

The Neoliberal University: Ascent of the Spiralists

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Michael Burawoy¹

University of California Berkeley, USA

Editor's Comment: This commentary outlines a process that began many years ago, devastating public institutions nationwide, especially those that serve poor and often predominantly minority urban communities. Rising tuition rates to make up for declining public sector support, increasing class size, a greater reliance on precarious employment of adjunct faculty, and administrations that take an ever greater share of an ever shrinking resource base all negatively impact students and stifles opportunity structures for those who need it most. The upshot is a growing divide between relatively rich institutions that reaffirm privilege, and those institutions that fail to do more than burden students with debt without providing the ability to fully participate in the current economy. UC Berkeley is important because it heretofore represented what was excellent about public education, in a state that has built the gold standard of a state-sponsored higher education system. If this is happening at Berkeley, one cannot imagine what has and continues to happen at less prestigious public institutions. At the same time, if this process can be challenged at Berkeley, it may point the way to resist and perhaps reverse these trends.

The UC Berkeley Chancellor Nicholas Dirks will resign. We now have to understand what happened and what lessons it holds for the future. Undoubtedly, he inherited a challenging fiscal situation, which was made more challenging by the deal struck between UC President Janet Napolitano and Gov. Jerry Brown. This was a year ago. Since then, Dirks has shown himself to be out of touch with the campus. There was the fence around his home, the cover-up of sexual harassment, the bungling of structural realignment, the athletics scandal and the escape hatch. From tragedy to farce.

These actions may appear idiosyncratic but they are part of a pattern that has its roots in the precipitous decline in public funding for the school. Over the last 30 years, the contribution from the state of California to UC Berkeley's budget has fallen from 50 percent to 13 percent, leading to an administration that is primarily focused on finance and giving rise to a new executive class. This class is full of spiralists — people who spiral in from outside, develop signature projects and then hope to spiral upward and onward, leaving the university behind to spiral down. Typical is former vice chancellor for administration and finance John Wilton, who came in from the World Bank, spent five years here promoting online education and then departed for other pastures. Our chancellor is a naive spiralist, which is why he crash landed rather than moving up. The president of the university is an experienced spiralist, but even her image has been tarnished.

Spiralists enter the university from the outside with little knowledge of its inner workings. They don't trust the local administration and instead cultivate, promote and protect each other through mutual recruitment, at the same time boosting their corporate-level incomes and contributing to

administrative bloat. At UC Berkeley, senior managers have increased five-fold over the last 20 years, rising to 1,256 in 2014, almost equal to the number of faculty, which has barely increased over the same period (from 1,257 to 1,300). While the number of faculty has remained stagnant, student enrollment has increased by 20 percent.

Coming from the outside and concerned more about their future, spiralists are in the business of promoting their image — Dirks employed a firm to do just that at a cost of \$200,000 to campus. Branding takes priority over ethics. This last year we have witnessed the cover up of sexual harassment by prominent faculty and administrators and the exoneration of punitive football coaching that led to the death of a football player and a \$4.75 million civil suit — all designed to protect the Berkeley brand.

Repeating ad nauseum their commitment to the public university, spiralists show themselves to be first and foremost loyal to their private lifestyle, even to the point of misusing public funds. Dirks is accused of deploying university staff as personal servants. He surrounded his campus residence with a \$700,000 fence, a material and symbolic statement of his relation to the community. Public in talk, private in action.

Spiralists indulge in conspicuous investment — signature projects that enhance their reputation to facilitate moving on while saddling the university with debt. Dirks' pet project was the Richmond Global Campus, which has now been shelved. The previous regime, under Chancellor Robert Birgeneau, concocted the \$445 million stadium debacle that contributes \$18 million a year to our debt — projected to rise to \$37 million a year by 2044.

The original spiralists are corporate executives, so it is not surprising that the university's executive class indulges in corporatist emulation. Birgeneau called in expensive business consultants to design new models of efficiency such as Berkeley's "Operation Excellence" that is neither operational nor excellent. Its signature project, Campus Shared Services, was designed to increase efficiency but brought such inefficiency and soaring costs that it had to be replaced after only three years.

These misadventures of spiralists are to be found not just at Berkeley but at many other public universities. At UC Davis, just a week before Dirks' resignation, Chancellor Linda Katehi resigned after revelations of her involvement on corporate boards, image fabrication and signature projects. Spiralism is not a function of pathological individuals but of an executive class who conceive of themselves as visionary innovators with new financial models, traversing the globe in search of private investors while complaining about recalcitrant legislatures and conservative faculty. They blame everyone but themselves for the plight of the university.

It is not surprising that the state Legislature is reluctant to fund a public university run by such profligate executives. It is not surprising that there is pressure from the Legislature to circumvent the UC Board of Regents whose members, with a few exceptions, endorse the executive class. It is not surprising that the Legislature no longer trusts UC Berkeley to look after its own affairs.

Like a fish, our school rots from the head down. Therefore, it must be transformed from the top, starting with the chief spiralist who earns over \$500,000 plus perks. The next chancellor's salary should be capped at that of the California governor (around \$200,000) or in a fixed ratio to the lowest paid worker (e.g. 10 to 1). This may not solve Berkeley's \$150 million annual structural deficit, but it would be a symbolic move to cultivate some badly needed legitimacy in the legislature and beyond. It could also help curb spiralism, at least locally, and lead to the recruitment of a chancellor committed to leading rather than exploiting the university.

Note

1. Michael Burawoy teaches sociology, and is also the co-chair of the Berkeley Faculty Association. These comments originally appeared in <http://www.dailycal.org/2016/08/22/campus-change-top-down/>