiency*, which Henry S. Pritchett, the President of M.I.T., introduced as a response to “the criticisms of American colleges and universities made during the past few years by businessmen.”²³ Cooke's central aim in the report was to develop conceptual tools for making “an estimate of the cost and the output both in teaching and research.”²⁴ Cooke's report concluded that even though American colleges and universities had been legally defined as “corporations” since the Dartmouth College Case (1819), they did not in practice operate like modern industrial corporations.

The legal question of who owns the material means of mental production was a contested issue in the United States until the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Dartmouth College v. Woodward* (17 U.S. 4 Wheat. 518, 1819) that the university is a corporation of a certain type, but not a guild. The Marshall Court ruled instead that all corporations are fictitious legal persons -- *persona ficta* – whose personhood resides in its board of directors; this is, for a university, in its governing board. Thus, with one stroke of a quill, the U.S. Supreme Court quietly transferred ownership of the material assets of the university from faculty guilds and converting them into the property of governing boards.²⁵

²¹ Kenneth E. Trombley, *The Life and Times of a Happy Liberal: A Biography of Morris Llewellyn Cooke* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1954), pp.6-11.

²² David Noble, *America By Design* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), pp. xiv-xxv; Daniel Nelson, *Frederick Taylor and the Rise of Scientific Management* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1980).

²³ Henry S. Pritchett, “Introduction” in Cooke, *Academic and Industrial Efficiency*, p. ii.

²⁴ Cooke, *Academic and Industrial Efficiency*, p. 3.

²⁵ There were two attempts at vesting the proprietary rights of a “tenured freehold” in professors, with this

In other words, U.S. constitutional law explicitly replaced the legal entity of the university as a corporation of scholars with a *capitalist* concept of private property that effectively expropriated the university from faculty by legal fiat and force of state. The *Dartmouth College Case* (1819) legally separated faculty from the material means of mental production to create the corporate-*capitalist* university. What we call “public universities” emulate this principle by creating independent public corporations that also vest the ownership of university property and all final decision-making authority in appointive boards of trustees that normally consist of bankers, corporate CEOs, corporate lawyers, and senior state elites.²⁶

However, the transition from the guild to the corporation was in practice a century long process that would eventually generate an on-going class struggle between university intellectuals and the capitalist class. Instead of the hierarchical corporate organization imagined by Pritchett, Cooke’s survey of universities found that two different systems of governance and administration were dominant in U.S. universities -- an executive committee system and a presidential system -- although both systems had a comparatively flat organizational structure based on faculty committees and deference to faculty control. In both systems, governing boards were peripheral to university administration as they were primarily concerned with the charitable task of raising money for their institutions. Thus, Pritchett had overestimated the immediate applicability of the corporate analogy, which was a somewhat deceptive analogy when compared to the traditional customs that dictated the day-to-day administration of most colleges and universities.

Whether through indifference, or due to customs and traditions inherited from Europe, the governance and administration of colleges and universities was either left to faculty committees organized through an elected faculty senate or left to a benevolent and charismatic president selected from the senior faculty and who had strong ties to the university faculty and local community. Cooke found that “committee management” under

freehold including both the office of professor and the physical plant of the university, including the *Dartmouth College Case* (1819) and *The Reverend John Bracken v. The Visitors of William and Mary College* (1790), see, Richard Hofstadter and Walter P. Metzger, *the Development of Academic Freedom in the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1955), 460-64.

²⁶ See, Barrow, *Universities and the Capitalist State*, Chap.2, for empirical documentation of this claim.

the leadership of a charismatic president was the typical administrative system. There was little hierarchical differentiation within institutions as deans and presidents (and other administrative officers) were usually prominent faculty members, who still taught undergraduate courses, wrote books and papers, and attended scholarly meetings. Administrators received a nominal addition to their faculty salary for the extra work and usually returned to full-time faculty status after a few years. Hence, the concept of “retreat rights” was the academic version of the republican principle that higher office was of limited term and that office holders soon returned to the ranks of the citizens who elected them.

The college president assumed the day-to-day responsibilities of administering the institution in conjunction with a small executive committee of local regents and influential faculty members. Governing boards were inclined to accept the policy recommendations of the president and faculty committees on budget appropriations, educational policy, curriculum, faculty appointments, and promotions, particularly since they were part-time unpaid volunteers with little time to devote to university matters. Moreover, long and close ties to the faculty, and the absence of strong governing boards meant that presidents and deans were inclined to look to the faculty to legitimate their actions and this promoted an institutional culture of shared academic orientations. The budget system at this time strengthened internal control by faculty because appropriations by trustees or state legislatures were usually made as lump sum allocations, which meant that the internal distribution of those funds was largely controlled by a faculty budget committee or even by departments.

Thus, Cooke’s report found that even though American colleges and universities had been legally defined as corporations since the Dartmouth College Case (1819), they did not in practice operate as corporations, but were governed more like small republics. University presidents were more like prime ministers or mayors than corporate CEOs and this meant their effectiveness depended on the support of constituents, primarily faculty. Consequently, Cooke found that Pritchett had overestimated the immediate applicability of the corporate analogy when compared to the traditional customs and practices that dictated the day-to-day administration of most colleges and universities.

However, the basic premise of Cooke's analysis was that "the industrial world is coming more and more to feel that all work is done under certain broad principles, and that the application of these principles to one industry is little different from their application to any other." As a result, Cooke rejected the claim that teaching and scholarship are somehow "radically different" from other kinds of labor, which meant that industrial engineers and corporate executives could rightly "apply the same standards of criticism to his [the professor's] work as obtain generally throughout other departments of life."²⁷ Indeed, Cooke insisted that professors "must be governed and measured by the same general standards that generally obtain in other occupations."²⁸

Cooke's report lays out the basic framework of the modern corporate university, including the invention of the student credit hour and its re-organization on the basis of organizational principles developed by major US railroads (i.e., major lines, service lines, and auxiliary services). Using Cooke's document as a blueprint, the U.S. government's scientific surveys of universities put in place all of the fundamental structures and processes of the corporate university by reconstructing state higher education systems and individual colleges and universities throughout the United States.²⁹ This process was essentially complete before the onset of the Great Depression. The impetus for state legislatures, governors, and university presidents to adopt the corporate model was the promise that more efficient university systems would solve the chronic fiscal crises that emerged in higher education following the Panic of 1893, World War I, and later the Great Depression at a time when university enrollments were steadily increasing as a proportion of the U.S. population.

The conceptualization, adoption, and implementation of this ideological state form was contested at every step by dissident faculty, Populists, Socialists, and labor unions, but it was an asymmetrical contest that resulted in an unstable balance of power between the intellectuals (faculty), the capitalist class (boards of trustees), and state managers (i.e., university administrators).³⁰ In 1925, the American Council on Education mediated

²⁷ Ibid, p. 26.

²⁸ Ibid, p. 21.

²⁹ Barrow, *Universities and the Capitalist State*, Chap. 4.

³⁰ James McKeen Cattell, *University Control* (New York: Science Press, 1913); Thorstein Veblen, *The Higher Learning in America: A Memorandum on the Conduct of Universities by Businessmen* (New York:

a conference between the American Association of University Professors and several college and university associations to produce the first joint accord on the principles of tenure and academic freedom.³¹ Intellectuals and business executives (trustees) were both uneasy with the accommodation, which immediately started to come unglued with the onset of the Great Depression and a new wave of faculty-student activism and radicalism.

