

Whither the Public University?

For forty years I took the university for granted as a platform for research and teaching. In 2015 when my eight years with the International Sociological Association were over, I was invited to join the Board of the Berkeley Faculty Association (BFA). I had been a member for several years but paid little attention to its activities. Without the energy or desire to conduct fieldwork abroad, I thought joining the BFA Board would be an opportunity to return to my old interest in the university. Moreover, I knew I had benefited from the university in so many ways without paying my dues, without doing much service beyond the department. I was only six months on the board before Celeste Langan, my colleague from the English department, and I were dragooned into becoming the co-chairs of the organization. We were thrown in at the proverbial deep end to protest, as best we could, the ramifications of privatization.⁶

From the beginning I have relied on Chris Newfield's two books *Unmaking the Public University* (2008) and *The Great Mistake* (2016), which detail the folly of privatizing the public university, an account based on the University of California. His books are unequalled in their detail and in their vision of what has gone wrong. If I have any quibble with his analysis, it is the disposition toward voluntarism. Privatization was no more a "mistake" than climate

change; privatization is the subsumption of the university to third-wave marketization, now ineluctably extended to the commodification of knowledge. This raises, once again, the two questions: “knowledge for whom?” and “knowledge for what?” In addressing ourselves we must ask how teaching and research should be organized, and in addressing others, should we prioritize narrow private interests or the more general public interest? My answers to these questions guide the organization of this chapter.

Unmaking the Public University

The Berkeley Faculty Association began in 1972 as a defense against aggressive moves by California’s then governor, Ronald Reagan, aimed in particular at the Berkeley campus where student protests had been most prominent. University faculty were punished with cuts in salaries and in the campus budget. In the 1970s the BFA became a popular organization among the faculty to preserve the independence of the university, but thereafter it languished until its revitalization after the Great Recession and the faculty furloughs of 2009. It was then taken over by a more radical wing of the faculty, hostile to strategies of privatization driving the administration of the campus.

At the ten campuses that make up the University of California, faculty interests are formally represented by each campus’s Academic Senate, whose long list of committees as well as its leadership are populated by an elected “committee on committees.” In theory the Academic Senate partners with the campus administration – the Chancellor, the Vice-Chancellors, the Associate Vice-Chancellors, Provost and Vice-Provosts, the Deans, and so on – in “shared governance.” Traditionally most administrators arose from the ranks of the faculty, and the Academic Senate became a common route into the administration. Over time the balance of power has

shifted toward the administration, with the Senate acting as a rubber stamp. The BFA, on the other hand, is independent of both the Senate and the administration. It defends faculty interests but it is not a union: it does not bargain with management. We think of ourselves as the conscience of the Senate and, when we deem it necessary, as opposition to the campus administration.

A key point of contestation between the BFA and the campus administration continues to be the “privatization” of higher education. While the Berkeley campus was the original site of the University of California, which began in 1868 as a Land Grant College, it is now one of ten campuses. In the postwar expansion of higher education, the state of California promoted a particularly ambitious Master Plan that would provide free college education for all who desired it, in a three-tier system – two-year Community Colleges, the four-year California State University, and then an upper tier, the University of California with its flagship campuses at Berkeley and Los Angeles. If the 1960s were the height of public education, they were also, ironically enough, a period of burgeoning campus social movements. They began with Berkeley’s 1964 Free Speech Movement attacking the mass university or what Clark Kerr, then President of the University, dubbed the multi-university (Kerr 1963). Today the three tiers still exist but the Master Plan with its vision of free education is in tatters. Clark Kerr, once the villain, target of student protest, has become a hero, a New Deal liberal who fought for public education.

Governor Reagan exploited the insurgent student movements – anti-war and civil rights – to arouse and mobilize popular sentiment against the University of California. He set the scene for the decline in public funding that can be traced to two events in 1978. The first was Proposition 13, which cut property taxes and thus state revenues. In the face of competing demands for expanded correctional facilities and rising costs of health, education – and especially higher education – was

deemed politically expendable. The second significant event of 1978 was the Supreme Court ruling in the Bakke case against race-based quotas. The ruling did, however, still allow the university to use race as a factor in admissions. This set in motion affirmative action, and later the backlash against affirmative action, marked by the 1996 passage of California's Proposition 209. The two events of 1978 are connected: the diversification of admissions, in the eyes of what was still a largely white electorate, justified the withdrawal of public funding from the university.

