

The Feudal Culture of the Postmodern University

by Alan Wolfe

The corporation is downsizing and going international. Government is being reinvented, even disinvented. Unions are disappearing. Churches are turning themselves into spiritual shopping malls, offering something for everyone. The family has fractured or recombined. Radical change is the order of the day in the life of American institutions—except in academia. While other institutions tangle with whirlwinds, the university seems to be sailing along, impervious to the forces buffeting the rest of society. The institution run by and for a group that has been dubbed the “tenured radicals” may be the most conservative institution in American society.

The last revolution to hit the American university was the one that brought the faculty to power half a century and more ago. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, note sociologists Christopher Jencks and David Riesman in *The Academic Revolution*, professors were pitted against university presidents and trustees in assorted campus battles over such matters as “the shape of the curriculum, the content of particular courses, or the use of particular books. The professors . . . lost most of the publicized battles, but they won the war.” Their victory was sealed in the aftermath of World War II by the rapid growth of federal research grants, which made faculty members independent revenue raisers.

As the faculty took control, they established their own criteria for how higher

education would operate: academic institutions would be meritocratic, national, secular, and professional. (The modern university, Jencks and Riesman add, also played a powerful role in spreading the meritocratic idea through the rest of American society.) Despite student protests, controversies over race-based admissions, efforts to rethink the role of religion in the public sphere, the tax revolt, and the shrinkage of the middle class, faculty control of the university has remained remarkably intact since Jencks and Riesman wrote their book.

To be sure, the higher education landscape is far from uniform. Faculty control varies with the status of the institution. Elite universities—the Ivies, the California Institute of Technology, Stanford, a few state universities, and about two dozen others—have little in common with Anne Arundel Community College, Hamline University, or Oklahoma Baptist University. When faculty members can make good on a threat to move elsewhere if their demands are ignored, they have considerably more power than when state legislators regard them as public employees little different from file clerks.

Some 833,000 people teach full or part-time at American institutions of higher learning, but only a minority enjoy the privilege of controlling their professional lives. Burton R. Clark, a higher education specialist at the University of California, Los Angeles, estimates in *Higher Learning in*



William Hogarth's *Scholars at a Lecture* (1736)

America that more than two-thirds of all professors teach in non-doctorate-granting institutions, including community colleges.

Still, at the top research universities virtually all challengers have withdrawn from the competition for control. Students, despite occasional flare-ups over political correctness and other matters, are politically quiescent, although one can hear rumblings around minority concerns. Trustees have demonstrated little interest in reasserting their authority. They believe that their obligation is to choose a president, give him or her occasional advice and money, and avoid “micromanagement” at all costs. Presidents, in the words

of Donald Kennedy, who held that post at Stanford University from 1980 to '92, “are running for office every day.” Needing to please everyone, they have scant incentive to confront faculty power, he notes in *Higher Education Under Fire*. The administration oversees admissions and erects buildings; the faculty retain authority over everything else that matters to them—tenure decisions, teaching loads, the lot.

Critics of the university have no doubt that faculty control is directly responsible for the institution's ills. During the 1960s, conservatives defended higher education against the attacks of the New Left. Now they delight in barbed criticism. Charles Sykes's *ProfScam* sums up the conservative

indictment. Professors are ripping off everyone else. They should teach more. Their English should be understandable. Their research should be less esoteric. They ought to spend more time with undergraduates. They should be in their offices more often. It is absurd that they get off one year in seven for sabbaticals. They should keep their politics out of the classroom and their hands off their students. (Yes, Sykes has three pages on sexual harassment, and they are charged with righteous feminist indignation.) “Almost single-handedly,” he declares, “the professors—working steadily and systematically—have destroyed the university as a center of learning and have desolated higher education.”

Many of Sykes’s complaints are echoed in *Impostors in the Temple* by Martin Anderson, an economist and former Reagan administration official who is now a Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution. He is especially fond of the word *corruption*. Professors are politically corrupt because they do not like Republicans. They are personally corrupt because they engage in hanky-panky with students. Administrators are corrupt because they exaggerate overhead costs and build expensive football facilities.

Conservatives are equally clear about who is responsible for the decline of the canon and what they see as the general degradation of the curriculum. Reviewing Stanford’s controversial decision in the spring of 1988 to drop a Western culture course requirement attacked as racist—Jesse Jackson joined a crowd chanting, “Hey hey, ho ho, Western culture’s got to go”—critic Roger Kimball writes in *Tenured Radicals* that “the faculty was, in the end, to blame for the demise of the Western culture course at Stanford.”

Even the speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives has weighed in. “Campuses are run for the benefit of the faculty, not the students,” declares ex-professor Newt Gingrich. “College and university faculties have developed a game in which

they have lots of petty power with very little accountability.”

