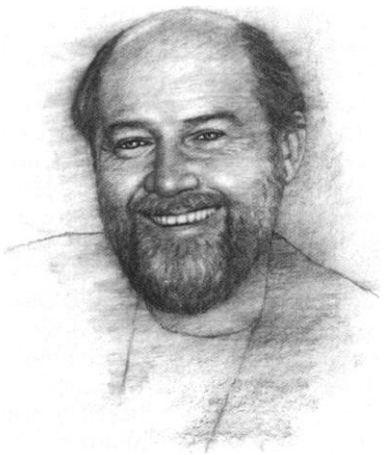
ESSAYS ON SCIENCE AND SOCIETY

Privatizing the University—the New Tragedy of the Commons



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In recent years, we have all watched the increasing commercialization of the campus. The numerous advertising posters and the golden arches of fast food outlets may be an affront to our aesthetic sensibilities, but they are, arguably, no worse than ugly. Some of the other new features of commercialized campus life do, however, constitute a serious threat to things we rightly revere. "Privatization" and the "business model" are the potential menace.

What do these notions mean? To me, they involve an increased dependence on industry and philanthropy for operating the university; an increased amount of our resources being directed to applied or so-called practical subjects, both in teaching and in research; a proprietary treatment of research results, with the commercial interest in secrecy overriding the public's interest in free, shared knowledge; and an attempt to run the university more like a business that treats industry and students as clients and ourselves as service providers with something to sell. We pay increasing attention to the immediate needs and demands of our "customers" and, as the old saw goes, "the customer is always right."

Privatization is particularly frightening from the point of view of public well-being. A researcher employed by a university-affiliated hospital in Canada, working under contract with a pharmaceutical company, made public her findings that a particular drug was harmful. This violated the terms of her contract, and so she was fired. Her dismissal caused a scandal, and she was subsequently reinstated. The university and hospital in question are now working out something akin to tenure for hospital-based researchers and guidelines for contracts, so that more public disclosure of privately funded research will become possible. This is a rare victory and a small step in the right direction, but the general trend is the other way. Thanks to profit-driven private funding, researchers are not only forced to keep valuable information secret, they are often contractually obliged to keep discovered dangers to public health under wraps, too. Of course, we must not be too naïve about this. Governments can unwisely insist on secrecy, too, as did the British Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries, and Food in the work they funded in connection with the bovine spongiform encephalopathy epidemic. This prevented others from reviewing the relevant data and pointing out that problems were more serious than government was letting on.

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A recent study* found that more than one-third of recently published articles produced by University of Massachusetts scientists had one or more authors who stood to make money from the results they were reporting. That is, they were patent holders, or had some relationship, for example, as board members, to a company that would exploit the results. The financial interests of these authors were not mentioned in the publications.* If patents are needed to protect public knowledge from private claims, then simply have the publicly funded patent holders put their patents in the public domain or charge no fee for use.

In another case, financial institutions donated a very large sum to a Canadian university economics department to study "the effects of high taxation on productivity." The results may influence government policy. In such cases, the public and its political decision-makers get information only of a certain kind, because there is no private, well-funded foundation called The Consortium of Single Mothers on Welfare that bestows similar massive funding to discover the effects of poverty on the development of children. Public policy decisions should be based on a variety of sources of information, but the privatization of research means that one point of view—guess who's?—will tend to prevail. Publicly funded science, though far from perfectly serving all interests, has at least a chance of serving more.

Even philanthropic groups can and sometimes do skew research and teaching. The Templeton Foundation, for example, offers awards to those who offer courses on science and religion.† I teach such a course myself and feel the temptation to seek one of their awards. It seems innocent enough; after all, I am already teaching the course and they are not telling me what I have to believe. Moreover, they will put $5000 in my pocket and give another $5000 to my chronically underfunded department. Everybody wins, so why say no?

There are several reasons. First, it skews the curriculum. A department might well offer a Templeton-type course because they need the money, when what their students need is a regular philosophy of religion or philosophy of science course (perhaps offering both in alternate years).

Second, although the Templeton Foundation does not prohibit atheists from winning their awards, they do insist that a certain type of literature be covered, namely, literature that sympathetically explores the science-religion connection. Top scientists

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*S. Shulman, *Owning the Future* (Houghton Mifflin, New York, 1999).

†In North America, these awards come through the Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences in Berkeley, California.

‡For more on the theme of efficiency in relation to public policy, see J. Heath, *The Efficient Society* (Penguin, Toronto, in press).

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are overwhelmingly nonbelievers, yet the material in a typical Templeton course gives the students the misleading impression that science and religion are in nearly perfect harmony and disagreements are merely over details. Sound pedagogy is sacrificed, thanks to privately controlled funding.