One can debate the specific origins of the transformation of the University of California, but it is part of a national and indeed global trend, symptomatic of third-wave marketization, which turns what was once a public good into a private commodity. If knowledge used to be regarded as something produced and distributed for the benefit of all, it is now increasingly bought and sold by those who can afford it, so that the university becomes a revenue-generating machine, transforming its internal structure and threatening its national and international standing. For so long we thought of the public university as exempt from the forces of commodification. Yes, there were periodic crises that involved defunding, but they were always followed by restoration, albeit at a lower level. Too few were ready to acknowledge how the secular decline in funding was leading to the structural transformation of the university.

We can gauge the slow transformation of the university as a transition from "university in capitalist society" to the "capitalist university" – a move that is not specific to Berkeley or to the University of California. The "university in capitalist society" is a relatively autonomous institution, run by faculty for faculty, following the principles of shared governance and academic freedom. It is a monastic form of governance by privileged professionals, largely white and male, with security of employment (tenure), driven, in its own self-understanding, by the pursuit of

truth. Its autonomy allows it to claim to represent the general interest of society by contributing subsidized research that lubricates capitalist accumulation, producing a professional managerial class and an educated citizenry. The research university generates a critical perspective toward elites that fail to live up to their espoused values. The “relatively autonomous” university doesn’t exist in pure form; its independence was always subject to external pressures from corporate funders of research and agencies of the state. However, those pressures did not fundamentally alter its character. In the US the “relatively autonomous” university reached its peak in the boom of higher education during the two decades after World War II (Jencks and Riesman 1968). In those years the public university was seen to be a fundamental institution of modern society, leading such commentators as Daniel Bell (1973) to predict its centrality to the post-industrial society.

In the 1960s the US university spawned student protest – attacking the institution itself for its complicity in reproducing social, political, and economic ills at home and abroad. The public university contributed to the war in Vietnam, it excluded from its own ranks women and people of color, it limited freedom of speech in the name of university autonomy. The university became the focus of political backlash, temporarily casting off its cloak of complacency and questioning its projection as an ivory tower. It began to lose public funding, which led to the pursuit of new sources of revenue, the commodification of knowledge that, in turn, led to its slow transformation. It came to look ever more like a capitalist corporation with an enlarged managerial structure imposing itself on faculty and students alike. The transition to a “capitalist university” is still ongoing, thereby generating a succession of mutually reinforcing crises: fiscal, governance, identity, and legitimation. Using Berkeley as my case study I will sketch out these crises as a function of third-wave marketization.

Fiscal Crisis

In the conventional account, defunding public education set in motion compensating increases in student tuition. Newfield (2016) offers an alternative explanation – suggesting that the public university contributed to its own demise by raising student tuition to cover increasing costs of research. In this view it was the university that triggered the spiraling tuition increases with the withdrawal of state support. Whatever the cause, the University of California increased undergraduate tuition from a nominal sum of \$150 per year in 1970 to today's \$15,000 for California residents and more than twice as much for out-of-state or international students. In the academic year 2010–11, for the first time, revenue from student tuition and fees exceeded funding from the state of California. By 2018–19 tuition and fees amounted to 32 percent of campus revenue while the state's contribution to campus revenue amounted to only 15 percent.

Still, any increase in student tuition had to be approved by the state legislature – tuition was limited to \$15,000 between 2015 and 2020. Those whose parental income was less than \$80,000 did not pay any tuition and it was reduced for those whose parents together earned less than \$120,000 per annum. The campus circumvented these constraints by parlaying its reputation into enrollment of out-of-state and international students who paid twice the in-state tuition and fees. In the twenty years from 1999 to 2019 enrollment of California students fell from 82 percent to 67 percent. Alarmed that outsiders were taking up precious spaces in California's public university, the state insisted on limits on the overall percentage of out-of-state students, which was accomplished through unprecedented increases in enrollments at already overcrowded campuses.

