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*Central Planning and  
Higher Education*

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**T**he self-governing large public university that combines research with teaching and is financed but not managed by the state has come under increasing criticism recently. The university model that Wilhelm von Humboldt pioneered in Berlin two centuries ago has arguably exhausted itself. Lifetime tenure, lack of financial accountability, and autonomy from the state have been blamed for rent-seeking behavior; resistance to innovation, change, and new ideas; xenophobia; intellectual and social inbreeding; dogmatic homogenization of opinions; low standards of customer service; lack of cost effectiveness; and resistance to supplying rising student demand (Tucker 2000; Burris 2004; Klein and Stern 2009)

The shortcomings of self-governing public universities have been particularly apparent in parts of Europe where public universities do not have to compete with private universities. In some European countries, such as Norway and France, private institutions of higher education are legally banned from calling themselves “universities” and from awarding academic degrees. As Michael Dobbins put it, “Instead of Humboldt’s ideas of unfettered scholarly inquiry, academic self-governing models have frequently become synonymous with the deterioration of teaching, mass bureaucratization, and distrust between the state, universities, and society” (2011, 40). As a consequence of this policy, almost all the best universities in the world are in the United States.

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European governments and bureaucrats have feared that one of the factors that contributes to the decline in their economic competitiveness is their inferior universities. Politicians and bureaucrats have wanted to increase the proportion of university graduates in the population to increase the competitiveness of their workforce (Dobbins 2011). Like central planners in general, they have measured their success by the quantity of what they produce rather than by its quality, in part because without a market and its pricing mechanism only quantity can be measured.

For the planned economic results, universities had to reorient and restructure from producing research and offering theoretical, scientific, and moral education to producing large numbers of vocationally trained graduates who can get good jobs and pay taxes that the civil servants will then spend. Some basic research may still be necessary, so the central planners in the Ministry of Education designate a few research-intensive universities or academies of science to carry on research, but most universities are in the process of becoming cheap vocational schools. The vocational focus of higher education implies the centrally planned expansion of vocational programs such as football management and marketing “science” and the elimination or radical reduction of theoretical fields such as classics, history of science, and philosophy. More challenging disciplines and subdisciplines that have higher rates of student attrition and lower rates of graduation, most notably foreign languages and subfields that require quantitative or formal skills, are under pressure to be eliminated from universities altogether. Languages are hit twice, first because they appear nonvocational to provincial managers who work for the state and do not quite understand the significance of languages in a globalizing world and second because they are challenging for monolingual, equally provincial students, who fail language courses more than other courses.

This curriculum shuffling is central planning in its self-contradictory essence, as one policy undermines the other: one hand of the central government wishes to turn universities into vocational schools by teaching students skills that are in demand, but the other planning hand wishes to increase the number of graduating students, both in absolute terms and as a percentage of students who enroll, by dumbing down the quality of education in exactly those skills that are most transferable and vocationally useful—languages and quantitative skills. The central planners have been worried that their countries are losing their competitiveness because their universities cannot match the quality of the great U.S. research universities, so they attempt to limit and concentrate research and dumb down the level of mass education. Faculty members, regardless of their intellectual capacity to update their knowledge of their fields and conduct research to expand knowledge, do not have the institutional resources, time, and incentives to do so. The limited holdings of continental European academic libraries in countries such as Austria and Italy severely curb the potential for offering updated contemporary education, let alone for conducting research. European scientists are in a worse condition than scholars in the humanities or social sciences because the latter can try to get the books and articles on their own and find time to be creative, but empirical scientists cannot innovate without laboratories and instruments.