Third, it is a degrading step down a slippery slope. If religious foundations can fund science and religion courses, then why can racist foundations not fund race and IQ courses? (They already fund racist research.) Even if they do not tell us what the course content must be, their courses give respectability and credence to views which merit neither. (It is a naïve educator who believes that students may be presented with rival views and then be left to make up their own minds.) Philanthropy without strings is an unqualified blessing. But when it comes with its own axe to grind, then we had better say no.

To raise funds, many universities have instituted a system of matching grants. If an endowed chair costs, say, $2 million to fund, a donor perhaps need only give $1 million, and the university will provide the rest. But where do these matching funds come from? Usually every university department loses a bit of its budget in order to build up a pool. Do they get it back in the form of an endowed chair? Some do and some do not. The relatively applied and the headline-grabbing fields do rather well on this scheme, but the so-called pure sciences and especially the humanities are being decimated. A matching-funds scheme takes decision-making out of the hands of academics and gives it to donors. We may think that our limited resources should go to, say, Byzantine history or evolutionary biology, but applied research is more likely to be popular with donors who are now empowered by the matching grants procedure to redirect our limited funds.

We are also asked to prepare our students more directly with the skills needed in the business world. Training in the pure sciences and humanities is taken to be obviously impractical. The government of Ontario, for instance, surveyed recent university graduates with an eye to "skills matching." The survey asked to what extent one's education provided the skills used and needed on the job. Dentists reported a 98% match, computer scientists reported 95%, and engineers reported 91%, whereas those in the humanities that their education matched the needed job skills only to 55%. I suppose an intimate knowledge of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* does not help decision-making in investment banking. But if we look for specific skills, we miss the real utility of a liberal arts education: the development of general analytic and writing abilities. It is these general skills that make those educated in the liberal arts so valuable to industry, to government, and to the larger community. It is a very shortsighted society that would eliminate this in favor of more applied education.

Selling out?

"University research must be funded overwhelmingly from the public purse. And the public...must own the results"

When Derek Bok was president of Harvard, he warned that strong leadership would be needed to protect our research goals from the eroding effects of commercial concerns. He was right to sound the alarm, it will take a great deal more than strong leadership in the university. It will require massive government protection and promotion of public knowledge. Patent laws, for instance, must not allow the privatization of the public good. University research must be funded overwhelmingly from the public purse. And the public—rather than corporations or individual scientists (or even secretive governments)—must own the results.

To achieve this, regular academics must take up the cudgels. If they make an organized and concerted effort, academics could bring the current trend to a crashing halt. What can we do?

At the individual level, we can refuse to do contract research that requires nondisclosure and insist on keeping knowledge public. At the university level, we can put pressure on our leading administrators (who will sometimes welcome the support, since they, too, are deeply concerned) to take decision-making power out of the hands of private interests, corporate or philanthropic. At the political level, we can pressure government leaders to keep research and education as part of the public good.

It is easy to fall into ideological debate on this issue, with one side upholding public knowledge for the sake of social justice and the other insisting on the value of private initiative and the need to financially reward it. However, there is a better way to view this cluster of issues, namely, in terms of efficiency.‡ The United States is unique among industrialized countries in not having a national health system. Health care is overwhelmingly private and largely in the hands of insurance companies. The cost is approaching 15% of the U.S. gross domestic product, and more than one-quarter of the population is not covered. By contrast, Canada (like most other industrialized countries) has universal coverage at a cost of under 9% of gross domestic product. Aside from the cost, it is hard to compare the relative quality of the health-care systems, but one statistic is revealing: Cancer patients in Canada live an average of 14 months longer from the time of detection than those in the United States.

The superiority of public health care is manifestly obvious; it is vastly more efficient, at least when properly funded, which it is currently not in Britain. Although there are disanalogies with research and education, a public health-care system can nevertheless serve as a model for how best to proceed. Why pay royalties to pharmaceutical companies when public research is more efficient? It's cheaper, safer, and better in every way.

Profit-driven medical research in the United States is topnotch. Is it the huge profits that make it so? Pure mathematical research in the United States is also topnotch, but publicly funded. No one could make a penny from Wiles' proof of Fermat's Last Theorem. Scientists need good salaries and the necessary resources, and they need to have their efforts appreciated. That is more than enough motivation for brilliant, effective science.

I do not for a moment believe we should be living in an ivory tower, indifferent to the world outside. The question is to whom we should be accountable—to use a favorite term of privatizers. The answer is simple: the public. We owe it to them to keep knowledge free for all.

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