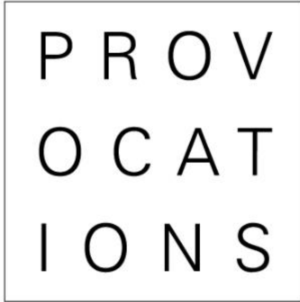

University Control or, Conditions and Tendencies

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In 1913, the third volume of a three-volume book series called Science and Education was published by The Science Press of New York. Titled *University Control*, it was edited by James McKeen Cattell, who at the time was head of the Department of Psychology, Anthropology, and Philosophy at Columbia University, President of the American Psychological Association, and longtime editor of the journal *Science*.[1] The book wasn't about science, wasn't even a scholarly tome; instead, it was the first collection of what was known at the time as the literature of "professors' protest." Consisting of a sixty-page essay by the editor, a collection of unsigned letters from faculty at eighteen different universities, and ten signed articles, the book is concerned with what Cattell calls in his preface "the autocratic system of administration which has developed in our universities," and adds up to "a protest against conditions and tendencies, the existence of which can not be denied and should not be concealed."[2] These conditions and tendencies, identified even then as coming from the world of the corporation, are protested not simply to protect the rights of professors but because, in Cattell's words, "The university should be a democracy of scholars serving the larger democracy of which it is part."[3]

For his trouble, Cattell got canned. He had participated in the founding of the AAUP, had famously been a thorn in the side of the Columbia administration for years, and had nearly been fired more than once by president Nicholas Murray Butler and the board. While it was his opposition to WWI and the draft that was the ostensible cause for his dismissal in 1917, as Carol Signer Gruber's 1972 revisiting of the case in the *AAUP Bulletin* makes clear, Cattell's opposition to the way things were done in university administration, expressed on his campus and in *University Control*, was a key factor.[4] Examined today, over a hundred years later, Cattell's case highlights a key tension present in the struggle begun at the rise of the modern university to address the effect of autocratic administrations as well as outside political and business interference on academic freedom and other central aspects of higher education: the tension between, on the one hand, attention to incidents involving infringements on the academic freedom of individual faculty members and, on the other, attention to the structural issues of the kind Cattell highlighted. This tension is visible in the founding year of the

AAUP, during which the organization insisted that it was more concerned with the latter, but was quickly dragged into working on the former. The tension can be seen in its two major accomplishments in 1915: the issuing of its *Declaration of Principles on Academic Freedom and Academic Tenure* and its first censure, of the University of Utah for its dismissal of multiple faculty members without just cause.

The study of the structures and conditions that give rise to these individual incidents and other deformations of higher education has been taken up by many in higher education, including those professionally trained in the study of higher education and those trained in other disciplines who are drawn to this kind of work by observation and experience. (The latter group has been especially busy of late—one imagines because there has been so much to observe and experience in the last three decades—especially since the economic crash of 2008 and possibly even more so since the start of the pandemic.) Julia Schleck's *Dirty Knowledge: Academic Freedom in the Age of Neoliberalism* is a new addition to the stack of work that's been slowly piling up since the time of *University Control*, and it does a very good job explaining the history and present manifestations of the structural issues that have created the conditions under which academic freedom currently struggles.[5] However, I wonder if the provocative solution it proposes doesn't itself incorporate a central element of the ideology that is the cause of these struggles.

Schleck's argument, summarized in three parts, is that 1) the defense of (public) higher education and academic freedom mounted by Cattell and others at the time of the AAUP's founding is the one still employed today by those who decry their current state: that higher ed provides a public good that must be protected, a key part of that protection being academic freedom; 2) that unfortunately this argument will no longer work because a) people don't believe in the public good anymore due on one hand to the effects of neoliberalism and on the other hand to the realization that the Progressive Era notion of the public good was elitist and b) the adjunctification of the professoriate means the weakening of the traditional defense of academic freedom by tenure, and so a replacement argument must be found; and 3) that its replacement—the solution for the weakening of traditional defenses of academic freedom and of higher ed more broadly—must be built on the recognition that we don't live in an ivory tower of disinterested knowledge production, that the knowledge we produce is always already "dirty," implicated in the world of outside funding and competing interests, and that we should put forward a new portrait of the university as the place where the definition of the public good is contested on a somewhat level playing field, with support for departments that need it allowing them to duke it out with the Koch-funded centers and the revenue-producers.

In Schleck's account (one whose support by works from Wendy Brown, Christopher Newfield, and many others makes clear is not a tendentious outlier), the focus on campus speech debates of the kind that erupted on her campus in 2017 both results from a reframing of these events by neoliberalism and also obscures the real structural issues that have arisen because of neoliberalism.[6] In reframing academic freedom as an issue of individual political rights rather than that of collective professional rights, neoliberalism ignores the history of the establishment of these rights by the AAUP as being motivated by the protection of the contribution to the public good made by higher education. It does this, Schleck argues, because there is simply no conception of a public good under neoliberalism, for which return on investment and *homo oeconomicus* are all. This same orientation in universities, not just to the market but to the state, is what has led to the casualization of academic labor and to the growth of the non-professorial, managerial class on campus, which developments, together with the increasing pressure of right-leaning (or -leaping) state houses, have crushed shared governance. The financialization of everything, Schleck rightly shows, has led us to this sorry pass.