My historical analysis of the origins of the corporate university concludes that there have been three additional cycles of university corporatization from 1929-1952, 1953-1989, and 1990 to the present (neoliberalization). For example, the exact same cycle of events that took place from 1894 to 1928 in American higher education was repeated from 1929 to 1952. The Great Depression and the events leading up to World War II resulted in another left-wing academic rebellion comparable to what had happened on campuses during the Progressive Era, while the Veblen genre of academic criticism was carried forward by writers such as Earl J. McGrath, Eduard C. Lindeman, Robert S. Lynd, James Wechsler, and Hubert Park Beck.³² This rebellion was effectively squashed by the continuing integration of U.S higher education into the war effort and the post-World War II welfare-warfare state.

American campuses began a third cycle of university reform in 1953 signaled by passage of the National Defense Education Act in 1958 and this cycle, as usual, culminated in a new round of state and national surveys with the most notable and influential effort again coming from the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education (1967–1973) and the Carnegie Council on Higher Education (1973–1979).³³ Over a 13-year period, the Carnegie Commission and the Carnegie Council issued a series of reports that essentially outlined a strategy of accumulation by dispossession designed to

Sagamore Press, 1957); Upton Sinclair, *The Goose-Step: A Study of American Education*, Revised Edition (Pasadena: Privately Printed, 1923);

³¹ Barrow, *Universities and the Capitalist State*, Chap. 8.

³² Earl J. McGrath, "The Control of Higher Education in America," *Educational Record* 17 (April 1936): 259-72; Eduard C. Lindeman, *Wealth and Culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1936); Robert S. Lynd, *Knowledge for What? The Place of Social Science in American Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1939); James Wechsler, *Revolt on the Campus* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1936); Hubert Park Beck, *Men Who Control Our Universities* (New York: King's Crown Press, 1947).

³³ J.A. Douglass, *The Carnegie Commission and Council on Higher Education: A Retrospective*, Research & Occasional Paper Series: CSHE.14.05 (Berkeley, CA: Center for Studies in Higher Education, UC Berkeley, 2005).

disempower university faculty and reduce to them to proletarianized functionaries, while largely privatizing the cost of higher education by shifting it onto students. The reports of the Carnegie Commission and the Carnegie Council, bolstered by numerous other state and national organizations, refined the mission, corporate organizational structure, and financial measures (austerity as “efficiency”) that became the hallmark of the emergent neo-liberal university in the 1990s and afterwards.³⁴

Thus, each of the reform cycles in higher education has furthered the goals of the corporate university at the expense of “the old constitution,” and in *Universities and the Capitalist State* (1990, 258) I noted that “each of these cycles has resulted in deeper penetration and stronger regulation of the university by corporate capital and the capitalist state.”³⁵ In fact, as soon as I had published these words, the devastating recession of 1990-91 struck American higher education with a ferocity not witnessed since the Great Depression of the 1930s. In pursuing the theme established in *Universities and the Capitalist State*, I constantly admonished faculty over the next two decades that “fiscal crises have often been a catalyst for institutional reform in the American system of higher education” and that faculty needed to prepare for another onslaught of corporatization -- now called neo-liberalization -- comparable to the previous three cycles of corporate reform. I wrote newspaper editorials,³⁶ appeared on local talk radio, published scholarly articles, presented papers at conferences, and worked as a political activist and union officer to combat these trends, even as fiscal austerity was imposed year after year. By 1993, I concluded that “it is now certain that the 1990-92 recession marked the beginning of a severe and prolonged fiscal crisis in American higher education.”³⁷ By the beginning of the next decade (2001), I pessimistically observed that:

during the last 90 years, the corporate ideal has advanced into the corporate reality through a series of higher education reform cycles in a sort of two steps forward one step back pattern of advance. Consequently, we are

³⁴ Sanford Schram, ed., *Neoliberalizing the University: Implications for American Democracy* (New York and London: Routledge, 2016).

³⁵ Barrow, *Universities and the Capitalist State*, p. 258.

³⁶ For example, Clyde W. Barrow, “UMass Needs Competitive Pay,” *New Bedford Standard-Times*, September 19, 1992, p. A7; Clyde W. Barrow, “State Shortchanges Colleges That Draw Most State Students,” *The Attleboro Sun*, June 17, 1990; Clyde W. Barrow, “Commentary: State Lags in Support of Public Higher Education,” *Fall River Herald-News*, May 21, 1990, p. 4.

³⁷ Clyde W. Barrow, “Will the Fiscal Crisis Force Higher Education to Restructure?” *Thought and Action: The NEA Higher Education Journal*, Vol. IX, No. 1 (Fall 1993), p. 7.

much deeper into the process of incorporation and the next step may be last step – faculty may be on the verge of defeat – unless they shift to a genuinely ‘revolutionary’ class-based strategy....We seem to be in the last stages of corporatization and, consequently, we may well be at the end of history for the academic ideal in higher education.³⁸

After a further decade of corporatization initiatives in higher education, I concluded that corporate and neoliberal structures were so deeply institutionalized in American universities that we had finally been imprisoned by Max Weber’s “iron cage” of bureaucracy and engulfed by its “polar night of icy darkness.”³⁹ Despite a plethora of books and articles that have been published by numerous scholars over several decades, and by scholars working in numerous disciplines, it often seems as if “the recent critiques of ‘corporatization’ have been like Cassandra’s prophecies falling on the deaf ears of university faculty, who may now find themselves...equipped with few political tools or economic resources to stem the tide.”⁴⁰

Neither Faculty Senates, Nor Faculty Unions

Consequently, in *The Entrepreneurial Intellectual in the Corporate University* (2017), I proposed a new social compact between the university, the state, and the public, that would restore faculty to a central place in higher education decision-making. However, I also argued that a progressive alternative to the corporate university will not be realized until faculty and students directly retake physical control of their campuses and join with other social movements to reconstruct power relations within those

³⁸ Clyde W. Barrow, “What is to Be Undone? Academic Efficiency and the Corporate Ideal in American Higher Education,” *Found Object* No. 10 (Spring 2001), pp. 166, 172.

³⁹ Max Weber, “Politics as a Vocation,” in Hans H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, eds., *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 128; Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure*, pp. 198-99, observes that, once established, all bureaucracies – corporate, state, religious, or academic – become rigorously self-perpetuating through discipline and self-selection: “Discipline can be effective only if the ideal patterns are buttressed by strong sentiments which entail devotion to one’s duties, a keen sense of the limitation of one’s authority and competence, and methodical performance of routine duties. The efficacy of social structure depends ultimately upon infusing group participants with appropriate attitudes and sentiments...there are definite arrangements in the bureaucracy for inculcating and reinforcing these sentiments.” See, *Ibid.*, pp. 200-02 on the social sources of overconformity in bureaucratic organizations. See, Clyde W. Barrow, “The Rationality Crisis in U.S. Higher Education,” *New Political Science*, Vol. 32, No. 3 (September 2010): 317-44.