Narrow, vocational education without research has been advocated as a money-saving policy. The central planners sometimes formulate the case for vandalizing research as a case for education. They argue that academics should concentrate on serving their students through teaching rather than on using public funds for their personal research interests. In the context of central planning, such ideas never remain on an ideal level; they imply the construction of bureaucratic hierarchies with vested interests in their implementation. Concentration on teaching can be more expensive than financing research when it implies the installation of a pedagogic bureaucracy in charge of training, evaluation, retraining, evaluation of the evaluation and the training, and development of new training modules and new forms of evaluation that require training in them, and so on. In comparison with the traditional Humboldtian apprenticeship system, where graduate students train as their teachers' assistants, the centrally planned teaching university wastes colossal resources on formally training academics as teachers. More significant, the bivalent assumption that scarce time can be used *either* for research *or* for teaching is false. Teaching without research quickly becomes outdated and is uncreative and unimaginative; the students memorize data but do not learn how to produce knowledge and how to innovate. Research without the need to explain and systematize results and methods for students remains in large part a means of accumulating only private, underdeveloped insight.

Narrow vocational training actually creates unemployment. Overspecialized vocational training, typical of the Soviet model of higher education, produces workers who can do only one thing. When technology advances or production moves elsewhere, they are unprepared for alternatives. A flexible, nonvocational general training can be more conducive to obtaining employment in the long run. American liberal arts colleges are not known for producing unemployed graduates; had that been the case, their tuition fees would have plummeted, or they would have gone bankrupt.

Central planners attempt to match the education they offer with the requirements of large local employers. The reasoning is simple: if the primary goal of higher education is employable graduates, higher education should adjust its curriculum to the requirements of the largest employers. The corporations will tell the public universities what kinds of specialists they need, the universities will produce them, and the graduates will have an excellent chance to work for the companies. The state will collect and spend taxes, and the corporations will save on the costs of training new employees. However, the interests of the big corporations are not identical to those of students and workers. Corporations prefer to receive welfare from the public purse to save on their training expenses; they prefer highly specialized workers who can start work immediately and cannot change jobs easily. Workers who are overspecialized cannot find alternative jobs easily and therefore occupy a weak negotiation position. If they lose their job when the company collapses or contracts, they have a limited set of skills to offer other employers. Any specific set of skills becomes obsolete sooner or later.

The civil servants who consult with the managers of large corporations do not consider small businesses, which actually create more jobs than big business, because

their own career aspirations and prospects may include joining the vast bureaucracy of a large corporation, but not the founding of a small business.

## Managerialism

It is difficult if not impossible to force reforms on autonomous, self-governing, and therefore conservative institutions. Therefore, the general trend in many European countries in the past couple of decades has been for central planners in ministries of education to abolish academic self-governance, the autonomy of departments, whole departments, tenure, and academic freedom (Dobbins 2011), replacing the Humboldtian model of the university with a managerial model that resembles the late Soviet model of industry during the Brezhnev era. The Soviet state set production targets and quotas. The “Red” managers had considerable local powers and autonomy and were assessed mostly according to their fulfillment of these targets. The Red managers used their powers and autonomy to serve their own interests, mostly through corruption.

The new “Brezhnev” managerial academic model was pioneered and has been most developed in the United Kingdom over the past twenty years. Self-government, autonomy, departments, tenure, and academic freedom have been gradually abolished there (Grafton 2010; Pears 2010; Head 2011). Some European countries, such as Germany and Italy, retain aspects of their traditionally Humboldtian higher education, but the general trend, encouraged by the European Union’s Bologna Process and the massification of higher education, is to turn universities into autonomous, state-managed corporations dedicated to vocational training (Wolf 2010). In the Bologna agreement, all members of the EU agreed to create “[a] system of easily readable and comparable degrees to promote European citizens’ employability and international competitiveness” (Dobbins 2011, 25). To impose this new order and fulfill production targets by any means, universities hire managers. The appointed managers are not accountable to their workers, so they can impose on them policies and decisions against their will and discipline them if they defy commands. The managers are judged by their superiors according to the quantifiable targets they are assigned. As much as iron foundries and the car company (there was only one) had to deliver quotas to the state to meet production targets in the Soviet Union, university managers must produce set numbers of graduates in set fields and meet set income targets from grants. As in the Soviet Union, when there is no market demand to satisfy, the easiest way to meet production targets is by cheating and compromising on quality.

