



Academe under siege and the atrophy of today's universities

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review of

Docherty, T. (2015) *Universities at war*. London: Sage. (HB, pp xi + 146, £45.00, ISBN 978-1-4739-0778-2)

[T]he marketization of knowledge is one of the world's greatest threats to democracy. [33].

The abrogation of academic freedom

In January 2014, a professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of Warwick was suspended by members of its senior administration. Amongst the charges laid against him justifying the suspension were allegations of 'inappropriate sighing', 'making ironic comments', and 'projecting negative body language' (Gardner, 2014) – behaviors which were said to undermine the authority of, who was then, the professor's head of department. To say that these charges appear specious – even if wholly true (which we are not necessarily conceding) – would be a gross understatement. Indeed, hypothetically speaking, under any set of institutional conditions in which these behaviors would offer sufficient grounds for suspension or termination of employment, many academics, if not most, would have been legitimately removed from their appointments at some point during their careers. Certainly, academic faculty members critical of the university or otherwise critical of the decisions made by its leaders, would have had their positions disposed of using nebulous accusations of giving off 'negative vibes', as was the professor in question

(Gardner, 2014). It would not require too great a leap of faith to argue that such institutional conditions would propagate a Draconian environment in which academic freedom was more a pipedream than reality, and where academics' survivability in universities and the ability to serve the desires of senior administration would become conflated as one and the same.

The professor who we describe above is Thomas Docherty, a long standing researcher and critic of the prevailing higher education system. In an ironic coincidence, Docherty completed and published his latest book on the subject, *Universities at war*, during the height of the controversy. In the preface to the text, Docherty recalls some of the challenges that he encountered as a consequence of his suspension:

The final research and writing of this book were carried out under awkward circumstances – while I was suspended from my position at the University of Warwick. During the period of suspension (almost a full year as I write, today, 23 July 2014), I have been supported by family, colleagues and friends. When I was initially suspended, I was told that I was to have no contact with colleagues and students and that, if I did, then such contact would be regarded as actionable under disciplinary procedures that could lead to my summary dismissal from employment. [x]

In what would be a prophetic twist of fate, many of the dynamics of contemporary universities that Docherty criticizes in the book would materialize in his own case.

Universities at war

Universities at war is organized into four substantive chapters along with a preceding introduction. The book ultimately seeks to illuminate the 'war on [...] the future of the university as an institution' [1]. Each of the chapters is dedicated to a particular theme, though collectively they are intended to forewarn readers of the consequences that would be the outcome of acquiescing to some of the current trends in the higher education sector. To flesh out, and to give veracity to, the myriad claims offered in the book concerning the decline of the university, Docherty seamlessly invokes relevant and insightful examples from literature. As such, we found *Universities at war* to not only present an incisive critique of today's universities but, in so doing, to also engage an important conversation that is posited at the interface between the humanities and the social sciences.

Chapter 1 interrogates the nexus between force and the university. Docherty takes his analytical departure from the assumption that, 'the university institution, as a force within civil society, has been systematically diminished' [23]. Working from

this claim, he endeavors to demonstrate the destabilization of the normative equilibrium in society caused by the steady negation of the 'force' traditionally held by the university. This negation, for Docherty, paradoxically comes part and parcel with the university authority's utilization of formal state powers – increasingly in the form of campus and city police and, less pervasively, the military – to 'quash protest, dissent or criticism' [27]. Under such oppressive conditions, far from having critical thinking – once the very hallmark of the university – celebrated, it is castigated. In the process, the university is transformed into a tool that functions to maintain rather than subvert society's existing inequalities. As Docherty identifies, 'in this *coup*, the university has become an instrument for advancing and furthering inequalities of wealth, presenting such inequalities as "natural", and thereby disqualifying anything critical of such positions as "unnatural"' [39]. In sum, Docherty concludes that '[m]oney talks, citizens don't' [41], and explains how this phenomenon is only exalted by the university.

Chapter 2 points to the emergence of an uncritical mode of education, which is described as 'an activity that delivers the past tradition and simply hands it down' [53]. Through this mode of education, students are led to conformism, due to education being treated as private property. Docherty critiques what he calls 'the cult of managerialism' [61], which entails constant surveillance and depriving people of personal and professional authority; a phenomenon that ultimately leads to the establishment of compliant students and faculty bodies. Within this purview, students are considered customers, and are to become the working capital of efficiency striving enterprises. This perspective effectively christens the discourse that 'getting a degree' is more important than 'getting the time to think'; a form of instrumentality that, in the process, reduces degrees to nothing more than 'passports to wealth' [67]. Docherty further brings attention to 'massive online open courses' (MOOCs) and to the 'speed-efficiency opportunity-cost model' [67] it represents. He claims that 'the prioritization of speed yields an efficiency whose effect is to evacuate the university of thought and to transform it [...] to be a mere initiation rite through which one enters the hallowed realm of personal wealth acquisition' [67]. Docherty concludes this chapter by inviting readers to imagine the benefits and the possibilities to society that a university system that is grounded in social obligations holds, as opposed to one in which care towards others is an irrelevant or an incidental consideration. Indeed, Docherty considers the university as 'the site where friendship, love and neighbourliness are all made possible' [74].