⁴⁰ Clyde W. Barrow, “The Coming of the Corporate-Fascist University? A Review Essay,” *New Political Science*, Vol. 36, No. 4 (December 2014), p. 641.

institutions and to redefine the university's relationship to the state and the market.⁴¹ I further suggested that a new social category of "the entrepreneurial intellectual" was emerging on the fringes of the corporate university, who might establish the foundations for a syndicalist form of the university anchored in the organizational principles of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's concept of producer associations.⁴²

When I wrote *The Entrepreneurial Intellectual*, it was intended mainly as a cannister shot into the on-going discussion of the corporate university with the hope that it would stimulate a more robust debate about possible alternatives to the failed strategies pursued up to this point in faculty efforts to challenge the corporate university. The first strategy proposed in many critiques of the corporate university is a return to the system "shared governance" that tentatively organized decision-making at major universities for about a half a century prior to the rise of neoliberalism. This is the strategy normally proposed by faculty senates and the American Association of University Professors.

Timothy V. Kaufman-Osborn offers a devastating critique of this strategy in his recent book on *The Autocratic Academy* (2023).⁴³ Kaufman-Osborn elegantly argues that:

the American academy is fashioned as a historically specific type of corporation; and it is this type of corporation that authorizes and enables the governing boards and administrator censured by the AAUP to do what they will. Until this way of structuring the power of rule within the academy is criticized, contested, and ultimately repudiated, the AAUP's impasse will be ours too.⁴⁴

Kaufman-Osborn rightly calls the concept and practice of shared governance a mere placebo to the problem of university control, because at best it carves out a small niche for faculty expertise in curriculum and faculty hiring in a governance system where faculty otherwise have little influence, much less control. Thus, Kaufman-Osborn argues that "the

⁴¹ Clyde W. Barrow, "The Rationality Crisis in U.S. Higher Education," *New Political Science*, Vol. 32, No. 3 (September 2010): 317-44.

⁴² Pierre-Joseph, Proudhon, *What is Property? An Inquiry into the Principle of Right and Government*, translated from the French by Benjamin R. Tucker (Princeton, MA: Benjamin R. Tucker, 1876 [1840]); See, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *System of Economical Contradictions, or, The Philosophy of Misery* (New York: Arno Press, 1972); Pierre-Joseph, Proudhon, *General Idea of the Revolution in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Cosimo, Inc., 2007 [1923]).

⁴³ Timothy V. Kaufman-Osborn, *The Autocratic Academy: Reenvisioning Rule within America's Universities* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2023).

⁴⁴ Ibid, 3.

appeal to shared governance represents not a challenge but an accommodation to an academy organized on antidemocratic principles.”⁴⁵ Moreover, even this small niche of faculty influence and autonomy is being rapidly eliminated by state legislation that curtails or eliminates tenure, allows for summary dismissal of faculty who are “insubordinate” to university administrators, or that prohibits the teaching of specific curricula. There is basically no governance left to share as state legislatures, trustees, and university administrators unilaterally impose an autocratic form of management across the entire spectrum of decision-making in universities. As Kaufman-Osborn points out, it is simply preposterous to believe, per the official AAUP position, that university autocrats can be persuaded to voluntarily give up authority to faculty without major acts of collective disruption. A return to the political accommodation of shared governance is neither desirable, nor realistic, because it always depended on the good will or fear of university trustees and administrators and there does not appear to be any good will or fear emanating from those quarters. It would be easier to convert the Pope to the Baptist religion than to convince a university president that there are any benefits to shared governance. This disdain for shared governance is reinforced by the fact that fewer and fewer senior administrators emerge from the ranks of faculty and this is doubly true of their ever-burgeoning non-academic support staff consisting of attorneys, finance officers, information officers, public relations officers, human resource officers, and compliance officers, who typically do not have any prior attachment to the university.

A second strategy proposed in various critiques of the corporate university is that intellectuals should embrace their new found proletarianization and align themselves more closely with the working class and other progressive social groups by organizing more militant faculty unions. This strategy traces its origins to the original university reform cycle when professors at the University of Illinois responded to corporatization by organizing the first local of the American Federation of Teachers on a university campus.⁴⁶ Upton Sinclair articulated this strategy, when he argued in *The Goose-Step* that the industrialization of American higher education had reduced most professors to

⁴⁵ Ibid, 257. For background on the origins of this accommodationist strategy, see, Barrow, *Universities and the Capitalist State*, pp. 242-49.

⁴⁶ William Edward Eaton, *The American Federation of Teachers, 1916-1961: A History of the Movement* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1975), p. 31.

“proletarians, and the bulk of them will remain proletarians all their lives.”⁴⁷ Sinclair predicted that the proletarianization of intellectuals was first “compelling the college professor to realize himself as a class, and second, to study the movements of other workers for freedom, to become more sympathetic toward them, and more identified with them in interest and action.”⁴⁸ Sinclair was convinced that organized labor was the only force capable of overthrowing the plutocratic empire and, consequently, he concluded: “...the college professor’s hopes are bound up with the movement of the workers for freedom.”⁴⁹ There is no question that faculty unions improve the compensation, benefits, and workplace protections of professors within the existing contours of the university, but as left-wing critics have always pointed out, trade unions are designed to improve the economic conditions of workers *within* the existing capitalist relations of production. It is a rare event for unions to transgress those legal boundaries, although boundary breaking events such as sit-down strikes, political strikes, and general strikes do occur under exceptional circumstances.

However, the bottom line with faculty senates and faculty unions is that both types of organizations accept the hegemonic dominance of the capitalist class and the “ownership” of the university by corporate boards of trustees. Thus, they both seek to bargain for a slightly increased measure of influence and income within the existing system, but without challenging the fundamentally capitalist relations of intellectual production and without contesting ownership of the material means of mental production. Thus, I argue that the task of replacing the corporate university will require faculty to develop new and more expansive forms of *political* organization. The goal of revolutionary transformation was originally part of the vision of “new left” dissident groups within the disciplines, such as the Caucus for a Critical Political Science, the Union of Radical Political Economics, the Association for Critical Sociology, the Radical Historians Organization, and Radical Philosophy Association, among others, so a coalition of these

⁴⁷ Upton Sinclair, *The Goose-Step: A Study of American Higher Education*, Revised edition (Pasadena: Privately Printed, 1923), pp. 455-56.

⁴⁸ Ibid, pp. 57-58. Cf. Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, p. 25, who predict that “Just as, therefore, at an earlier period, a section of the nobility went over to the bourgeoisie, so now a portion of the bourgeoisie goes over to the proletariat, and in particular, a portion of the bourgeois ideologists, who have raised themselves to the level of comprehending theoretically the historical movement as a whole.”

⁴⁹ Sinclair, *The Goose-Step*, pp. 457-58.

types of organizations could take the lead in organizing a revolutionary program on and off campuses. These organizations could facilitate alliances with the AAUP, existing faculty unions, faculty senates, student organizations, and external community groups, that might incorporate and partially work through unions and senates, but such a coalition would eventually need to evolve into a new and autonomous form of faculty political organization created specifically to reconstruct relations of production and ownership.