The managerial model of higher education attempts to catch up with the achievements of the best U.S. private universities by using late Soviet economic methods. As the Soviet experience demonstrated, however, although central planning may succeed in a few outstanding projects, such as Soviet missiles, by focusing all available resources on them, command economies cannot sustain the effort across the

board to match supply with demand without a pricing mechanism and private enterprise. Central planners may be able to construct a few excellent academic centers by concentrating resources and finding some effective managers, but their chances of competing systematically with the decentralized and partly private U.S. academic system are no better than those of the Soviet managers.

The western European central planners have goals for their social engineering that are diametrically opposed to those of the Soviets. The Communists attempted to limit the size of the educated middle class by restricting the size of the higher-education sector. The European planners have attempted to increase the size of the middle class by inflating the ratio of vocational graduates to population. It is ironic but consistent with the logic of central planning that the latter have chosen the same means to achieve their diametrically opposed goals: attempting to abolish the association of universities with high culture, contracting the humanities and languages, expanding and encouraging engineering, radically dumbing down the level of education, limiting research or eliminating it altogether, debasing education by reducing it to learning by rote with little or no space for creativity, eliminating academic self-governance and freedom, and imposing appointed managers who do not always have a substantial academic background in order to attain quantitative targets. It does not seem to occur to any of the European central planners that had these methods been effective, the Soviet Union would have won the Cold War.

Like the barons of old, each manager in the U.K. “Brezhnevian” higher-education system controls a fiefdom with little external interference. The establishment of this “New Class” has required the addition of several bureaucratic layers at considerable expense to the taxpayer because the managers earn salaries comparable to managers in private industry but produce no research or teaching (Pears 2010). The members of this managerial New Class possess none of Weber’s three sources of authority: they have no democratic legitimacy; as radical reformers, they go against tradition; and with typically meager intellectual achievements, they have no personal charisma among academics. In a market, unelected, effective, and successful managers can establish legitimacy by their success. When “success” means meeting government-set targets by dumbing down the quality of education, however, it is not the kind of success that commands respect.

From the state’s perspective, college dropouts (for example, Bill Gates, Michael Dell, Steve Jobs, Jack Kerouac, and Woody Allen) are lost investments—not because students who drop out of college do not benefit from their time there, but because the central planners do not know how to measure that benefit. Retention rates also affect the ratings of universities by independent rating agencies. However, without smaller class sizes and improvement in the quality of admitted students, pedagogical methods, and the number and quality of teachers—all impossible when the state’s goal is to increase the size of the higher-education system without paying more for it—the usual method managers have chosen to improve graduation rates substantially is to radically dumb down the level of education. They prohibit the failing of students

regardless of their performance, and they cheat (Ainley 2008; Gil 2008). The exact methods for dumbing down the levels of education are obviously not reported by the universities or discussed in the pedagogical literature. As in regard to corruption in general, it is impossible to obtain official statistical data. The chief sources of evidence are the testimonies of people who spent time in the system. While working at Queens University Belfast, I witnessed the following methods for moving the graduation rate in the school where I worked from 70 percent to almost 100 percent in one year.

Undergraduate classes were expected to be strictly lectures. The managerial argument was that reading anything critically and then discussing it in class was beyond the students' cognitive skills. Expecting such reading and discussion from them was, in managerial lingo, "inattentive to student progression." Besides, it was argued, if students listen to each other, they do not learn anything. If they are assigned to write anything original, they will plagiarize. Managers demanded that professors publish on the university intranet "bullet points" for each lecture, a few sentences that students could memorize for the exam and thereby pass it. Students who did not attend lectures could pass by learning by rote the teachers' own highly simplified and dumbed down lecture notes. Students who attended classes but either could not concentrate or lacked the critical cognitive skills to distinguish the lecture's essential core from the examples, illustrations, metaphors, anecdotes, asides, and jokes that the teacher might make could also pass the exams by memorizing the bullet points.