After reaching the limits of one source of revenue another is pursued. Thus, another strategy has been to develop special programs – self-financing MA programs

or professional certificates in business or engineering. Other departments devise one-off fee-paying courses in the summer, often online, to bring in badly needed funds. My own department hit upon the idea of enticing students from abroad for a semester, charging them substantial fees for “concurrent enrollment.” These innovations in the commodification of knowledge bring in funds in the short term until everyone catches on, competition increases, and revenue falls. Or a pandemic strikes and “concurrent enrollment” disappears overnight.

As these alternative sources of revenue are choked off, the university turns to its alumni and other “friends” in capital campaigns. Accustomed to state funding, Berkeley like other public universities was a latecomer to building an endowment. Even when successful it had its limits, if only because of the restricted use of funds. For example, donors like to give money for a new building to be named after them, but the funds are often inadequate and the university is left carrying additional costs as well as maintenance. Corporate investment in cheap research can also be costly for the university. For example, after much controversy, Berkeley accepted a \$350 million investment from British Petroleum to create an Energy Biosciences Institute. The university put up money for a new building, but was left holding the bag when BP unceremoniously pulled out after the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf. The university is so desperate for funds that it strikes deals, so called public–private partnerships, which create credit in the short run but can be very costly in the long run. Privatization digs the university into deeper debt (Newfield 2016).

The commodification of prestige and knowledge is one strategy; the commodification of labor is another. Universities can go after the weak and the vulnerable, outsourcing low paid service work to avoid paying benefits or even minimum wages. Economic restructuring led to dramatic change in teaching as expensive tenure-track faculty have been replaced by short-term, precarious

instructional labor, known variously as lecturers, adjuncts, and part-time or contingent faculty. When I began teaching at Berkeley, lecturers barely existed; today they teach some 40 percent of student credit hours. Across higher education lecturers now outnumber tenure-track faculty by two to one, whereas fifty years ago the ratio was the inverse. As the number of tenure-track positions declines, the oversupply of PhDs has left them competing for low-paid, insecure teaching positions. The conditions of lecturers vary a great deal across higher education, depending on the status of their employer, but everywhere their conditions of employment are vastly inferior to tenure-track faculty who, thereby, are released from teaching to conduct research. In the short run, tenured and nontenured faculty have opposed interests; in the long run they have a common interest in stemming the degradation of the public university.

Governance Crisis

As commodification makes inroads into the university, it brings about changes in the administrative structure. Fiscal crisis has been accompanied by “administrative bloat.” According to the university’s figures, the number of senior and executive managers at Berkeley increased five-fold in the twenty years from 1994 to 2014, so that they now equal the number of tenure-track faculty, which has remained constant over the same period. It’s not just the numbers but also the salaries. A senate committee reported that between 2010 and 2015 salaries of Berkeley’s central administration increased by 38 percent whereas the income of academic units increased by 13 percent. While Berkeley is at the extreme, we can find similar administrative expansion at the other University of California campuses and indeed across higher education.

Coincident with administrative expansion has been the recruitment of executives from the financial and

corporate world. For example, Berkeley's Vice-Chancellor for Finance and Administration came from the World Bank, knowing little about the operation of universities, let alone the peculiarities of a public university like Berkeley. He recruited personnel from the world of finance to help him govern the university. He lasted for five years. The university attracts such "spiralists" who enter the university from outside, perhaps from the corporate world, develop their own signature project and then spiral on (if they are lucky), leaving the university, saddled with debt, to spiral down. In this case the Vice-Chancellor tried to promote "online" education, which proved to be an expensive flop, and he spiraled out and down.

After the economic crisis of 2008–9 that left the campus in dire straits, the Chancellor at the time called on outside consultants Bain and Company to identify ways the university could save money. Bain charged the campus \$7.5 million for developing a plan for restructuring the campus that would cost a further \$70 million to implement. The report, called *Operational Excellence*, identified a number of inefficiencies: too many layers of management, supervisors with too limited a span of control, and too much duplication in managerial operations. The plan called for a new system of management, Campus Shared Services, that would reduce the "duplication" of administrative staff by pulling them out of departments and relocating them in distant offices. This proved to be neither operational nor excellent, breaking the close connection between faculty and department staff, who held the tacit knowledge necessary for managing research projects, teaching curriculum, and employment of students. As staff were relocated, departments had to hire extra personnel to administer projects that required close and continuous collaboration within departments. Campus Shared Services was declared a failure after three years.