If the Right attacks, the Left must perforce defend. During the 1960s, the Left attacked the “multiversity” for its “irrelevance” and its impersonal “processing” of students. Now listen to Cary Nelson and Michael Bérubé, the editors of *Higher Education under Fire* and self-described “loyal, card carrying” leftists who teach English at the University of Illinois. Those mass lecture courses, once the target of the Left’s criticism, now “have their place even in the humanities.” As for criticisms of the esoteric theory so popular in English departments, “the public does not understand that knowledge in the humanities must be produced as well as transmitted.” Faculty stagnation? Nelson and Bérubé do admit—unlike some of their colleagues—that something is wrong. But they insist that it “is not the same thing as the so-called ‘deadwood’ problem.”

In the same volume, Ernest Benjamin, general secretary of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), the professional organization of the American professoriate, brushes off several other challenges to the status quo. “Elimination of tenure . . . will not increase the number of available positions,” he writes. “Nor can we improve teaching by increasing teaching loads.”

The university’s defenders believe that the public has been fed inaccurate ideas about what goes on within its walls. The task is not to change the institution, writes AAUP president Linda Ray Platt, a professor of English at the University of Nebraska and another contributor to the Nelson and Bérubé book, but to “develop a new narrative of our own and find ways to carry it to the public.”

The university’s critics and defenders are both at least partly right. As Nelson and Bérubé suggest, there is nothing inherently wrong with the idea that faculty have a responsibility to uncover new knowledge and to convey the results of their

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Books discussed in this essay

Charles W. Anderson, *Prescribing the Life of the Mind: An Essay on the Purpose of the University, the Aims of Liberal Education, the Competence of Citizens, and the Cultivation of Practical Reason* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1993).

Martin Anderson, *Impostors in the Temple: American Intellectuals are Destroying Our Universities and Cheating Our Students of Their Future* (Simon and Schuster, 1992)

Michael Bérubé and Cary Nelson, eds., *Higher Education Under Fire: Politics, Economics and the Crisis of the Humanities* (Routledge, 1995)

Ernest L. Boyer, *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate* (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1990)

David W. Breneman, *Liberal Arts Colleges: Thriving, Surviving, or Endangered* (Brookings Institution, 1994)

Jonathan R. Cole, Elinor G. Barber, and Stephen R. Graubard, eds., *The Research University in a Time of Discontent* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994)

David Damrosch, *We Scholars: Changing the Culture of the University* (Harvard University Press, 1995)

Julius Getman, *In the Company of Scholars: The Struggle for the Soul of Higher Education* (University of Texas Press, 1992)

Newt Gingrich, *To Renew America* (Harper Collins, 1995)

Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History*. (University of Chicago Press, 1987)

Russell Jacoby, *Dogmatic Wisdom: How the Culture Wars Divert Education and Distract America* (Doubleday, 1994)

Christopher Jencks and David Riesman, *The Academic Revolution* (Doubleday, 1968)

Roger Kimball, *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education* (Harper and Row, 1990)

Arthur Levine, ed., *Higher Learning in America: 1980–2000* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993)

George Levine, Peter Brooks, Jonathan Culler, Marjorie Garber, E. Ann Kaplan, and Catharine R. Stimpson, *Speaking for the Humanities* (American Council of Learned Societies, Occasional Paper No. 7, 1989)

Charles Sykes, *ProfScam: Professors and the Demise of Higher Education* (Regnery Gateway, 1988)

findings to those few others who work at the margins of the knowable, even if the price is scholarship that is difficult for a lay person to understand. Students, especially motivated students interested in exploring uncharted territory, benefit when scholars undertake such work. Nor is there anything wrong in theory with the notion that the responsibility of uncovering new knowledge gives academics a greater stake in governing themselves than most other groups in American society have.

Yet precisely because academics have special obligations, their failure to govern

themselves *well* is special cause for concern. If we look at how faculties actually do act, as opposed to how they ought to, the Left's defense reveals as many weaknesses as the Right's attack.

Exactly which new "narrative" about what's actually occurring on campus, one wants to ask Linda Ray Platt, should be offered the public? Surely not the one given by one of her predecessors at the AAUP, University of Texas law professor Julius Getman. His account of faculty conduct in *In the Company of Scholars* is highly unflattering, and all the more damning

because Getman loves the academic life and has a clear-eyed appreciation of its promise. "Debate at faculty meetings," he writes, "often resembles one-on-one schoolyard basketball more than it does serious academic discussion." The gravest responsibilities seem to elicit the worst behavior. "On almost all faculties," Getman says, "the most competitive, emotion-laden, acrimonious, lengthy, and pretentious debates are about faculty appointments."