Lecturers were encouraged to repeat the exam questions and their answers in class and to publish them on the intranet, without describing them explicitly as the exam questions, which would have made this practice simple fraud.

Managers pressured lecturers to make sure nobody failed and sought to inflate grades further by measuring the teacher's effectiveness according to his students' achievements. Just as the tutor to the emperor of China was spanked if his pupil was naughty, if students failed or received lackluster grades, the teacher was considered guilty of insufficiently preparing them for exams and of using "forms of assessment" that ignored "student progression." This method of measuring the teacher's performance not only affected promotions and privileges such as sabbaticals, funding for conferences, and so on (which were not rights, but "privileges" the managers granted or withheld) but also led to punitive sanctions, from being forced to attend afternoon and evening "pedagogical" classes that concentrated on methods for learning by rote to being dismissed as an ineffective teacher. Facing such pressures, teachers of challenging topics whose students might fail found it less painful to post the answers to exam questions on the intranet, to repeat several times in every class the future exam questions and the correct answers, and finally to inflate the grades. This procedure is possible even in quantitative fields, where students can memorize the solution to a mathematical problem without understanding how it is reached or why one phase of the solution follows from another.

To be fair to the managers, they impose on their subordinates the same method by which they themselves are evaluated by the state central planners. The quality of

universities is measured by how centralized they are, how many bureaucratic layers they have added, and how well inflated the grades are (Kealey 2008).

The British central planners attempted to introduce measures to limit or to appear to limit the extent of managerial cheating on grades. Unmonitored student performance, such as class participation that cannot be audited externally, can amount at most to 10 percent of each final grade. Each anonymous exam in U.K. universities is monitored by two to four people, who grade it independently; the class instructor and another member of the faculty grade each exam and then agree on a grade together. The grades then go to a school director of education who has the authority to revise them and finally to an external examiner from a different university who reads either all the exams or samples from each type of grade to guarantee that the questions are appropriate and the standard for grading is uniform. The external examiner cannot know if questions and bullet-pointed answers were posted in advance in the university intranet or dictated in class. In an Orwellian twist, the “director of education” is in charge of dumbing down the education and cheating on grades. I witnessed such action when some students failed a difficult course given by a colleague, and the “director of education” multiplied their true grades according to an algorithm he invented that ensured that everybody passed, with the best students receiving about 180 out of 100 possible points.

The dumbing down of higher education to meet production targets causes waste of public and private resources. U.K. employers have adapted to the decreasing value of university degrees by demanding higher degrees. Whereas a bachelor’s degree with a good grade (“good upper second”) used to be the entry requirement for many careers in the United Kingdom, employers are increasingly demanding an additional master’s degree.

Because domestic and European Union Ph.D. students are subsidized, the central planners want doctoral studies to take four years. If they take longer, universities are penalized financially. Therefore, managers have a strong financial incentive to graduate students whether their dissertations are completed or not and whether they are ready to go on the job market or not. The managers can pressure directors by making it plain that if their Ph.D. students fail, it is their fault, so they better help the students with their dissertations. There is an external examiner, but, as in the case of exams, the external evaluators cannot know the internal process that generates the document they examine. They are working in the same academic system and are aware of the financial pressures each university faces to graduate its Ph.D. students in four years.

The students are the greatest victims of the dumbing down of education, the learning by rote, the bullet points, and the repetitions of the exam questions and answers. Most of the students I taught would have passed fair exams. But because the level of education was forced to adjust to the limited abilities of the students at the bottom of the class, the better students became bored, did not receive the challenging level of education from which they would have benefitted, and encountered a perverted, dumbed-down version of the discipline they studied. The most talented

were unfortunately dissuaded from continuing to study for advanced degrees. They did not want to go through four more years of this kind of experience. Who can blame them? The students at the bottom who should have failed instead received an unwritten message from their government that the way to advance themselves in life is through cheating and that everybody does it.