This was just one ill-conceived project designed to cut costs that had the opposite effect. Perhaps the most famous sinkhole was the seismic retrofit of Berkeley's football

stadium. Campus engineers considered it impossible to retrofit the stadium to withstand a major earthquake, but the project moved ahead. When it was planned, again just after the Great Recession, it was to be financed by alumni paying from \$40,000 to \$225,000 for special reserved seats that they would hold for fifty years. The venture was a financial disaster; alumni were not interested in paying exorbitant amounts to watch a losing football team. In the end the retrofit would cost \$445 million and the campus would be saddled with an annual \$18 million debt, rising to an estimated \$37 million a year by 2044.

Having overseen failed attempts at reversing fiscal crisis and mishandling the student protests in 2009 following the 32 percent increase in tuition, the Chancellor resigned in 2013. He was succeeded by another outsider. He too had his signature project – to build a Global Campus not far from Berkeley, on vacant land deemed environmentally hazardous. Instead of building campuses in the Middle East or Asia, Berkeley would use its “brand” to attract investment from major foreign universities to build a local international campus. Before the project had a chance to demonstrate its folly, after three years in office, the Chancellor resigned under pressure of faculty, appalled by the cover-up of cases of sexual harassment, openly justified in the name of upholding Berkeley’s “reputation”! As a spiralist this Chancellor built a fence around himself – figuratively and literally – keeping faculty and students at a distance. Instead of asking a local to be his deputy, he installed an Executive Vice-Chancellor from another university, a private one. Instead of using the wisdom of faculty and students, he hired outside consultants to guide his plans.

Sobered by a succession of disasters, the Board of Regents chose a “local” for the next Chancellor. She had been a faculty member at Berkeley since 1970 and became Executive Vice-Chancellor before moving on to become President of Smith College. After ten years she returned to Berkeley to retire, but was pulled back in as interim

Executive Vice-Chancellor as a stopgap measure to clean up the mess left by her predecessors. The campus breathed a sigh of relief when she was appointed Chancellor. Convinced that privatization was the only strategy going forward, she pursued it deliberately and rationally. Her first goal was to eliminate the burgeoning annual deficit of some \$150 million by multiplying revenue streams as well as trimming expenses. With soaring rents it was increasingly difficult for students and faculty to live in Berkeley or the surrounding areas, so she set about expanding university accommodations through public-private partnerships.

The smoother operation of the new regime throws into relief what is taken for granted – the progressive commodification of knowledge, keeping the university alive with privatization strategies, even to the point of openly repudiating support for tuition-free education. With a disastrous credit rating, due to the fiascos of the past, the administration is forced into high-risk investments, often over opposition from faculty. The restructuring of the administration has gradually expropriated control from all campus communities – faculty, lecturers, staff, students. Leaving the hallowed value of shared governance, we have entered a regime of consultative governance – consultations after the fact – driven by market forces.

Identity Crisis

Increasingly focused on making money to stem its fiscal crisis, the university administration undermines collective self-government, bringing on a governance crisis, which in turn prompts an identity crisis. Are we a private or a public institution, responsive to particular interests or generational interests, reproducing or challenging the commodification of knowledge?

The university divides into competing sectors. Some regions of the university are better able to exploit the

marketplace than others. The biosciences and engineering supply research allied to expanding regions of the economy; the business and law schools supply managers and regulators; schools of public policy and social welfare supply the expertise to administer and treat precarious populations. As tuition increased and employment prospects dimmed, so students gravitate toward those disciplines that supply the best job opportunities, whether that be a path to a professional degree or directly into the more secure regions of the labor force. The university surreptitiously pushes toward vocationalism at the expense of a broad liberal education. The number of majors in the arts and humanities falls. The university follows student demand by redistributing resources among departments on the basis of “student credit hours” and the number of degrees. In a time of shrinking budgets the competition between departments becomes palpable, no longer on the basis of scholarly distinction but on their appeal to students.