The problem, in short, is not that professors are free to run their own affairs. It is that they do so badly. Self-governance ought to encourage responsibility, but in practice self-governance often becomes nongovernance. Professors use the language of academic freedom to rationalize their inability to make hard decisions, take unpopular actions, or police their own conduct.

II.

Two features of the American research university help explain the failures of faculty self-governance. The first is its highly decentralized structure. In *The Research University in a Time of Discontent*, Steven Muller, former president of Johns Hopkins University, calls this the "holding company governance" model. All units of the university—including the colleges and individual departments—are treated, as college presidents like to say, as tubs on their own bottom. This structure is a product of the rise of the financially autonomous professional schools in law, medicine, and engineering. In the swollen and ungovernable "mega-sized" research university, each division comes to resemble the professional school: it taps into a market, provides a service, and charges what the market will bear. Under this arrangement, Muller points out, the arts and sciences are no longer at the center of the university, either financially or intellectually. In fact, nothing is.

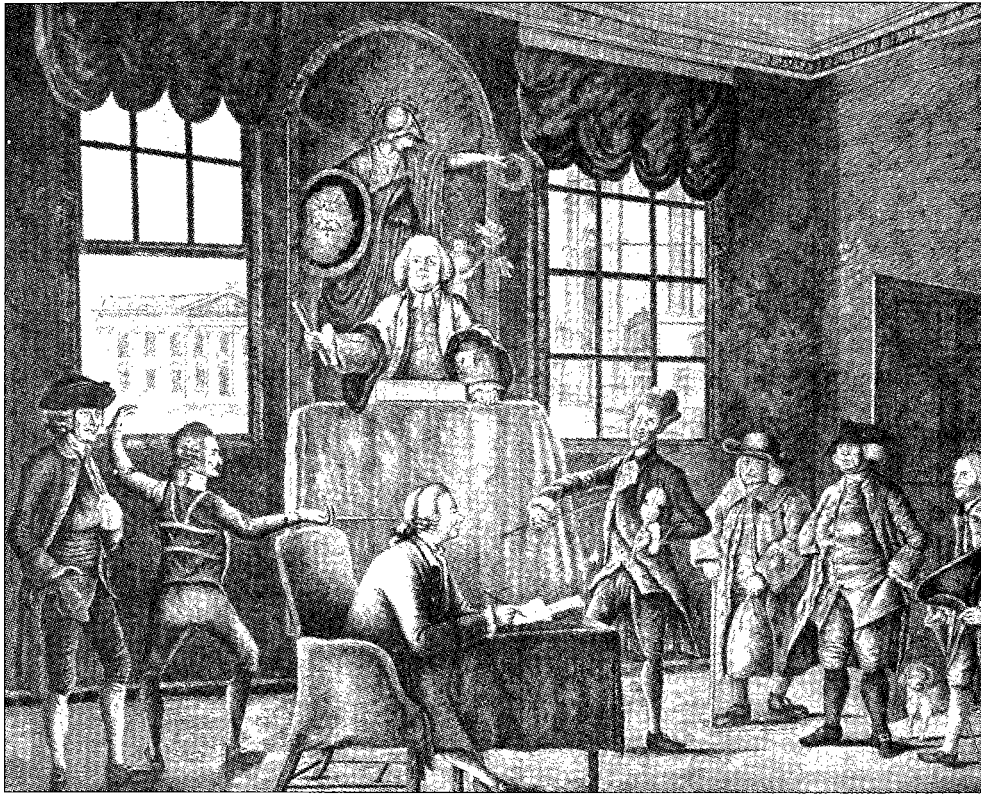
So organized, the university is not an entity with a common purpose, or at least organized around a system-defining core. It is a set of linked fiefdoms that find temporary advantage in belonging to a larger organization. Charles Anderson, a political sci-

entist at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, rightly says that it ought to be the purpose of the university "to prescribe a program for the life of the mind." But that is not the purpose of the university today. It is not too much to say that the late-20th-century university, as a corporate entity, has no purpose.

Even the fiefdoms that operate within it have limited power. Authority is concentrated not in the units of the system but in the hands of individuals. *Bureaucracy* is a word students frequently spit at the university, but as David Damrosch, a professor of English and comparative literature at Columbia University, points out in *We Scholars*, it is anything but that. A bureaucracy is rationally organized from top to bottom. In the university—in Columbia's case a \$1 billion enterprise—there is little power at the top, among the trustees and president, and even less among vice presidents, deans, and other middle managers. The very things they are expected to manage, such as the costs of hiring faculty or the rationale for the curriculum, are largely beyond their control.