Chapter 3 commences by questioning the notion of universities 'producing' graduates, asserting 'universities claim that is they who "produce" graduates, and not the graduates who produce themselves and their own autonomous lives' [76].

These graduates go on to become ‘branded goods’ who tend to be highly competitive and individualistic in a global race of wealth acquisition, prompting important ethical questions unless ‘one subscribes to an ideology designed to justify increased disparities of wealth or life-chances’ [79]. This phenomenon has only been exacerbated by the fact that the burgeoning cost of university tuition has come hand in hand with the systematic reduction in funding for the arts, the humanities, and the social sciences – areas of study not considered relevant for the promotion of the state. This adds to Docherty’s claim that students have become only ‘human capital’, reducing the function of university to that of ‘preparation for jobs and not for life’ [85]. Moreover, he extends his critique to the current trend for quantification of quality empowered by ‘the tyranny of number, an abstract entity of measurement that substitutes measure itself for truth’ [104]. Docherty observes that universities have come to normalize inequality, not only when related to access to the institution, but in the social sphere where mobility is not desired. Put differently, education becomes a privilege of the few who can afford it and allows for inequality to prevail. Emphasis is placed on the fact that the university is not a market place but ‘a mode of being together, of seeking communities and forging shared futures [...] immune from measurement, but open to questions of quality’ [105]. While the pursuit of knowledge should be the main ambition for those in the university sector, this aspiration is, alarmingly, becoming less and less common.

Chapter 4 is introduced with an interesting juxtaposition between government and university governance. In comparing these two sectors, Docherty claims that they share some level of institutional affinity – ‘the thing that has to be governed [in both arenas], above all is the tongue’ [107]. Much akin to how members of a political party must toe the official party line, so too must academic staff confer loyalty to the brand of the university that senior administration has constructed and reified. It is, indeed, the reification of brand loyalty, as the undergirding ideology of the university, which has salient implications for the institution and, by extension, society. At the very least, Docherty observes that a system based on brand loyalty – or, more tersely, the unitary narrative of the governing oligarchy – engenders, ‘reduction in free speech [and] democratic participation’ [114]. Within such an institutional arrangement, ‘the model academic is she or he who carries the brand; our speech has to be “approved” in the conformist fashion’ [131]. Docherty presages that if academics who genuinely care about the university – as not only the site of research and teaching but also the quintessential space of social inquiry – remain silent about current trends, it might transform into yet another institution that seeks to maintain the status quo and, specifically, the social, political and economic inequalities that prevail in society (Fotaki and Prasad, 2015).

Implications for Business Schools (and Beyond)

Docherty's text poses important implications for several ongoing discourses emanating in business schools. Indeed, academics have been increasingly reflexive and critical of the dynamics that have emerged within contemporary business schools. For instance, questions concerning its relevance (Dennis and O'Toole, 2005), the nature of the institutional pressures within them (Butler and Spoelstra, 2012; Tourish, 2011; Willmott, 2011), and the implications that such pressures have on the most junior members of the academy (Prasad, 2013; 2015; 2016) have been raised. *Universities at war* helps frame some of these debates by positing them within a broader discourse that considers the disturbing state of the university system today. It reveals, for example, how the regime of accountability through rankings comes at the detriment to: i) the traditional value of the university in society as the vanguard for social inquiry, and, ii) the systematic atrophy of academic freedom.

The suspension of Thomas Docherty by an established research university should be a cause for grave concern to the entire academic community. Unfortunately, however, this case is not an isolated event; it represents, instead, a disconcerting trend in higher education. In addition to the fact that a growing number of universities use contingent labor to deliver more than half of its teaching (Edmonds, 2015), even conventionally secure academic contracts, in the form of tenured or continuing appointments, are being subjected to attack. Indeed, the cases of Norman Finkelstein at DePaul University and Steven Salaita at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, poignantly reveal how the steady erosion of academic freedom is occurring alongside – and is, perhaps more aptly, the corollary of – the burgeoning corporatization of the university. If only for shedding light on these timely subjects, *Universities at war* merits being read widely. It may be best to conclude this review by returning to Docherty's reflection on the steadfast abrogation of the university in the last several decades: 'This is *politically and pedagogically* unacceptable to anyone who has a serious interest in the proper activities of a university' [124].

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