The capitalist university not only creates lateral inequalities between disciplines but also vertical ones. As we have seen, cutting costs means employing armies of lecturers to do the teaching abdicated by a relatively shrinking labor aristocracy of tenure-track faculty. At a prestigious public university, tenure-track faculty create the symbolic capital of the university – the number of prominent scholars, Nobel Prize winners, as well as turning out outstanding graduate students. The tenure-track faculty are pampered with diminished teaching loads and off-scale salaries in order to keep up with Ivy League universities. The capitalist university creates an entrenched two-tier system – a lower caste of dedicated teachers and an upper caste of researchers. There is virtually no mobility between the two. In the short term, the interests of the tenure-track faculty lie in the multiplication of lecturers, but in the long term they suffer declining numbers. Graduate students, expecting to enter the ranks of tenure-track faculty, now face two tracks into the future (Burawoy and Johnson-Hanks 2018).

The Berkeley Faculty Association defends the idea of the public university, opposing privatization, the corporatization of the university, the commodification of knowledge. In practice this means we oppose economically irrational projects (public-private ventures, retrofitting the stadium, privileging athletics, campus shared services), the degradation of education through online education, and revenue-making credentials with limited content. It means we support diversity at all levels of the campus, defend shared governance, build alliances with unions of graduate student instructors (GSIs), lecturers, and staff. The BFA along with other University of California faculty associations has thrown its weight behind a plan to refinance higher education from increases in state taxation. Rather than pursuing the self-destructive strategies of privatization, we support the “\$66 fix” – \$66 being the extra tax a median income earner in California would pay in order to reset higher education to funding levels of the year 2000. This has the support of a wide range of unions and associations involved with higher education, though it has yet to win the broad support of California’s population or the political establishment that runs the state.

Legitimation Crisis

Accustomed to support from the state legislature as one of California’s symbols of progress, the university has experienced a slow downgrading for some fifty years. It is now one of many public agencies competing for a diminishing slice of the state budget. State funding per student has fallen steadily over the last fifty years at the same time that fees have increased. Here lies one material reason for the declining public support for the university. As student fees increase, as total costs of attendance increase at an even greater rate, and as the degree itself buys less lucrative, more precarious jobs, so many wonder whether university education is worth the increasing cost.

It may be necessary but not sufficient for an economically secure future. As college education has become part of an individual or family strategy to advance a person's career, so the university as a collective public good recedes into the background. The more families pay for their children's education, the less they want their taxes going to the same university.

To the public the university's claim to be in perpetual economic crisis seems bogus in the light of rising tuition but also in the light of the media attention given to scandals that have swirled around the university: sexual harassment by the high and mighty, bribing one's way into the university, misuse of funds by the Office of the President, increasing numbers of out-of-state and international students displacing Californians of equal or greater scholarly merit, exorbitant salaries of administrators, abysmal conditions of service employees receiving subminimum wages. Uninterested in its "international" prestige, Governor Jerry Brown wanted the university to mimic his favorite fast-food chain Chipotle Mexican Grill: the university should offer a low-cost fixed menu of courses. The public looks at the university through a different lens than its administrators and its faculty.

In one area, at least, the University of California has had some success in deepening its public character: namely, the broader access to the university, whether by class or by race. *The New York Times* annual listing of universities that are most effective at promoting social mobility regularly puts the University of California and its campuses at or near the top. At Berkeley from 2000 to 2020 first-generation students increased from 7 percent to 26 percent, and "under-represented minorities" (the university's category) increased from 13 percent to 20 percent (but African American students are still only 3.7 percent of the total). Berkeley has far fewer "under-represented minorities" than other campuses: Berkeley's figure of 20 percent compares to Riverside's 42 percent and at Merced, the newest campus, the figure is 60

percent. As Hamilton and Nielsen (2021) show, Riverside and Merced are also the less well-resourced campuses. More generally, as the number of students of color and students from poorer backgrounds have increased, the resources available for education have diminished and costs of attendance have increased – students are getting less but paying more (Samuels 2013).