Even departments, which organize the curriculum and hire the faculty, rarely operate as independent centers of authority. Authority flows all the way down to the professors, each of whom acts as an individual entrepreneur. Each chooses his own research agenda, develops his own teaching schedule, plans his own day, and decides his own level of involvement with the management of his institution.

This does not necessarily result in a lean central administration. At most universities, the administration has expanded greatly, in part to produce reports demanded by the federal government, but also because an antibureaucracy requires more, not fewer, checks and oversights from the center, particularly on students. Anarchy at the bottom is linked to autocracy at the top. Presidents try to gather power where they may. Damrosch quotes a study of the college presidency, *Leadership and Ambiguity*, which concludes that "the latent absurdity of being the executive leader of an organization that does not know what it is doing haunts the presiden-



Bunbury of Clare's A School of Athens, after T. Orde (1773)

tial role." Presidents fill their schedules with "frequent reminders of the fact that one is the president, the attention to minor things one *can* do."

Besides decentralization, the second distinctive feature of university organization is tenure—a privilege enjoyed by about two-thirds of full-time academics in the United States. The product of a long struggle to protect academic freedom, tenure in the form we know it—a seven-year apprenticeship, formal rules of candidacy, faculty origination of the case—was not solidly established until 1940. Tenure assumes an inevitable clash between the profane concerns of ordinary life (money, influence, political interests, getting by) and the sacred nature of intellectual inquiry. It operates on the theory that society needs the ideas that academics produce but cannot trust itself to allow academics to produce them.

Rather than enter into the separate debates over decentralization and tenure, it pays to consider how the two work at cross-purposes. Take a system organized as a series of turfs designed to maximize self-

interest, then add job protection for life, and the result can hardly help but be perverse. It has produced a faculty culture shaped not by anything like the "postmodernism" so vigorously championed in the university's humanities departments but by distinctly premodern norms and codes of behavior. The postmodern university has a feudal faculty culture, a system based on the principle of protecting the autonomy of independent guilds, surrounded by a consensus to do nothing lest the entire structure collapse.

There are other institutions that offer tenure. The civil service comes to mind. But civil service bureaucracies are just that: bureaucracies. There is job security, but there is also direction from the top and clear lines of authority. Other institutions combine decentralization and self-interested individualism. Mutual fund managers work for investment companies but operate within them as individual entrepreneurs. The modern corporation in general is rapidly copying this model. But such organizations have nothing resembling tenure. Only the prestigious research university

combines systems in which individuals have maximum freedom to shape their work *and* freedom from the ultimate consequence of bad decisions: unemployment.

Tenure works only when academics subordinate their self-interest to something else: the callings of their profession, the collective purposes of the university, the detailed work of actual self-governance. They never actually acted that way, to be sure, but when universities were smaller and more purposeful they at least kept such ideals in mind. Now that self-interest has become paramount, tenure becomes not a protection of academic freedom but an economic arrangement designed to limit competition—of both people and ideas.

Operating in a feudal organizational system, academics are quick to adopt a feudal code of conduct. Charles Anderson describes it succinctly: "If each leaves the other alone, then we can all do as we please." Every college, every department, every *individual*, is a fiefdom. This is not, despite what some critics say, a "laissez faire" system. In that kind of system, individuals (or organizations) are concerned with what others do, obsessively so; they know that if a competitor offers a better, cheaper product than they do, they may go under. The operating rules of the university resemble a Mafia "honor" code more than a regime of laissez-faire: it's best not to inquire too deeply into anyone else's activities. If I ask the purpose of what you are doing, you will ask the same of me, and before long the rationale for the entire enterprise will begin to crumble.

III.

Once we appreciate that the culture of the university is more feudal than capitalist, two features that draw the ire of critics—specialization and tenure—appear in a new light.

Specialization is the *bête noire* of the university's conservative critics. This was as true in the 1950s and '60s, when Jacques Barzun and William Arrowsmith led the charge, as it is now, when Charles Sykes ridicules obscure article titles ("Evolution of the Potholder: From Technology to Popular Art") in scholarly journals.

It is not only conservatives who are exasperated by academic specialization. David Damrosch hearkens back to the idea of general education, "that last bastion of generalism, of which a healthy core curriculum should be the centerpiece." During the 1920s and '30s, the University of Chicago and Columbia University were swept by a "great books" movement that aimed to offer undergraduate students a common introduction to the world's great ideas. It was not only students whose lives were changed by such courses. At Columbia, literary critic Lionel Trilling began writing about Freud and Marx (and all manner of other things beyond the normal purview of an English professor) because he taught them to undergraduates. "The triumph of specialization during the past several decades," Damrosch writes, "has almost entirely eliminated such figures from the university."