Toward the Syndicalist University

In the meantime, I and a few of my colleagues have also found ourselves maneuvering within our institutions to create personal zones of independence and self-sufficiency outside the iron cage of bureaucracy as entrepreneurial intellectuals. These intellectuals tend to work as sole proprietors or in small groups outside the normal university bureaucracies as private consultants to progressive government agencies and labor unions, affiliates of self-sustaining university research centers and institutes, members of off-campus non-profit organizations, or members of cooperatives and self-owned enterprises. The entrepreneurial intellectual in its simplest form is a social category of the intellectual who seeks to capture the full value of their intellectual labor, while forging alliances that build toward a non-capitalist future within the womb of capitalism. The strategy of the entrepreneurial intellectual stands in sharp contrast to the university status quo, where a majority of university professors reluctantly acquiesce to the expropriation of the surplus value produced by faculty labor as it is captured Deans, Provosts, Presidents, Offices of Sponsored Research, and other non-academic bureaucracies, who claim that value as monopolistic rent payments in exchange for access to the material means of mental production, which they control (own). This expropriation of surplus value takes the form of exorbitant administrative salaries and benefits, lavish offices, bloated retinues of courtiers that often involve nepotism or political patronage, and highly profitable vendor contracts issued to political donors of the ruling party.

In contrast to the prevailing situation, my argument in *The Entrepreneurial Intellectual* is that if the university is a corporation, then as a faculty member I want to own shares in the corporation and I want to reclaim the full value of what I produce as a

producer. Otherwise, intellectual property is theft!⁵⁰ In *The Entrepreneurial Intellectual*, I proposed a micro-strategy of the entrepreneurial intellectual based on the actions of individuals and small groups operating at the margins of the corporate university. However, I also suggested that “one might foresee a situation in the indefinite future where networks of entrepreneurial organizations operating on the edges of the corporate university (boring from without), or operating quietly inside the corporate university (boring from within) could presage the emergence of a genuinely entrepreneurial university” and I offered glimpses of this possible future in my references to Pierre-Joseph Proudhon. Proudhon’s writings led me to wonder if the contemporary university could be reconstructed as a network of decentralized and autonomous producer associations.⁵¹

In this vein, I am proposing a syndicalist university that is owned and managed by the faculty.⁵² To put it unequivocally, I am calling for a revolution in the university on a scale that has not been seen since the 1960s, with all that such a term means historically whenever workers seize direct control of the means of production. The types of action necessary to achieve this goal will require multiple forms of direct action with an explicitly revolutionary objective. The legitimating principle of this revolution in university control is a principle that has long been accepted in classical liberal, Marxist, and anarcho-syndicalist theory – the right of first generation. The right of first generation is a principle derived by John Locke from the labor theory of value in his *Two Treatises of Government* (1688). As Locke states it:

...every Man has a *Property* in his own *Person*. This no Body has any Right to but himself. The *Labour* of his Body, and the *Work* of his Hands, we may say, are properly his. Whatsoever he removes out of the State that Nature hath provided, and left it in, he hath mixed his *Labour* with, and joined it to something that is his own, and thereby makes it his *Property*.⁵³

Locke’s basic claim is that a right of ownership and proprietorship is immediately conferred on an individual by having generated that thing with one’s labor; thus, infusing

⁵⁰ Pierre-Joseph, Proudhon, *What is Property? An Inquiry into the Principle of Right and Government*, translated from the French by Benjamin R. Tucker (Princeton, MA: Benjamin R. Tucker, 1876 [1840]).

⁵¹ Barrow, *The Entrepreneurial University*, p. xii.

⁵² Clyde W. Barrow, “The Rationality Crisis in U.S. Higher Education,” *New Political Science*, Vol. 32, No. 3 (September 2010): 317-44.

⁵³ John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, with introduction and notes by Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960 [1688]), Chap. 5, Section 27, pp. 328-29.

it with a value not found in its natural state. As the product of one's labor, the thing created becomes an extension of the person and, therefore, a fundamental element of the right to life and liberty. This is the same application of the labor theory of value that is articulated by Marx to justify socialized ownership of the means of production, under conditions of socialized production, and by Proudhon to justify producer associations under conditions of social and collective production as opposed to individual production.⁵⁴ Insofar as my brain and my voice are a part of my body, when I type a book or give a lecture, it is the work of my hands and my brain and, thereby, by right belongs to me. When a university department produces a major, its value belongs to the department faculty, but insofar as universities produce degrees that involve the cooperation of many departments, a significant portion of each degree's value belongs to the faculty collectively.

A simple way of operationalizing this proposition is to bluntly declare that faculty are the only creators of value at a university if we measure value by revenue and what people are willing to purchase from a university. States appropriate money to universities to educate students, and students are only at universities because there is a faculty to teach them. Students only attend universities and pay tuition and fees, because there is a faculty to teach them. Students only purchase textbooks, food services, and dormitories, because there is a faculty to teach them. Universities receive grants only because faculty write them and conduct research to implement them. Universities generate royalty income from patents only because faculty conduct research and invent things. Alumni only donate money, because of the educational programs and research conducted at the university and perhaps a desire to associate their names with the university's intellectual prestige. The faculty are the *sine qua non* of a university – that without which it would not be. The faculty IS the university. Thus, the contemporary university institutionalizes a structural contradiction between the *de facto* relations of production (faculty possession) and the legal relations of production (trustee ownership), which is sustained and enforced by the state for the purpose of expropriating the value created by university intellectuals through state coercion.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Karl Marx, "Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Vol. I" in *Marx-Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 35 (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1996), Section 2, pp. 51-56; Proudhon, *What is Property?*, pp. 44-69.

⁵⁵ Etienne Balibar, "The Basic Concepts of Historical Materialism," in Louis Althusser and Etienne Balibar,

In recent years, other scholars have proposed alternatives to the corporate university, including proposals for a Socialist University and a Democratic University, but what I am proposing is different from these proposals.⁵⁶ My proposal for a Syndicalist University unapologetically elevates the collective material interests of faculty to paramount importance, while leaving broader considerations about the “public good” to the democratic state and its regulatory apparatus.

The idea of a “socialist university” has deep roots in American political thought that go back at least as far John Dewey, who was a founder of both the AUUP and the AFT. Dewey took it for granted in his own time that Populists and Progressives had successfully created the democratic machinery necessary “for securing control by the masses,” although in retrospect this is a doubtful proposition. Dewey was supremely confident that a knowledge of modern social and economic conditions “was an obvious concern of the masses” and, consequently, as workers marched toward social democracy, and became the dominant class in American society, their democratic and participatory spirit was “bound in the future to animate our educational system.”⁵⁷ Similarly, James McKeen

Reading Capital (London: New Left Books, 1970), p. 227, observes that in understanding the structure of a mode of production, we must distinguish sharply “between the connexion that we have called ‘property’ and the *law of property*....the distinction between the social relations of production and their legal expression, concern precisely the possibility of a dislocation between base and superstructure.” Balibar’s argument is that workers actually possess the means of production as the only ones who can actually set them in motion (*de facto* ownership), while the capitalist class exercises *de jure* ownership backed by the force of the state, because they do not actually possess the means of production.