The quality of research at British universities is assessed by sixty-seven field-specific central academic committees every seven years. Civil servants appoint the members, who are senior academics employed in the United Kingdom, according to criteria that are not made public but include geographical distribution in the four regions of the United Kingdom. Each British academic must submit at most four pieces of original research and receives a mark from 1 to 5 that is not made public. Departments then receive an amalgamated mark that is made public and affects their prestige and the amount of state funding they receive. A committee of a dozen or so academics is assigned to read thousands of submission over a year. These committees evaluate approximately two hundred thousand publications (Head 2011). Assuming the committees distribute their labor equally, each member has to read hundreds of books and articles and evaluate them within a year. Can anybody do so? Do they have the time, or in their evaluations do they consider the prestige of the publishing house presses and journals in addition to or instead of the intrinsic values of each publication? Only the people who serve on those committees know. As homogenizing as the Humboldtian university with its dogmatic tenured professors may be, at least they greatly outnumber the few members of a central committee.

Nevertheless, this system has been useful in giving managers incentives to lay off academics who have not published any research for seven years and to hire people with a recent research record before the seven-year deadline. By itself, this process can improve the quality of the faculty in universities beyond what is possible in self-governing universities by eliminating the very bottom ranks of the faculty. But it has the unintended consequence of giving managers an incentive to dissuade academics who already have four articles from doing more research instead of taking on other duties related to targets on which the managers are evaluated on or simply serving the managers at their pleasure. As a result, academics who like to do research postpone publication till the fifth or sixth years of the evaluation cycle to have more research time. Conversely, if academics have a time-consuming project, they must rush to publish the results, even if they are premature, in the fifth and sixth years of the cycle.

The central planners require the homogenization of education because graduating students have become mass-produced products. The methods of instruction and evaluation must become “the same” regardless of subject matter. This insistence on uniformity leads to excessive regulation of academic work by a large number of committees. British academics often spend more time on such administrative chores, regulating and being regulated, than on teaching and research (Tahir 2008). For example, when I taught at Queens University Belfast, each syllabus was a single-spaced document of about twenty pages, most of them filled with regulations that needed to be

discussed and decided by committees. Each class instructor had to fill in details, including the working skills the students were supposed to acquire. For example, for courses in metaphysics or Celtic Poetry, they might suggest time management or writing skills. They then returned the syllabus to a committee, a couple of managers, and an officer in charge of syllabi, which might lead to further revisions, and so on. The final result was long, complex, and confusing. In the United States, where a syllabus is the teacher's exclusive responsibility, a far more useful guide is produced in a fraction of the time.

Many interactions between students and teachers that are informal, short, and effective in the United States, such as those related to advising, evaluation, and feedback on written work, are regulated and formalized in the United Kingdom: committees meet to deliberate and formulate regulations that should govern such interactions; then training sessions must be devised to train employees in these regulations; and then forms must be invented, printed, and filled in to document and monitor compliance with the regulations. Managers or committees must then study the completed forms; archive them; demand their revision; consider disciplinary action when they are improperly filled in; and so on and on. The result is a colossal waste of time in comparison with institutions that concentrate on research and teaching. The regulatory culture treats teachers and students as potential criminals who need to be checked to prevent their natural tendency to slack off on the job. Yet the result is the opposite of that ostensibly sought; the process turns teachers and students who would normally trust each other and maintain their moral integrity into crooks.