Now, he concludes, general education, much praised in theory, is avoided in practice. Today's professors tend to see themselves more as members of their specialized discipline than of their university or even their department. The professional life of a professor of political science specializing in Indian politics, for example, has very little to do with anything that occurs on his or her campus. Such a professor writes for journals read by fellow specialists at other institutions, attends important conferences and professional meetings far from home, and seeks recognition from a community of scholars whose community is an intellectual rather than a geographical reality. Although paid by their universities, such specialists are essentially self-employed. Asked to choose between a time-consuming local service and a disciplinary obligation, they invariably choose the latter.

The triumph of specialization, the critics agree, works to the neglect of teaching. It represents the victory of graduate culture over undergraduate culture. Students (and their families) dig themselves into a dry well of tuition debt only to find themselves instructed by overworked graduate students while globe-trotting professors travel to professional conferences. And untenured assistant professors are poorly prepared for teaching. It would be an exaggeration to say that good teaching is punished in the uni-

The Making of the Megaversity

Before the 20th century, higher education was dominated by conservative colleges founded on religious principles and devoted chiefly to undergraduate instruction. In The Academic Revolution (1968), Harvard sociologists Christopher Jencks and David Riesman described its transformation.

The rise of the university has been gradual rather than sudden. The first Ph.D. was awarded in 1861 by Yale. Cornell opened in 1868 with Andrew White as president. Charles Eliot was inaugurated as president of Harvard in 1869. Yet it was not until the 1880s that anything like a modern university really took shape in America. Perhaps the most important breakthroughs were the founding of Johns Hopkins and Clark as primarily graduate universities. Eliot's success in instituting the elective system at Harvard was also important, both in its own right and because it facilitated the assemblage of a more scholarly and specialized faculty.

The 1890s saw further progress, with the founding of Chicago, the reform of Columbia, and the tentative acceptance of graduate work as an important activity in the leading state universities. This was also the period when national learned societies and journals were founded and when knowledge was broken up into its present departmental categories ("physics," "biology," "history," "philosophy," and so forth), with the department emerging as the basic unit of academic administration. Medicine and law also became serious subjects of graduate study at this time, with Johns Hopkins leading the way in medicine and Harvard in law.

By World War I, two dozen major universities had emerged, and while the number has grown slightly since then, the changes have been slow. These universities have long been remarkably similar in what they encourage and value. They turn out Ph.D.s who, despite conspicuous exceptions, mostly have quite similar ideas about what their discipline covers, how it should be taught, and how its frontiers should be advanced. (This does not mean that there are no differences of opinion on these matters within the academic profession. It means only that when contrasted with trustees, administrators, parents, students, or the present authors, the outlook of Ph.D.s in a given discipline seems quite uniform.)

These men were not only likeminded at the outset, but they have established machinery for remaining like-minded. National and regional meetings for each academic discipline and subdiscipline are now annual affairs, national journals publish work in every specialized subject, and an informal national system of job placement and replacement has come into existence. The result is that large numbers of Ph.D.s now regard themselves almost as independent professionals like doctors or lawyers, responsible primarily to themselves and their colleagues rather than their employers, and committed to the advancement of knowledge rather than of any particular institution. . . .

These attitudes were greatly strengthened by World War II and its aftermath. Not only in the Manhattan Project but in other less glamorous ones, academic scientists helped contribute to the war effort, and for this and other reasons a dramatic increase in federal support for academic research ensued. . . . Unlike previous support for universities, these federal grants and contracts are for all practical purposes given to individual scholars or groups of scholars rather than to the institution where they happen to work. More often than not, if a man moves to a new institution his federal grants are transferred too. . . . The result has been further to enhance the status of the academician, who is now a prime fund raiser for his institution.

Since the amount of research support has grown much faster than the number of competent researchers, talented men have been in very short supply and command rapidly rising salaries. They are also increasingly free to set their own working conditions. The result has been a rapid decline in teaching loads for productive scholars, an increase in the ratio of graduate to undergraduate students at the institutions where scholars are concentrated, the gradual elimination of unscholarly undergraduates from these institutions, and the parallel elimination of unscholarly faculty.

versity, but it would not be going too far to say that when instructors devote a great deal of time and attention to preparing for classes their colleagues wonder if they aren't fleeing the demands of scholarship.

The critics also charge that specialization, by forcing institutions to offer competitive salaries and other inducements to attract specialists, drives up costs.

The imperatives of specialization flow from the priority given to research. As David W. Breneman, dean of the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia, writes in *Liberal Arts Colleges*, these forces are powerfully felt even at the nation's better liberal arts colleges, which, although they number only about 200 and account for only 260,000 enrollments (two percent of the total) have always defined a certain ideal of higher education.