⁵⁶ Richard Hil, Kristen Lyons, and Fern Thompsett, *Transforming Universities in the Midst of Global Crisis: A University of for the Common Good* (New York: Routledge, 2022), make a number of proposals to “decolonize” universities. Most of these proposals seek to redefine the dominant social values of universities – education for the common good as opposed to private benefit – and, thus, many of their proposals focus on changes to pedagogy, curriculum, and community engagement. Moreover, most of their proposals for reorganizing the internal operations of universities focus on creating “more inclusive and horizontal ‘communities of learning’ that avoid the hierarchical rigidities of top-down control” in the teacher-student relationship (p. 181, Chap. 5 generally). These types of educational transformations are certainly compatible with a Syndicalist University. Their main structural proposal for decolonizing the university is to transfer “the lands and resources that have been hoarded within universities to the Indigenous peoples from whom they were taken” (p. 92), so in that respect, my proposal for a Syndicalist University is *not* a decolonial strategy. In the United States, however, there are a variety of more realistic decolonization policies that are compatible with the Syndicalist University, and that would benefit Native Americans, such as formal land acknowledgements, land back agreements with universities possessing surplus lands, a more aggressive US Department of Interior land-into-trust process for dispossessed tribes, improved federal funding for public colleges on indigenous lands, strengthening Native American Studies programs, and improved funding for university scholarships for Native American students (e.g., American Indian College Fund).

⁵⁷ John Dewey, “The Need of an Industrial Education in an Industrial Democracy,” *Proceedings of the Second Pan-American Congress*, December 27, 1915 to January 8, 1916, Vol. 4, pp. 222-25.

Cattell, one of Dewey's colleagues at Columbia University published a book called *University Control* (1913), where he argued "that in the end the people will control monopolies and the universities [will be] supported by the profits of monopolies." As a result, professors would no longer be dependent "on the generosity or caprice of millionaires."⁵⁸ Thus, Dewey's and Cattell's concept of a socialist university rested on the assumption that higher education would be socialized (i.e., public) and that academics merely had to sit and wait until the working classes rescued them from the grip of the capitalist class. It did not require university professors to actually *do* anything except wait to become dependent on the largesse of the socialist state as contrasted with the self-interested donations of the capitalist class, and it naively assumed that in their "participatory spirit" the newly dominant working class and its political representatives would just hand universities over to the control of faculty, rather than impose their own demands and restrictions on faculty.

Timothy V. Kaufman Osborn has updated this socialist conception of the university by proposing that American universities be "reincorporated in republican form."⁵⁹ Kaufman-Osborn rightly points out that the Dartmouth College Case (1819) did not merely define the corporation as a *persona ficta* but in doing so, it welded a particular concept of the corporation to "a capitalist conception of property," when there were in fact both socialist (state ownership) and syndicalist (guild) alternatives before the court.⁶⁰ Consequently, it is theoretically possible to reincorporate the university on different terms than those imposed by the Marshall Court. Thus, I concur with Kaufman-Osborn that "the

⁵⁸ James McKeen Cattell, "Concerning the American University," *Popular Science Monthly* (June 1902), pp. 180-82.

⁵⁹ Kaufman-Osborn, *The Autocratic Academy*, p. 4.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 5. There were two attempts at vesting the proprietary rights of a "tenured freehold" in the professorial office, which contested ownership of the physical plant of the university corporation. In *The Reverend John Bracken v. The Visitors of William and Mary* (1790), the agrarian radical John Taylor of Caroline argued the case on behalf of faculty, while John Marshall represented the Visitors (Board of Trustees) of William and Mary College. In this case the Virginia Court of Appeals ruled against the claim that faculty had a "freehold tenure" in the property of the university and vest full ownership rights in the Board of Visitors. In the Dartmouth College Case, Daniel Webster argued that the faculty of Dartmouth College held a freehold tenure in the college, while the State of New Hampshire argued that the college had been created by royal charter, which transferred to the State of New Hampshire upon U.S. independence, which made the college a state university. John Marshall, now sitting as Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court rejected both arguments and reiterated his earlier position that the university was a corporation – no different than any other corporation – with ownership rights legally vested in the self-perpetuating governing board, see. Richard Hofstadter and Walter P. Metzger, *The Development of Academic Freedom in the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1955), pp. 460-64.

task before us is not to repudiate the academy's 'corporatization' but to *reaffirm* its identity as a corporation capable of pursuing purposes and sustaining practices that are not reducible to those of a capitalist political economy."⁶¹

Kaufman-Osborn proposes an alternative form of the university that he calls Commonwealth University. Kaufman-Osborn does not offer a blueprint for Commonwealth University as he considers it beyond his ken, but he does offer two principles to guide such a blueprint. The first principle is that "members of this [new] corporation must retain the authority to select those who are to rule, and those who govern must in turn remain accountable to these same members."⁶² However, Kaufman-Osborn emphasizes that we cannot permanently reconstruct the "superstructural" elements of university governance (i.e., its politics) without reconfiguring its material substructure as a different form of property. Thus, he proposes as a second principle that the assets of this new corporation "must be corporately owned and so subject to expropriation in the service of capital accumulation by no one."⁶³ In this respect, Kaufman-Osborn argues that "Commonwealth University must also assume the form of a socialist enterprise whose assets, owned by no one, are unavailable for appropriation as so much privatized property and hence insertion within capitalism's circuits of accumulation."⁶⁴ It is the latter point where I primarily deviate from Kaufman-Osborn in proposing a syndicalist (guild) form of ownership, rather than an "ownerless" corporation, because I am not inclined to subordinate the collective material interests of faculty to an abstract *summum bonum* with no agreed upon content. While I elaborate a more detailed blueprint for what Kaufman-Osborn calls a "republican" form of governance for the university, I suggest that this form of governance should be anchored in a syndicalist form of ownership of the material means of mental production.

⁶¹ Kaufman-Osborn, *The Autocratic Academy*, p. 6.

⁶² Ibid, p. 6. See, also, Dalie Giroux, Dimitrios Karmis, and Christian Rouillard, "Between the Managerial and the Democratic University: Governance Structure and Academic Freedom as Sites of Political Struggle," *Studies in Social Justice* 9 (2): 142-58.

⁶³ Kaufman-Osborn, *The Autocratic Academy*, p. 6.

⁶⁴ Ibid, p. 263. European law has a concept of the "foundation" as a property that exists without an owner, whereas in U.S. legal tradition, all property must have an owner. Thus, the European foundation may exist independent of the persons who administer it and even of the state which supports it. No such concept exists in American law, see, Arthur Livingston, "Academic Freedom," *New Republic* (November 27, 1917), pp. 69-71; Samuel P. Capen, *The Management of Universities* (Buffalo, NY: Foster and Stewart, 1953), pp. 4-6.