In short, it is not enough to think only of access. We also need to think of what happens to students once they arrive on campus. The university needs to be accessible but also accountable, and not just to its students but also to communities outside the university. Reversing the legitimation crisis requires us to extend ourselves into the wider communities from which students come. It requires us to reconceive the place of the university in the wider society. Berkeley has made efforts in this direction, building programs of scholarly engagement, but they are poorly funded and marginal to the university's overall program. The university cannot survive as an ivory tower.

The Future

When COVID-19 struck, Berkeley, like other universities, was plunged into darkness and mounting deficits. The university was quick to understand on which side its bread was buttered. It could do without Nobel Prize winners, but not without students. As in-person teaching became impossible, administrators worried if students would be prepared to enroll for remote instruction, charging the same fees. Suddenly, teaching took priority and during the summer of 2020, there were endless websites, workshops, seminars on the “best practices” for remote instruction. The tables were turned: the inessential and taken for granted became the essential *raison d'être* of the university. As it happened, students came roaring back in the fall, only too happy to regain some order in their disjointed lives, even though it meant the disappearance of campus

life. An empty campus is still very costly. Berkeley posted an anticipated loss of \$340 million (about 15 percent of the annual budget) by the end of the 2020–2021 academic year – losses from dining, housing, entertainment, athletics, and other auxiliary ventures, as well as the extra costs of remote instruction. The question now haunts instruction as to what pressures will be brought to bear – and on whom – to continue online education, now that faculty and students have had to learn how to live with it.

As in so many sectors of society, COVID-19 is likely to be the catalyst of further polarization of an already steeply hierarchical system of higher education. Many colleges will not be able to recover from the accumulating losses and will disappear or descend toward a degraded vocational education so effectively described by Tressie McMillan Cottom in her book *Lower Ed* (2017). Already well-practiced in online education, for-profit colleges will have competitive advantages over traditional in-person education, which will be reserved for elite colleges and universities. Certainly the Ivy League universities will survive, but which of the public universities will also survive, and under what conditions, is less clear.

Polarization will not only affect the system as a whole, but for those that survive it is likely to divide the university itself, deepening trends already in motion. A burgeoning administrative structure will rule over the increased separation of teaching from research. As at Berkeley, so elsewhere, overworked and underpaid lecturers are slowly taking over teaching undergraduates while a labor aristocracy of tenure-track faculty spend more of their time doing research, working with diminishing numbers of graduate students, and supporting new “revenue streams.” Under this dispensation, one wonders how many students will devote six to ten years to obtain a PhD for the insecurity of contingent employment? So the lecturers themselves will diminish in quality. As research and teaching diverge, they may no longer take place under the same roof, as research migrates out of the university

into independent institutes and think tanks. The university will no longer offer subsidized research for the general good; instead, research will increasingly serve those who can pay for it.

Unless there is a counter-movement against the global reach of third-wave marketization, the same pressures for commodification will infect universities in all corners of the world. Indeed, the process is already far gone in many places, especially in poorer countries. Thus, my alma mater, the University of Zambia, is heavily in debt, bulging with some 20,000 fee-paying students taught by precariously employed instructors experiencing regular pay arrears – a far cry from the proud institution I knew in 1970–72. The larger and richer nations of the Global South, such as Brazil, South Africa, and India, are able to concentrate resources into one or two flagship national universities, while the rest become credentialing mills. The university has lost its symbolic status as a mark of progress and nationhood, allowed to decay in so many places, and restructured as a capitalist enterprise in others.

These are the dystopian tendencies that have overtaken the American university, but we should not forget the 1960s assault on the university came out of the blue. It was a protest movement inspired by the blatant injustices of the world beyond, injustices mirrored in the operation of the university. As I write we are still in the midst of the pandemic that has clarified the injustices of today, also mirrored in the university. It has become clear who is carrying the burden of the university, namely the very ones who are supposed to benefit from the university. Just as in 1964, so now it is difficult to imagine fundamental challenges to the ascendancy of the capitalist university. Still the university remains the one institution that, in principle, might be able to conceive of an alternative world, the one institution that can see and tackle the destructive forces that have overtaken the planet, the one institution that can nurture and make itself accountable to a universal, public interest.