At top colleges such as Williams and Amherst, teaching is still emphasized, but faculty publication at levels approximating those of the research university is expected. (To their credit, such institutions often try to reward types of publication more compatible with their teaching mission: books rather than specialized articles, literary works, even efforts that achieve what, in the eyes of university specialists, is the cardinal sin: popularity.) Such standards are required to attract the best scholarly talent. The top colleges also have to assume, moreover, that they will lose some of their outstanding junior faculty to the elite universities.

The effects of this arrangement trickle down to other institutions. Colleges just below the top 25, such as Skidmore or Franklin & Marshall, feel compelled to stay in the competition to recruit the best graduate students to their faculties. That means they have to pay for labs, leaves of absence, libraries, and other trappings of a research institution. Costs rise. (Tuition at the colleges is already in the neighborhood of \$15,000 to \$20,000.) And as Breneman notes, the likely shrinkage of the Ph.D. pool in the years ahead does not augur well for a slowdown.

Conservative critics of the university have also linked specialization to what they regard as the politicization of the academy. It is relatively easy, they point out, to trans-

late left-wing political complaints into an academic specialty. Feminist theory, gay and lesbian studies, and what is actually called subaltern studies (a form of postcolonial studies, which involves the examination of literature and everyday life in former European colonies) are now departments and programs at many universities, not just bodies of ideas. And once such programs are established, the conventions of academic life demand that no one scrutinize them too carefully.

Overall, the case against academic specialization is strong, but I for one do not fully buy into it. Yes, there are people who write meaningless, jargon-filled articles for no other purpose than to advance their careers. But the quality of work being done overall in the American university is far higher now than it was in, say, the 1950s. There may be fewer historians writing for a general audience, but there are many better works of history. Academic philosophy can generate technical treatises devoid of common sense, but it can also produce John Rawls's magisterial *Theory of Justice* (1971). My own field, sociology, no longer has a C. Wright Mills, but, to take just the subject of race, it has Christopher Jencks, William Julius Wilson, Elijah Anderson, Orlando Patterson, and Douglas Massey—not bad scholarship by anyone's standards.

An academic world with less specialization would be worse than anything that exists today. Some inkling of what it might look like is provided by Ernest Boyer in *Scholarship Reconsidered*. Boyer, president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, argues for a broader conception of scholarship, embracing such things as "the scholarship of application" (applied work) and "the scholarship of teaching" (knowledge of pedagogy and communication of results) as well as the "scholarship of discovery" (specialized research).

Yet teaching is teaching and scholarship is scholarship; calling one the other sounds like one of those therapeutically inspired ways of enhancing the self-esteem of those who find themselves somewhere else than at the top. Let colleges and universities reward teaching if they want, but let them call it teaching.

One crucial aspect of “the scholarship of discovery” distinguishes it from all the ersatz forms of scholarship advocated by Boyer: it is harder to do. That does not necessarily make it good, but it does make it different. Specialized research plays a crucial role in decision making about tenure and promotion for the same reason that SAT scores play a role in college admissions; it stands there, an unambiguous reality, clearly differentiating some from others. A record of books and articles deemed worthy of publication by one’s peers may not be a perfect indicator of merit, but it is a tangible accomplishment. As long as some universities seek to distinguish the more accomplished from the rest, an emphasis on scholarly publication will be inevitable.

If the case against specialization itself is weak, the case against some of the forces driving it is very strong. What really stirs critics is not so much the pursuit of esoteric research in itself as the assumption of those who engage in it that they should be allowed to do whatever they want, whenever they want.

Alas, that argument is frequently heard, and nowhere more aggressively than among the postmodernists who have made such a comfortable home in the premodern university. Russell Jacoby’s *Dogmatic Wisdom*, for example, contains a catalogue of self-incriminating statements by leftist academics. Historian Joan W. Scott, of the Institute for Advanced Study, and English professor Judith Frank, of Amherst College, declare that their immersion in theory gives them access to knowledge that is simply beyond the comprehension of what Scott calls “marginal intellectuals,” let alone ordinary people.

A less impolitic expression of the same point of view comes from the six eminent authors of *Speaking for the Humanities*—a response to critics such as Lynne Cheney, former head of the National Endowment for the Humanities, sponsored by the American Council of Learned Societies. Unlike David Damrosch, these writers do not mourn the disappearance of broad-ranging academic intellectuals such as Lionel Trilling. To the contrary, they take the view that “belle lettrists” and advocates of the “gentlemanly

ideal” have no standing to contest the “competence of the best scholars in the humanities today,” which is “remarkable.” Humanistic thought “must be free to pursue questions as far as possible without knowing what general use or relevance the answers might prove to have,” they write, as they “assert the value not just of specialization but of professionalization also.”

