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Class, Politics, and Higher Education: *Universities and the Capitalist State* Thirty Years On
Clyde W. Barrow, Isaac Kamola, and Heather Steffen

Abstract

*This conversation between Clyde W. Barrow, Isaac Kamola, and Heather Steffen uses the thirty-year anniversary of *Universities and the Capitalist State* as an opportunity to examine various transformations in academic labor. This discussion investigates how Barrow's book, an early contribution to the field of critical university studies, not only demonstrates how universities are political institutions but also explores the limitations and possibilities of this critique of academic labor for contemporary political organizing within and against the corporate and neoliberal university.*

This interview with Clyde W. Barrow took place over Zoom during the peak of the pandemic (September 1 and 10, 2020), as an opportunity to recognize the thirty-year anniversary of the publication of *Universities and the Capitalist State: Corporate Liberalism and the Reconstruction of American Higher Education, 1894–1928* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1990). Drawing upon extensive archival research, Barrow's book examines the profound transformation of the American university as economic power centralized in the hands of corporate capitalists during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Barrow demonstrates, for example, how representatives of national corporations made a concerted effort to replace the clergy, farmers, and local business leaders who populated boards of trustees at most academic institutions. These changes ushered in an era of intensive scientific management within American higher

education, with philanthropic organizations playing a significant role in remaking higher education in the interests of corporate capital. Barrow's book has been widely read as a classic in Marxist state theory and one of the earliest contributions to the field of critical university studies.

Kamola: How did you come to write *Universities and the Capitalist State*? What motivated you to study the early US research university?

Barrow: The book began as an exercise in the sociology of knowledge, as my dissertation, titled *Intellectuals in the American Social Structure*. I had taken an entire seminar on Karl Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia* and became fascinated by Mannheim's argument that all claims to objectivity, political neutrality, and value-free social science rested on the claim that intellectuals are a relatively autonomous strata, unattached to any particular social class. And, as a consequence, they could achieve a higher level of objectivity than, say, a class ideologist like Karl Marx. But the whole sociological foundation of that argument was based on Mannheim's claim that the university was an autonomous institution separate from and above the rest of society. My goal was to write a critique of the epistemological claims that supported the concept of a value-free social science.

I was trying to write an epistemological treatise where I tested whether that [autonomy] is actually the reality of the American university. My goal was to document that, in fact, intellectuals were and always had been participants in a class struggle, that we were either allies or opponents of a capitalist class or allies or opponents of a working class. More interesting for me was that to the degree that you could conceptualize intellectuals as a stratum organized through the university, we were effectively engaged in our own class struggle over control of the university, particularly at the turn of the last century, when business trustees became very active in their efforts to assert control over the university and to restructure it.

I wanted to reconceptualize the university as a political institution.

Steffen: What do you mean when you say the university is a political institution?

Barrow: I mean two things. First, universities are institutions of the state. Something like 75 percent of students attend public universities. They are public corporations, incorporated by the state, owned by the state, regulated and governed by the state. They are part of the state. Period. To use the term *ideological state apparatus* doesn't even strike me as controversial. Even private institutions now derive the majority of their funding from government. So universities are state institutions, and in that respect they're political institutions.

Second, universities are political because they provoke fights and squabbles about control of resources, access to resources, control of facilities. We engage in politics at the university all the time, although most of our colleagues probably don't like to think of it as politics. Political decisions are being made that have implications beyond the university, depending on who wins those political conflicts within the university.

When I submitted the manuscript of *Universities and the Capitalist State* to publishers, everybody said, "Well, you know, nobody is really interested in the sociology of intellectuals. You need to reframe this some other way." I realized I had used Althusser's concept of an ideological state apparatus, and so I began to reframe it in terms of a contribution to the state theory debates that were going on at that time. I thought of using the university as a case study to challenge the kind of abstract state theory that we'd been getting up to that time. If you want to talk about the development of a state and the role of a state, then actually look at a state or at least a piece of the state, which the university is.

Steffen: When you were researching the book, how did you view the existing histories of the university by scholars like Laurence Veysey, Walter Metzger, and Frederick Rudolph? How did you feel like you were engaging with those big narratives about the early twentieth-century university?

Barrow: I wish I could go back and insert this into the book's introduction, to make clear the way in which I was engaging with those metanarratives of higher education, because I was directly engaged with them.

I would suggest that there were about four sets of higher education literature that I was attempting to engage, but I wasn't as clear theoretically as I should have been.

When I started the research, I read over two hundred histories of individual institutions of higher education that ran the gamut from histories that were basically just picture books to hagiographies of this great president and wonderful donors. Now and then I would find a snippet of politics in there. Somebody would get fired, some legislator would get upset. There was politics there, but you really had to dig out these nuggets to challenge the official histories of higher institutions, which, again, present universities as completely apolitical.