Consequently, I offer six additional principles to replace Kaufman-Osborn's second principle of an ownerless corporation. In contrast to Kaufman-Osborn's Socialist University, Proudhon envisioned a "third form of society" between capitalism and communism.⁶⁵ Thus, a Syndicalist University is neither capitalist (i.e., privately owned) or socialist (i.e., publicly owned), but a collectivized enterprise owned and managed by faculty as required by the right of first generation. Proudhon establishes five additional principles for organizing a syndicalist economy and by implication a Syndicalist University. The second principle of syndicalism is "the principle of workmen's associations," which is that workers who collaborate directly in a production process should not only own, but manage their enterprises as producer associations. A third principle is that the relationships within and between producer associations will no longer be governed by laws, rules, and regulations – that is, by state and corporate bureaucracies -- but by the principle of voluntary association or what Proudhon calls "the concrete form of contract." In this network of producer associations, all economic associations are based on voluntary contracts negotiated in the mutual interests of the producers entering into these relationships, rather than being mandated by coercive laws and administrative regulations. These relations of voluntary contract within and between producer associations are also governed by the principles of equality of exchange (based on labor), market competition, and the honorableness of work. A final fundamental principle of Proudhon's third form of society is "the universality of comfort" in contrast to the opulence of the few, on the one hand, and the universality of poverty on the other hand.⁶⁶ Hence, a faculty-owned university would not seek to replicate the opulence of today's university's presidents, but it would ensure that all faculty achieve a comfortable level of economic prosperity and security.

However, it is one thing to talk about a Syndicalist University in terms of abstract principles, but how would a Syndicalist University work in practice? How would a Syndicalist University be configured as an institution and how would it operate on a day-to-day basis? As a beginning, I suggest that a Syndicalist University would be in practice what Thorstein Veblen calls a corporation of learning – "a body of mature scholars and

⁶⁵ Proudhon, *What is Property?*, pp. 280-88.

⁶⁶ Proudhon, *General Idea of the Revolution in the Nineteenth Century*, pp. 215-24, 243-47.

scientists, the faculty—with whatever plant and other equipment may incidentally serve as appliances for their work.”⁶⁷

Thus, the first important distinction between a capitalist university and a syndicalist university is that either by law, judicial decision, or force of action, the university corporation’s personhood will be re-transferred from boards of trustees to an incorporated or syndicated faculty. This means that the first step in establishing a Syndicalist University will be to ratify Articles of Syndication that define the structure, officers and their terms of office, the powers and duties of officers, other operating procedures, and membership in the university syndicate.⁶⁸ These Articles may well establish levels of membership similar to a legal corporation with managing partners, senior partners, junior partners, and associates that confer ownership and/or voting rights in the Syndicate.⁶⁹ One option for the departments affiliated with a university syndicate would be for each department to organize itself as a limited liability company affiliated with the Syndicate, with the Syndicate acting as a holding company for the university’s common physical assets, such as land, buildings, and shared revenue. As a limited liability company, each department would be legally required to have written by-laws and operating procedures, including rules on financial distributions to its members and managing partner (i.e., Chair).

Another important distinction between the capitalist university and the Syndicalist University is that budgeting will be a bottom up instead of a top-down process, and it is my contention that this change will significantly alter budget priorities, salaries, and expenditure flows in ways that benefit the liberal arts. The fundamental unit of the Syndicalist University will continue to be the academic department, because they are the primary units of value generation in the form of student tuition and fee revenue and grant receipts. Consequently, in a syndicalist budgeting system, 100% of student tuition and academic fees would be initially collected and distributed to the departments that

⁶⁷ Veblen, *The Higher Learning in America*, pp. 59, 18.

⁶⁸ I leave open the possibility that Articles of Syndication could vary greatly from one university to another depending on its mission, size, legislative mandates, and the preferences of faculty.

⁶⁹ A similar idea was first proposed in James E. Kirkpatrick, *The American College and Its Rulers* (New York: New Republic Press, 1926). Kirkpatrick was a professor at Washburn College (Kansas), who helped organize one of the earliest American Federation of Teachers locals on a college campus in 1920. He was dismissed for his union activity along with every other member of the union local, see, Eaton, *The American Federation of Teachers*, p. 33 and “Report on Washburn College,” *Bulletin of the AAUP* (January-February 1921): 66-137.

generate them based on enrollments and the ratio of tuition and fees generated by those enrollments. A percentage of those revenues could be simultaneously redistributed in a second round of calculations based on the numbers of majors in a department, or a percentage of revenues could be redistributed based on an equalization formula designed to maintain small departments at a minimum level of funding. This arrangement would not preclude asymmetrical tuition and fee structures to support the full cost of instruction in more expensive programs (e.g., engineering, science), which would be justified by the ostensibly higher rates of return on investment for graduates of those programs.

This system of responsibility centered budgeting would also mean that departments are responsible for determining their own budgets and expenditures based on estimated annual revenues, while being in control of their budgets would allow departments to engage in long-term planning for future capital expenditures, major research projects, and faculty recruitment. Faculty and staff salaries, including raises for cost of living and merit would be set at the department level on the basis of compensation policies adopted at the department level and on the basis of available revenues. Departments would be similarly liable for research support expenditures, conference travel allocations, and basic office and computing equipment, while they would be required to reallocate a proportionate ratio of their budgets (based on actual use) for items such as common capital expenditures, facilities maintenance, and library acquisitions. There would, in effect, be very little “overhead,” because much of what is now called “indirect costs” would be direct costs managed by departments. Moreover, based on the principle of voluntary contracts, individual departments should be allowed to negotiate these costs on a contract basis with non-academic units of the Syndicate or by contracting out these expenses (e.g., facilities maintenance) to non-university enterprises – preferably to other cooperative and worker-owned enterprises.

In this new system of university finance, states that currently identify a public interest in higher education by making annual appropriations to colleges and universities could convert all of their current appropriations into a financial aid pool that would travel with individual students, rather than being allocated to specific colleges and universities. This system of providing “free higher education for all” would implement Proudhon’s principle of market competition by allowing individual institutions to compete with each

other on a mix of price, quality, reputation, degree offerings, placements, atmosphere, and facilities, i.e., on the basis of outputs, rather than inputs. Another possibility would be for states to enter into limited term contracts with syndicalist universities to provide a fixed guaranteed funding stream in exchange for an agreement to cap tuition payments in designated fields of public interest or to admit and graduate an agreed upon number of students each year at various levels (e.g., undergraduate, master's, doctoral) over a four-to six-year period. The latter arrangement would actually insulate universities from having to absorb unexpected enrollment surges and/or budget cuts, because it would fix the funding arrangement as an enforceable contract between two legally separate entities.

A third important distinction between the capitalist university and the Syndicalist University is that administrative services could be unbundled, rather than imposed on faculty through the coercive rent seeking monopolies we call "The Administration." All administrative and auxiliary services would be organized as separate units that would either be required to bid for departmental contracts or be supported by separate student fees paid on a voluntary basis (i.e., based on student perceptions of value). Thus, competition by administrative services would determine whether, and to what extent a university needs a writing center, an advising center, a dean of students, an information technology department, a library, a payroll department, a human resources department, a registrar, a police department, a lacrosse team, etc. In other words, the price and availability of various administrative and auxiliary services would be determined by what consumers – both faculty and students – are willing to pay for them. Thus, the syndicalist university would be systematically redesigned as a network of voluntary producer associations and there is no requirement that the same services would have to be purchased from the same vendor by different departmental units.