The addition of that word “professionalization” is significant. In *Professing Literature*, his history of the English department, Gerald Graff argues that professionals are not those who have the best ideas but those who win temporary control over the way English is taught. We have our own institutions now, the defenders of professionalism seem to be saying, and we don’t want you, the non-professionals, to interfere with them.

Five of the six authors of *Speaking for the Humanities* were directors of academic centers for the humanities when they wrote their report. Not surprisingly, they conclude that the existence of such centers “answers most directly to negative criticisms and most fully expresses the range and importance of the humanities.” Like the academic Left, they confuse the genuine need for specialization with the spurious effort to protect the institutions and practices of faculty privilege.

Academics are deluding themselves if they think that they can have autonomy without accountability. The privileged always live at the sufferance of others. Faculty status is a privilege; the salaries may not be great (although they are not bad), but tenure alone can, in an uncertain economy, be priceless. And the sheer joy of being able to explore ideas is a privilege as rarely given as it is exercised. To suggest that no one has the right to poke into the business of such a privileged group is a remarkably insensitive slap in the face—and a stupid one at that. Consumers have a right to be furious.

And they are making themselves heard. Even as debate continues, it is clear that the high point of specialization is already in the past. (And it is important to note that only a minority of academics, mostly at the prestige institutions, undertake specialized research.)

Especially at the universities most dependent on tuition revenues, pressures for a renewed emphasis on teaching are building. Administrators have begun to sponsor centers for teaching excellence. Core curricula are making a comeback. The State University of New York at Stony Brook has taken out ads in the *New York Times* trumpeting its renewed focus on teaching. There is even talk, and even at research-oriented universities, of the need for departments to hire “public intellectuals,” academics who speak to a broader audience.

In areas where they have some leeway—for example, in filling endowed chairs standing outside departments—university presidents now tend to search for generalists, not specialists, academics whose name recognition among the general public will draw students.

It would be a shame if consumer anger,

properly addressed at the faculty’s demand for complete autonomy, were to spill over into a campaign against academic specialization. Taxpayers and consumers might, if talked to seriously, come to understand why specialized research is important. But they will never be persuaded of what is patently untrue—that the university should be organized on the principle that faculty have some special status that renders them immune from public scrutiny and criticism.

IV.

If consumers are angry about specialization, academic administrators worry about tenure. Their concern has a very practical edge. In 1993 Congress refused to renew higher education’s exemption from the abolition of mandatory retirement rules, raising the prospect of a faculty full of tenured and aging professors, with little or no turnover. Tenure has been abolished at some institutions and is under attack by state legislators. If the opinion pages of the academics’ trade publication, the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, are any guide, even some tenured faculty have concluded that the whole system has become little more than an excuse for irresponsibly self-interested behavior.

The reform of tenure will take much longer, and will be far more difficult, than the reform of specialization. The move back toward general education and an emphasis on teaching is made possible by the fact that consumers have as much power in this realm as faculty. But tenure is kept in place, at least in the elite universities, by the fact that no self-respecting academic “star” would accept a position without it. An institution seeking to remain in



Frontispiece to the “Humours of Oxford” (1730) by G. Vandergucht, after engraving by William Hogarth

the first rank will have no choice but to offer it. What can and must be changed is the way in which tenure is awarded.

When academics choose who will join them for life, they have to ask questions about what others are doing that faculty culture normally forbids. People who rarely can be bothered to comment on what others teach or know are suddenly called on to determine whether another person will enjoy absolute job security until she dies. A jump of this magnitude is bound to leave everyone a little dizzy. Academics could respond with thoughtful self-reflection, strict adherence to their own standards, and responsibility to their institution and their vocation. Unfortunately, they don't.

Occasionally, when a candidate who has been rejected claims that he has been the victim of politics, sexism, or some other form of bias, a tenure fight spills into public view. But the larger scandal is that rejection is exceedingly rare.

Tenure decisions today are shaped by one overriding paradox. Scarce goods usually command higher prices, but as tenured slots have become more valuable, faculty members have become more willing to give them away. During the 1950s and '60s, when tenured posts were plentiful, academics were more likely to say no to candidates. Today they are more likely to say yes. At the University of Massachusetts, 96 percent of those recommended for tenure between 1990 and '93 received it, a fact brought to light when the trustees caused an uproar last summer by actually saying no to three candidates. (Saying no, in the culture of academe, does not necessarily mean losing one's job; they can come up again.) UMass is not typical. At the main campus at Amherst, 86 percent of the faculty are tenured, compared to a nationwide average of 65 percent. Still, the proportion of academics with tenure is creeping up.

Why don't the elementary laws of supply and demand apply? Part of the reason is that many of those making tenure decisions are products of the 1960s who hold values that make it almost impossible to say no.