The second, on the grander scale, was engaging with people like Lawrence Veysey, Frederick Rudolph, and John Brubacher. I was really going after Veysey's very Weberian account of the university. Basically, he describes a process of bureaucratization in the twentieth century that he views as inexorable, as irreversible. As the size and scale of the modern university grew, it had to bureaucratize. But that story continues this narrative of autonomy, claiming that the development of the university is driven by its own internal mechanisms and processes. When I read that, I said, corporatization has links to the external development of the capitalist economy which he really doesn't talk about.

The third set, as you also mentioned, was Richard Hofstadter and Walter Metzger's *The Development of Academic Freedom in the United States* (1955). That's the book that really irritates me the most, because it's a good, accurate chronology, but it should have been titled *The Development of Academic Repression in the United States*. It's nothing but a litany of failures, of people who were driven out of higher education, blacklisted, repressed. There's not a single instance of anybody being reinstated in a job or having their job protected. In fact, they make the argument that the only people who really ever got fired didn't get fired for ideology; it was

because they were difficult personalities, like Thorstein Veblen. They psychologize the explanation when in fact, clearly, there must have been some difficult conservatives on faculty somewhere, but they weren't getting fired. So I wanted to rewrite that narrative in the last two chapters to say that, no, this was political, it was ideological, and we need to read it as such.

The last set of literature was on foundations, like Raymond Fosdick on the General Education Board and Merle Curti and Roderick Nash's *Philanthropy in the Shaping of American Higher Education* (1965), which again were basically hagiographies to rehabilitate the image of Rockefeller and Carnegie and all the good they had done building laboratories and medical schools. They didn't capture the broader corporate liberal movement—that the US needed to be transformed from a country with a capitalist economy into a capitalist society. What that meant, drawing on, say, Habermas, was the subordination of every sphere of the life-world to the imperatives of economic efficiency and profit. The university being one case study of that process.

Steffen: What do you think is *Universities and the Capitalist State's* lasting impact?

Barrow: One of the more gratifying things is that a lot of young historians, and educational historians in particular, have picked up on those little snippets I pulled out of the individual institutional histories and news archives when I was talking about World War I and the first red scare. So it's pleasing to me to know that others are picking up on those cases because they have access to the local archival resources that I didn't have access to at the time. Similarly, I'm really pleased by the fact that so many scholars have picked up on Morris Cooke's *Academic and Industrial Efficiency* (1910) and now cite it regularly or mention it as a cornerstone of the corporate university.

However, I wish the impact had been for professors to start thinking of themselves in class terms, as political actors in a political institution. I'm not so sure how much of that has taken place in the last thirty years, but that certainly would have been the hope when I published it.

Steffen: What kind of significant changes do you think have taken place in higher education and academic labor since *Universities* came out thirty years ago?

Barrow: Boy, have things changed a lot! One change is that corporatization has penetrated deeper and deeper into the university to generate a level of micromanagement of faculty activity that would have been unthinkable thirty years ago. It would not have been tolerated by faculty. Down to the State of Texas micromanaging the structure and content of our syllabi. The corporatization is much deeper. It's not abstract. To use Max Weber's term, it's an iron cage and the door has been closed and locked.

Steffen: How do you understand corporatization, especially in relation to neoliberalization?

Barrow: Well, *corporatization* is the adoption of corporate organization and corporate accounting standards of efficiency in terms of how the university operates. I think *neoliberalism* or *neoliberalization* applies more to the idea of the monetization and marketization of what the university produces. You could have a corporate university that's not neoliberal. I suspect the Soviet universities were very corporate.

Corporatization often includes the profoundly expansive rise of professional staff at universities and the parcellation of faculty labor. We used to advise students. We don't do that now; we have advising centers. We used to do our own budget management if we had a grant. Now we have a grants office. A lot of what faculty do has just been sliced off, sliced off, sliced off—and, I would argue, with our willing cooperation to be relieved of these responsibilities. With that has come these massive bureaucracies of professional staff, non-PhDs, nonacademics. And they have increasingly managed to accumulate power in the university to the point that universities are now not run by senior administrators. They're run by staff, and it is a constant source of frustration and conflict.

We're sold a bill of goods about bureaucratization as efficiency but none of it is efficient. It costs far more. In fact, I would invoke an old book, *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (1974) by Harry Braverman, on the transformations of the labor process in factories in the early twentieth century. He documents, in meticulous detail, that none of these corporate strategies of bureaucratized labor actually increased productivity or profit. It was about political control. Managers were willing to sacrifice efficiency in order to get control. That's what we're seeing. Neoliberals, members of the capitalist class, their political allies, the state legislatures, are frustrated by the fact that faculty always find ways to evade their techniques. For example, we have a requirement in Texas to teach principles of free enterprise. I'll gladly teach principles of free enterprise, but it's not going to be Milton Friedman. So they're looking for ways to absolutely control what comes out of your mouth. And that's where this bureaucratization and corporatization are really reaching the level of controlling your neurons.