So, it is confusing to me that Schleck makes the argument, in the final chapter of the book, that faculty should accept the failure of the traditional public good argument (in part, she argues, because who among those who still believe in the public good can agree what it is). It is even more surprising that she advocates for making a new argument that eschews claims of disinterested knowledge and instead embraces the notion that all knowledge is interested, biased, "dirty," and that what the university is good for—its new and improved rearticulated public good—is being the place where we debate definitions *of* the public good. Rather than continuing to be held back by "the vague public-good rhetoric in which knowledge is supposedly generated through the pretended neutrality of a cloistered elite," by embracing this "fierce contention over the public good" the university will, in Schleck's formulation, make its own "case for a new freedom predicated on a knowledge generated through" this contention, through "direct participation in the dust and dirt of the battle that shape our society" (80).

My concern about this vision is that it perhaps inadvertently perpetuates the privileging of competition that has led us here. In spite of Schleck's proposal to support the undervalued and under-resourced disciplines, the support she proposes is aimed at allowing them to contest the definition of the public good among themselves and the big boys—to compete, in the end, over what vision of the university and the society will allow them to continue to exist. This solution seems not to fight what has come to be known as academic capitalism but rather to embrace its logic. Sheila Slaughter and Gary Rhoades define academic capitalism as "the internal embeddedness of profit-oriented activities as a point of reorganization (and new investment) by higher education

institutions."[7] As Schleck seems to know, there are two aspects to academic capitalism, what Brendan Cantwell and Ilkka Kauppinen call the structural aspect of "neoliberal policy and governance regime," which brings the campus closer to the market and the state, and the behavioral aspect that conditions actors in higher ed to think in financialized ways.[8] Anyone reading this knows what I'm talking about. You see the results in shrunken budgets misdirected toward encouraging possible revenue streams that might go some way toward making up lost government funding; in administrative prostration before increasingly politicized boards and before state legislators who win votes for starving public higher ed and for punishing it for its perceived politics; in the adjunctification of the professoriate to the tune of, last time I checked, 73%; in the destruction of shared governance in favor of increasingly hierarchical management regimes; in the swelling ranks of nonfaculty managerial professionals resulting in what Gary Rhoades describes as "reduced professorial prominence," which then causes the weakening of shared governance and the academic freedom it supports.[9] (If you need a primer or refresher, read Henry Reichman.)[10]

These developments result in large part from the broader cultural loss under neoliberalism of the notion of the public good. The economized notion of the public good that survives can be seen in the assumption that what states need from higher education is the production of workforces for their employers and in the touting by universities, schools, and departments of the earning potential of their graduates. (An especially perfect, perverse illustration are the new income-share loans, where private investors issue college loans in return for a percentage of future earnings.) In place of the public good, we have embraced individual good—to our collective detriment in higher ed and especially in the humanities, that mythologized seedbed of political headaches and overeducated fast-food employees, that collection of disciplines whose educational goals frustrate outcomes accountants and whose research is sadly unpatentable. So the question is why embrace a solution familiar from the neoliberal mouthpieces of social media and manufactured campus free speech imbroglios—"debate me!" (read in Ben Shapiro voice)—and "intellectual diversity" bills emerging from state legislatures since the barnstorming tours of David Horowitz. Why embrace competition?

If much of this bad news is caused by academic capitalism (and a larger culture attuned to this way of seeing and acting in the world), then why not confront the effects by addressing the cause instead? Faculty can do this by promoting in their work the "humane" that is at the etymological and philosophical root of the humanities—that which is "characterized by sympathy with and consideration for others" (thanks, *OED*). In opposition to the private good—practices and structures that emphasize the individual, competition for resources, hierarchicalization, and market-thinking—they

can promote practices and build structures that emphasize relationality, interconnectedness on campus and with the world off campus, shared governance and shared outcomes, the best interests of others—in other words, the public good. If the notion of the public good that animated the AAUP's Progressive Era founding bears an exclusionary elitism that renders it no longer useful, then it needs to be made more expansive and inclusive.

At the level of the university, faculty can work against the spirit of competition as it manifests within institutions. In her work on scholarly publishing and on universities more broadly, Kathleen Fitzpatrick has argued about the harmful effects of competition between institutions; faculty should also (as Fitzpatrick does in *Generous Thinking*) identify and speak against competition within them.[11] They should advocate for other units as if this weren't all a zero-sum game. Embracing a gladiatorial competition will not only leave the root causes of our condition unaddressed, it will not even entertain. Rather than competing for shared resources, faculty can find strengthening connections between departments and schools, and do so without handing over to upper administrators the power to hire and tenure. If departments are weakened, so is shared governance, because, as Louis Menand puts it in *The Future of Academic Freedom*, "decisions about hiring, promotion, and curricula have to be made somewhere, and that somewhere is likely to be the office of the dean or the provost" (18).[12]

There are also things faculty can do as teachers to move away from competition as the default: they can lose the exercises organized around competition and find new ones organized around cooperation. If at least somewhat protected by tenure, they can teach politics and the university, to help students learn about the history, economics, and politics of higher education. They can teach off campus if possible, to show people the value of what they do. They can write about the connection of their work and workplace to the community, about legislative efforts to control what they teach, about efforts to force guns onto their campus (if that's a concern of theirs—it should be), about the value of humanities majors, and they can do it outside of scholarly journals, in more popular venues, in letters to the editor, on social media. They can stress that higher education makes prepared professionals and that it can do more than that. In their research, they can consider ways to highlight the value of their work to communities outside their disciplines. They can defend their work and the work of all faculty and do it in a way that stresses that the concerns of professors are professional, societal concerns, not concerns about individual rights.