To claim that one person merits tenure while another does not suggests that there are standards, a position many academics deny in their writings. The 1960s also taught that individuals count more than institutions. Nobody wants to ask if granting tenure to a person will serve the institution's interest. It's easier to ask simply, "Has the candidate done enough to warrant it?"

Most important of all, however, academics generally do not like the market, and tenure allows them to avoid a market in faculty talent. The seven-year apprenticeship rule brings individuals along under a paternalistic system. They are subject to frequent loyalty tests, ritual baptisms, and other rites of the academic way of life. At the end of the apprenticeship at least this much can be said about the candidate: we know her. Having spent seven years with another person does not guarantee that she will be an acceptable colleague for life, but compared to selecting someone we do not know at all, the gamble may be worth taking.

Faculty are more comfortable cultivating someone from within because the relationships thus produced are more feudalistic than capitalistic. This is not a system in which institutions bid for the best talent. Having participated in tenure decisions at three institutions over the course of more than three decades, I have heard the word *fit* much more often than the word *merit*.

True, outside opinions are sought. As few as 10 and as many as 20 scholars in the candidate's field will be asked for their views on his academic qualifications. But since academics tend to favor tenure abroad as well as at home, in most of their letters they bend over backward to find words of praise for the candidate. Surely he would be tenured at my own institution, says the expert from an Ivy League university. His reputation is worldwide, his book a work of great significance. He would easily be ranked among the very top people in his field, without question. No one believes such hyperbole, but no one is expected to. The general rule is: say something positive or say nothing at all.

There is one interesting exception to the tenure-for-all tendency: it is far more common to say no to senior “stars” being recruited (often under pressure from administrators) from other universities than to candidates from within. Outside recruitment comes about as close to a market in talent as the academic world can—which is no doubt why faculty are so suspicious of it. The rules governing academic success are the obverse of capitalist values: the more one has published, the more vulnerable one is to attack; the better one is connected, the greater the likelihood that one has enemies; the more one has succeeded in attracting grant money, the greater the anxieties of the grantless. Some departments deal with the market issue by simply refusing to hire any senior people.

One can detect inside academia the beginnings of an effort to reform, if not eliminate, tenure. A study by the American Association of Higher Education exploring the post-tenure review of faculty members and the highly (and negatively) publicized efforts by the board of Bennington College in 1994 to replace faculty who had “presumptive” tenure (long service but no formal job security) are just two examples. Tenure is, in fact, quite vulnerable. Whatever its attractions (especially to those who have it), no one should have as much power as those who hand out job security for life—and no one should have as little power as those who seek it. It is difficult to imagine that tenure as we know it can continue: at the very least, tenured faculty will find themselves having to justify to everyone else why they should have job security when no one else does.

Does all this mean that tenure should be abolished? Not necessarily. What is untenable is a system in which faculty want the power to determine who joins them but not the responsibility of passing judgment. Change that aspect of faculty

culture, and tenure will likely remain. Keep the current culture, however, and tenure will (and should) be doomed.

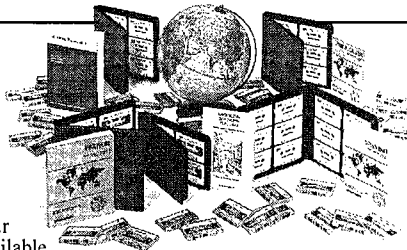
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All institutions have cultures. Just a few years ago, it was common to speak of corporate cultures—the ways in which, say, the paternalism of IBM differed from the youthful entrepreneurialism of Apple. Anthropologists tell us that cultures come in strong and weak forms. Some societies are so deeply stamped by a particular culture that when a colonial power arrives, its culture is changed more than that of the occupied. Other cultures are so weak that the moment they come into contact with foreign ideas, they disappear.

Although corporations have more power in America than universities, the culture of the university is stronger than corporate cultures. Once the market turned against it, the paternalistic ethos of IBM did not last long. Faculty culture is, for better and for worse, far more durable. Regardless of field, irrespective of geography, independent of academic status—the mere fact of being a faculty member predisposes an individual to think and act in particular ways. Faculty culture trumps every other kind of culture: no matter what the original country, gender, or ethnicity of an academic, once someone becomes a member of a faculty, that person is irrevocably stamped as a member of his profession.

This culture’s imperviousness to change owes much to faculty’s suspicion of the market, which is the major agent of change in modern society, and to their ability to resist it through the maintenance of a feudal order. Yet feudalism did finally go under. So, one feels confident to predict, will the feudal culture of the postmodern university. The question facing the American university is not whether it will change, but how—whether professors will reform themselves or be reformed by forces beyond their control.

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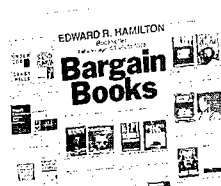
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