A fourth distinction between the capitalist university and a Syndicalist University is that all academic administrators would be elected by the faculty in those units: department chairs, deans, provosts, and presidents. In lieu of an appointive board of trustees, general university policies would be made by an elective university council whose composition might vary from one institution to another depending on the agreed upon mix of faculty,

students, alumni or other constituencies.⁷⁰ Moreover, if syndicalist universities were to follow the example of the Paris Commune then they would also likely set maximum salaries for administrative positions, e.g., a president could make no more than twice the average salary of the 10% lowest paid full professors on campus; a Provost no more than 75% more than the average salary of the 10% lowest paid full professors on campus; and a dean no more than 50% more than the average salary of the 10% lowest paid full professors in the college. Contrary to the admonitions of executive head hunters, who would be unnecessary in such a system, there will be an adequate supply of talented and capable individuals willing to assume these posts at these salary levels and it will largely be individuals with strong ties to the institution. It goes without saying that in a Syndicalist University controlled by faculty, administrative titles such as dean, provost, or president will be restricted to individuals with an earned Ph.D. regardless of how many qualifiers precede that title such as assistant, associate, special, deputy, etc. The days of the administrative assistant promoted to assistant dean, the dean with an M.B.A. and no prior academic experience, and the politician turned president will likely come to a rapid end at the Syndicalist University.⁷¹ Significantly, this change would also require academic administrators to *govern and lead* departments, colleges, and universities, rather than *manage* them so that university presidents would become more like mayors of dynamic mid-sized cities instead of the CEOs of moribund and bankrupt capitalist enterprises.

While a system of syndicalist universities would collectivize the material means of mental production under the control of university faculty, it would also substantively de-statize the system of higher education. Thus, as Robert A. Dahl has documented in *A Preface to Economic Democracy* (1985) even worker owned enterprises in a competitive market economy will continue acting in their own self-interest with the resulting negative externalities and market failures that must be prevented or regulated by the state. Dahl correctly observes that based:

⁷⁰ One could also imagine a bi-cameral works council with one chamber representing faculty and the other chamber representing students, who jointly report out proposed policies to an elective president similar to the U.S. system of national government.

⁷¹ There would be nothing to preclude a faculty from electing a successful corporate CEO or popular politician as their president, but such a person would be accountable directly to the faculty and subject to removal by them. See, Ginsberg, *The Fall of the Faculty*, on the proliferation of unqualified “deanlets” and “mini-Provosts” in the supposedly “efficient” corporate university.

On our assumptions, self-governing enterprises would operate within a market. It would therefore be a mistake to suppose that they could – or even should – entirely escape pressures toward instrumental rationality and protection of the firm's revenues. It is too much to expect, then, that self-governing enterprises would always act to prevent the displacement of adverse consequences on others. Consequently, like corporate enterprises, they would need some regulation by the state.⁷²

Dahl emphasizes that “a system of relatively autonomous enterprises would require controls external to the enterprise, both by markets and prices and by democratically imposed laws and regulations.”⁷³ However, Dahl's analysis suggests that the range of necessary regulations would be reduced because of two differences between self-governing enterprises and corporate-capitalist enterprises:

First, self-governing enterprises would in principle eliminate, and surely would in practice vastly reduce, the adversarial and antagonistic relationships between employers and employees that foster moral irresponsibility on both sides. Every employee would have a stake in the firm's welfare; actions adverse to the performance of the firm would be hurtful to all. Second, being far more numerous and closer to the average citizen than [capitalist] managers and owners, employees would be more representative of consumers [students] and citizens [community].⁷⁴

Thus, I am not proposing a pure system of unregulated and stateless syndicalism, as advanced by Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, but one that is subject to many of the same types of state and federal regulations as currently apply to all private corporations and to public and private universities. These regulations could be implemented and enforced through state funding contracts, state-mandated accreditation, articles of incorporation and syndication, and existing laws on equal opportunity and non-discrimination. Similarly, the current system of federal financial aid could remain in place, except I argue we should increase funding for that program, in conjunction with the states, to provide free higher education for all who are qualified for admission to a college or university. A fully-funded federal-state system of grants to students, rather than appropriations to institutions would create a highly competitive system of higher education that might, in fact, initiate an era

⁷² Robert A. Dahl, *A Preface to Economic Democracy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), pp. 99-100.

⁷³ Ibid, p. 100.

⁷⁴ Ibid, p.00.

of genuine innovation and educational transformation.⁷⁵ While it is probably true that some colleges and universities will go out of business, that is already happening regularly in the United States. However, a system of free higher education for all might also create a direct and expanded political constituency for financial aid as students and parents would now have a measurable and tangible individualized interest in state and federal support for higher education. Similarly, I do not see any significant change to the federal and state systems that provide research grants to support scientific research, the arts, and humanities, as there continues to be a public interest in supporting those activities.

Accreditation is also a federal requirement for receiving federal financial aid, so it is likely that a system of accreditation and quality control would continue to function through the regional accreditation associations. However, since most accreditation associations currently consist of university administrators, I suggest that by changing the institutional character of “administration” from an autonomous career path detached from faculty and students to one dependent of faculty support, I contend that the accreditation agencies would be rapidly transformed as faculty-administrators assume leadership posts in these organizations. Similarly, it is likely that states and disciplinary accreditation bodies would still regulate the development of new academic programs, mandate their periodic peer review, and set minimum criteria for their approval and continuation.

You Can Get There From Here

Kaufman-Osborn does not propose a political strategy for achieving Commonwealth University, nor have I proposed one for achieving the Syndicalist University. However, Phillip Ablett, Christine Morley, and Heather Fraser have at least taken a step down this path in their proposal for a “Democratic University.”⁷⁶ Importantly, Ablett, Morely, and Fraser explicitly link their proposal for a Democratic University to the wider concern for a revolutionary transformation of capitalist society. They argue that:

⁷⁵ David Osborne and Ted Gaebler, *Reinventing Government: How the Entrepreneurial Spirit is Transforming the Public Sector* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Pub. Co., 1992); David Osborne and Peter Plastrik, *Banishing Bureaucracy: The Five Strategies for Reinventing Government* (Reading, Mass.: Addison Wesley Pub. Co., 1997).

⁷⁶ Phillip Ablett, Christine Morley, and Heather Fraser, “Progressive Revolutionary Change and the Democratic University: Reimagining Higher Education,” in Masoud Kamali, ed., *Revolutionary Social Work: Promoting Systemic Changes* (New York: Routledge, 2022), pp. 48-68.

If there is an institutional field that offers potential in contributing to the formation of a critical, revolutionary consciousness, capable of envisioning social alternatives, then higher education is a key contender, but the humanizing neoliberal processes that have permeated every aspect of our existence, have also largely captured higher education.⁷⁷

Thus, Ablett, Morley, and Fraser propose building revolution from the inside out and thus make “the case for a progressive revolution in universities,” which would culminate in what they call “the democratic university.”⁷⁸ They propose a complex long-term strategy of revolutionary transition that is anchored in Erik Olin Wright’s concept of “real utopias.”⁷⁹ This strategy involves a combination of Wright’s interstitial, symbiotic, and ruptural strategies with each strategy building on the previous strategy to culminate in a ruptural (or revolutionary) confrontation with the State and the University. Ablett, Morley, and Fraser also explicitly recognize that “beyond Marxism [Leninism] and social democracy, there have always been non-statist revolutionary traditions in anarchism, syndicalism, council communism, and libertarian socialism.”⁸⁰ However, “these non or post-Marxist revolutionary traditions were often marginalized by their statist competitors and, with few exceptions, unable to articulate compelling links between their proposed utopias and viable, popular strategies for achieving them.”⁸¹ In the end, however, Ablett, Morley, and Fraser merely propose a reformed system of shared governance, where curriculum and faculty personnel decisions are left to disciplinary experts (faculty), while governing boards are “democratized” by incorporating faculty, student,⁸² and community

⁷⁷ Ibid, p. 48.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 48.