Those who work in departmental or college administration can think about ways to encourage and reward faculty for doing all of these kinds of work. They can also reach out and resist. They can reach out across department lines, for research and teaching

opportunities and in solidarity, and they can reach off campus and find opportunities for faculty and students to go out and show the value of what they do and its connection to life off campus. They can resist academic capitalism: question budget models, demand transparency, fight to hire on the tenure track, fight for graduate students. They can resist pressure from above. They can model the resistance to the pressure administrators and faculty are under from the economic realities of higher education and from the economic thinking in the air everywhere around us, on campus and off. They can try to do something to relieve this pressure, to change the air around all of us.

"They" here is of course "we," and the kinds of alternatives to giving in to academic capitalism and embracing competition that I'm putting forward here make obvious that the most important things we should do involve acting not as neoliberal individual subjects but as a collective, as members of the professional class James Cattell lost a job protecting over a hundred years ago. Schleck recognizes (following Bérubé and Ruth and others) the destructive effect of the demise of the tenure track on faculty governance and the role faculty organizing could play, but she does not believe that unionization alone will be sufficient to turn that tide.[13] In support, she makes an argument similar to one of the arguments she marshals against the effectiveness of deploying the public good argument in defense of academic freedom and higher ed more broadly—that it's just not resonating with public sentiment. Aside from its defeatism, this claim that a dearth of public support requires abandoning organizing doesn't take into account the remarkable surge in unionizing that's taken place over the last few years, especially during the pandemic; on the day that I am writing this sentence, the AAUP and the American Federation of Teachers union have just signed an affiliation partnership. More importantly, in addition to the measures I suggest above, resisting the continued degradation of higher ed under its increasingly corporatized leadership structures will require reclaiming faculty governance through the exercise of labor.

As importantly, organizing emphasizes the "we" over the "me," the collective over the individual, collaboration over competition—the very things that neoliberalism can't even recognize on its own terms. Schleck shows at the end of *Dirty Knowledge* that she also values these things. Deploying Wittgenstein's notion of forms of life and the metaphor of the seed bank, Schleck proposes that we think of the knowledge produced out of the "massive faculty contest over resources" she envisions as seeds necessary to grow the forms of intellectual life specific to the different disciplines, resulting in the resurgence of a "biodiversity of ideas" that academic capitalism has discouraged (112). Usefulness of the seed bank metaphor aside, one thing this bit of Schleck's proposal implies in its noting the need for the flourishing of all areas of intellectual life is a recognition that survival of the fittest might not be the smartest way forward if one values the survival of

as broad a community as possible. One is tempted to argue that an education in history and even in literature might help people to see that and to think of other ways of surviving.

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[1] James McKeen Cattell, *University Control* (New York: The Science Press, 1913).

[2] Cattell, *University Control,* p. v, vi.

[3] Cattell, *University Control,* p. 62.

[4] Carole Signer Gruber, "Academic Freedom at Columbia University, 1917-1918: The Case of James McKeen Cattell," *AAUP Bulletin* 58.3 (Sep. 1972), pp. 297-305.

[5] Julia Schleck, *Dirty Knowledge: Academic Freedom in the Age of Neoliberalism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska P, 2022). Further references to this text will be cited parenthetically.

[6] Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015); Christopher Newfield, *The Great Mistake: How We Wrecked Public Universities and How We Can Fix Them* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016).

[7] Sheila Slaughter and Gary Rhoades, *Academic Capitalism and the New Economy* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2004), p. 11.

[8] Brendan Cantwell and Ilkka Kauppinen, eds., *Academic Capitalism in the Age of Globalization* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), p. 5.

[9] Gary Rhoades, "Extending Academic Capitalism by Foregrounding Academic Labor" in Cantwell and Kauppinen, *Academic Capitalism in the Age of Globalization*, p. 114.

[10] Henry Reichman, *The Future of Academic Freedom* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019); *Understanding Academic Freedom* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021).

[11] Kathleen Fitzpatrick, *Generous Thinking: A Radical Approach to Saving the University* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019); *Planned Obsolescence: Publishing, Technology, and the Future of the Academy* (New York: NYU Press, 2011).

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[12] Louis Menand, “The Limits of Academic Freedom,” in *The Future of Academic Freedom*, ed. Louis Menand (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 18.

[13] Michael Berube and Jennifer Ruth, *The Humanities, Higher Education, and Freedom: Three Necessary Arguments* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015).