Kamola: Today, faculty often experience a deep existential fear, both an economic fear and a fear of being on the receiving end of manufactured right-wing outrage.

Barrow: Yes. That's actually a point I did address in the book that I think nobody picks up on. I called it "terror without violence." You put somebody's name in the paper. You spread rumors about them. You create bad publicity around them. Now, all of a sudden, your friends aren't your friends anymore. All of a sudden, your colleagues are afraid to be around you or come to your defense. It's an incredibly powerful way of fragmenting the Left in academia. It has worked more than once. Only it's better organized this time.

Kamola: This becomes especially true as academics are also expected to be more public-facing. Universities like the idea of civic engagement but are often unwilling to support faculty when the rubber hits the road. The

recent example of Garrett Felber at University of Mississippi being a case in point.

Barrow: Going back to *Universities and the Capitalist State*, one of the primary points I made in my argument was you could be as radical as you wanted to be as long as you were inside the university and only talking to other academics. But when you translated that off campus into political action? That's where they started to crack down on people.

I have a lot of personal experience with that as a director of the Center for Policy Analysis (CPA). They want you to publicly engage, until you say something that offends a corporate or political elite, and then they're not prepared to step up and defend that. When I was director of the CPA, we reached a level where I could pick up the phone and talk to the Speaker of the House, call a reporter at the *Boston Globe*, or talk to the mayor. The center ended up not only having public visibility; we had an independent source of political power, an independent source of media credibility. We could convey information about the university that wasn't controlled by the administration. At the end of the day, that terrified them. They were scared to death of that.

Steffen: In light of all this, what do you think has changed or evolved in the *critique* of the university and of academic labor conditions in the last thirty years? In my view, the force identified as the cause of the crisis in higher education has changed, but the broad strokes of the anticorporate critique have remained relatively stable. We've moved from corporatization to neoliberalism. And now we're moving to a critique more centered on racial capitalism, white supremacy, or systemic injustice.

Barrow: In some ways, my problem is that the critique hasn't changed in a hundred years, and we're stuck in a rut. How many times can you keep repeating the same thing over and over again?

Kamola: I think the emphasis on the relationship between the university and slavery is a really important development. Craig Wilder's book *Ebony and Ivy* (2013) fundamentally shifted the ways I look at the academy, and opened up a lot of space for further inquiry. Teaching the university by studying my school—a small liberal arts school in New England once tied to the Episcopal Church—and drawing out the connections between the slave trade and the institution itself is not just new information but opens up a different kind of theoretical move, one that makes it possible to look at one's own institution fundamentally differently. Does it provide a political response to the threats of corporatization and neoliberalization? I don't know.

Barrow: I wonder, though, what are the mechanisms for distributing all this to the rest of the faculty? There is now a very rich critique of the university that has developed over the last hundred years, and the last thirty years in particular, but it just doesn't seem to penetrate the day-to-day lives of the faculty.

Steffen: So we're saying both that the faculty already know this stuff and also that the critique isn't motivating people to action.

Barrow: I'm not sure the faculty do know this stuff. I honestly am always dumbfounded by the levels of ignorance among faculty about the organization and operations of their own institutions. They live in a world where they show up, they teach their class, maybe they do some research, and they go home. They just don't view themselves as part of an organization that has a structure, that has a politics.

Steffen: So, here's the big question. What is to be done?

Barrow: I'm encouraged by the talk of free higher education for all, student-debt forgiveness, and those kinds of things. It's the first time since the sixties that higher education has been part of the national political discussion. So that's encouraging.

Within the university, I think that what's happened is the exact same thing that has happened with the rest of the state apparatus, which is the financialization of decision-making. Instead of the financial division being there to implement the goals of the academic division, the academic division has been subordinated to the imperatives of the financial division, which is about collecting revenue. When I was at the Center for Policy Analysis, they would always say, "Why don't you hire a budget officer?" And I said, because the minute I give up control of the budget, I give up control of everything. Faculty need to get their noses down into these books and learn how to read a budget and how to manage a budget. Because if you don't control the money, you don't control anything.

Clyde W. Barrow received his PhD in political science from the University of California, Los Angeles, in 1984 and taught at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth (1987–2014), where he founded the Center for Policy Analysis. He is currently chair of the Department of Political Science at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (2014–present). Barrow's most recent books are The Entrepreneurial Intellectual in the Corporate University (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017) and The Dangerous Class: The Concept of the Lumpenproletariat (University of Michigan Press, 2020). Isaac Kamola is an associate professor of political science at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut. He is author of Free Speech and Koch Money: Manufacturing a Campus Culture War (with Ralph Wilson, Pluto, 2021) and Making the World Global: US Universities and the Production of the Global Imaginary (Duke University Press, 2019). Heather Steffen is an affiliated scholar at the Center for Cultural Analysis at Rutgers University. Her research examines the changing contours of academic labor. Her most recent article is "Imagining Academic Labor in the US University" (New Literary History 51, no. 1 [2020]).