⁷⁹ Erik Olin Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias* (London and New York: Verso, 2010).

⁸⁰ Ablett, Morley, and Fraser, “Progressive Revolutionary Change and the Democratic University,” p. 55.

⁸¹ Ibid, p. 56.

⁸² Rather than having representation on a governing board, J. Gagnon, “The Democratic University,” *Arena Online* 3 September 2021, available at <https://arena.org.au/the-democratic-university>, suggests that students might better be represented by an elected “rector” (dean of students), who is a senior executive officer of the university charged with advocating for students in manner similar to the Tribunes of the Roman Republic. Gagnon also proposes a cumbersome and inefficient tri-cameral system of representative bodies that would each independently represent faculty, students, and the community, with each body having its own administrative support. However, this governance system would again put faculty in a subordinate position relative to student and community representatives and, thus, effectively make them “employees” of a corporation controlled by non-faculty.

representation⁸³ in contrast to university governing boards being dominated by corporate capitalists. Ablett, Morely, and Fraser agree that governance structures could vary from one institution, or one political jurisdiction, to another, so there is no fixed formula for deciding representation, but in my proposal for a Syndicalist University, faculty self-ownership requires that faculty must always constitute a working majority of the institution's governing body; otherwise, ownership is transferred *de facto* back to a governing board that is not accountable to faculty/owners. Thus, while Ablett, Morley, and Fraser define the “democratic university” as a “democratically self-governing community of learners, researchers, and their supporters,”⁸⁴ this is a different institution than Veblen's “corporation of scholars” because it differs significantly in terms of ownership and governance structures, which are the cornerstones of the Syndicalist University.

Ablett, Morley, and Fraser suggest that building revolution from the inside out begins with critical pedagogy, which is a pedagogical strategy designed to promote counter-hegemonic thinking that disrupts established power relations.⁸⁵ While critical pedagogy is often linked to proposals for educational reform, it is not per se an organizational strategy, but instead focuses on what is taught, and how it is taught in a university, and such a strategy is quickly encountering its limits in the United States as authoritarian neo-liberal regimes begin to close those pedagogical spaces by passing laws that prohibit the teaching of “divisive” concepts, such as class, race, and gender, climate change, and even basic historical facts (e.g., slavery).

However, Ablett, Morely, and Fraser widen the circle of political activism by emphasizing that the transition to a new type of university will require intensive lobbying campaigns designed to build support among university constituencies and the general public. They suggest that “free higher education for all” has proved to be a compelling

⁸³ The authors do not address what constitutes the appropriate “community” for different types of institutions, which could be local, regional, state, national, or global depending on the institution's orientation. The authors do not include alumni as a constituency with a vested interest in the university.

⁸⁴ Ablett, Morley, and Fraser, “Progressive Revolutionary Change and the Democratic University,” p. 57.

⁸⁵ Ibid, p. 53. For example, Henry Giroux, *On Critical Pedagogy* (New York: Continuum, 2011); Henry Giroux, “Foreword: Critical Pedagogy in the Age of Tyranny,” in Christine Morley, C. Ablett Noble, ad S. Cowden, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Critical Pedagogies for Social Work*. London: Routledge, 2020); Peter McLaren, “Revolutionary Pedagogy in Post-Revolutionary Times: Rethinking the Political Economy of Critical Education,” *Educational Theory* 48 (4): 431-62; S.D. Brookfield, *The Power of Critical Theory: Liberating Adult Learning and Teaching* (Indianapolis: Jossey-Bass, 2005).

issue, while “a legislative campaign for reforming university governance structures could commence with the issue of excessive executive remuneration packages for senior management,” which Ablett et al rightly point out is considered obnoxious by the general public. At this point, senior university executives cannot plausibly lay claim to superior decision-making skills, fiscal management, or fundraising abilities, when universities are constantly beset by massive structural deficits that require the elimination of programs and degrees and the termination of tenured faculty and that often result in outright bankruptcy and closure. One college and university after another is imploding financially in the United States, and it is increasingly clear to the public, and to legislatures, that these implosions are the direct consequence of poor decision-making by senior administrators and corporate trustees, but faculty have been slow to leverage these facts in public relations campaigns for governance and financial reform.⁸⁶

Thus, Ablett, Morley, and Fraser argue that faculty political action:

begins by articulating the problem, promoting conversation, engaging in critical analyses, and forming counter-proposals to inform wider actions. The initial actions can start within the system, activating collective forums like student, union, and public meetings, but must not end there. Such campaigns will entail lobbying of politicians and university councils, pamphlets and position papers, blogs and videos, and internet petitions and protest actions.⁸⁷

Ablett, Morley, and Fraser predict that these types of actions will result in one of three outcomes. If these political actions are successful, it will build momentum toward more ambitious revolutionary reforms.⁸⁸ If these types of political actions fail to secure incremental victories then it is possible that activists will either withdraw in despair and defer the revolution to an indefinite future, or faculty encounters with the “bad faith” of political elites could lead to an escalation of confrontational tactics and a shift toward ruptural transformations that involve direct confrontations with the University and the State – or in my scenario, a direct seizure of the material means of mental production

⁸⁶ Ablett, Morley, and Fraser, “Progressive Revolutionary Change and the Democratic University,” p. 59.

⁸⁷ Ibid, p. 60.

⁸⁸ For example, Andre Gorz, *Strategy for Labor: A Radical Proposal* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967) on the concept of revolutionary reforms.

comparable to the sit down strikes among auto workers in the 1930s (US) or the French general strike of 1968, where faculty occupy their universities and lock out management.

Conclusion

Accepting the reality that university intellectuals are the employees of capitalist or state-capitalist enterprises does not mean that they should allow themselves to be hamstrung by a capitalist concept of business enterprise or by “capitalist” notions of private property. The point of convergence between a movement for academic and economic democracy is that a renewed emphasis on university self-governance is no different than a demand by other workers for self-management and employee ownership. Colleges and universities cannot be anything but a reflection of the society in which education takes places and, thus, the transformation of higher education also depends on the transformation of the existing society. As Marx and Engels wrote in *The German Ideology*:

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e., the class which is the ruling material force of society is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, consequently also controls the means of mental production, so that the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are on the whole subject to it.⁸⁹

This means that university intellectuals must become a material force in society – a class in-itself and for-itself -- by directly seizing control of the material means of mental production. Whenever university professors are admonished to operate their institutions like business enterprises, it should be an opportunity to challenge the prevailing conception of how we do business in America and particularly on our campuses. There are other ways of doing business than the way it is done at General Motors or Bank of America and we have at least begun to have a discussion on what should replace the corporate university and the autocratic academy.

⁸⁹ Marx and Engels, “The German Ideology,” in *Marx-Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 5, p. 59.