Autonomous, self-governing academic departments can be "territorial." They compete with other departments for resources and students and jealously guard their disciplinary boundaries and methods. Academics who try to cross boundaries and who combine and integrate disciplines creatively may meet serious resistance. Departments ask if researchers are "one of us" rather than whether they do valuable work. The central planners set out to ameliorate this sad situation. However, instead of increasing the rights of individual academics or introducing institutional mechanisms for evaluation that are not discipline specific, they abolished academic freedom and individual departments, replacing them with "schools" that amalgamate several departments but are smaller than faculties, as can be seen on the Web site of any British university. True to form, central planners cannot create a space for freedom and let spontaneous, unpredictable, natural intellectual growth take place. They instead have to attempt to control everything, including interdisciplinary research, from the top down. Academics without academic freedom cannot choose the topics of their research; they are assigned what they should work on, just as they are assigned classes to teach whether they like them or not. The results have been unintended even if predictable. It is impossible to force valuable creativity from above. Turf warfare did not disappear; it merely shifted to the school level. Although academics are encouraged and even forced to combine disciplines that happen to be in the same school (for example, politics and philosophy), they are discouraged from combining fields that are in different schools (for example, politics and history). The composition of a school often has an intellectually arbitrary,

bureaucratic rationale. As the British academic joke goes, “What is the result of amalgamating the Department of Engineering with the Department of Comparative Literature? The School of Construction and Deconstruction.” Because school heads micromanage contents as well as budgets, they are required to plan the study of fields about which they often know nothing. For example, I witnessed an expert on Northern Irish politics and a continental political theorist coplan the teaching of symbolic logic, a field about which they knew nothing, with predictable results that necessitated the forging of the final grades by the same planners.

Because managers with little accountability have broad authority, their background is significant. MBAs would rather take better remunerated and more satisfying positions in the private sector. Academics with an active research program are reluctant to devote all their time to administration. At Queens University Belfast, I witnessed two groups of people dominating the managerial class: failed academics and clerical and secretarial university staff. They have higher salaries, are not required to do research, and can dominate and bully the “intellectuals” who do research. They can subject their academic subordinates to hours of Castro-like speeches, exhorting them to meet graduation quotas and to apply for grants with frivolous, hopeless proposals in order to satisfy targets for the number of grant applications, and menacingly threaten “or else.” In the school meetings that I attended at Queens University Belfast, most faculty members did not dare to attempt to discuss any of these issues because the few who did immediately became targets of punitive managerial action. These meetings were not deliberative departmental gatherings of the sort I was familiar with in the United States, but totalitarian-style rallies, where the subjects were supposed to listen to the dictator and cheer—or else.

When vulgar, uneducated, and boorish central planners and managers who conduct little or no research and who do not read books, go to the theater, or listen to classical music in their leisure time are put in charge of planning university education, they eliminate what they do not understand: the theoretical sciences and high culture—exactly the fields that cost the least to teach because they require only teachers, libraries, and blackboards. They make a superfluous distinction between theoretical and applied research, ignoring the obvious historical fact that the applied sciences actually began as theoretical sciences in the mid–nineteenth century. But such obliviousness is only to be expected because the history and philosophy of science is one of the fields these planners are often keen to abolish (Hunt 2009). Herman Göring quipped that when he heard the word *culture*, he reached for his gun. When the academic managers hear the word *culture*, they reach for their budget-cutting knives.

## Gestapo Methods

The construction of a managerial hierarchy and the abolition of academic self-governance were originally intended to combat the power of a lazy, unproductive, resistant-to-change, even incompetent yet powerful and protected oligarchy of senior faculty

that operated a clientele system of hiring and promotion. For this reason, managerialism had some initial popularity among some junior members of the academic profession, who were competent and creative but less well paid and powerful and at the mercy of their seniors who controlled appointments and promotions. They had hoped that the managers would shift the balance of power in their favor. As when the first secretary replaced the czar, however, once the new rulers received the power deemed necessary for solving the problems of the downtrodden, they were under no constraint to use this power as the powerless had hoped they would. The result was new and sometimes worse forms of the old evils.

The academic managers have received and developed powers to break established hierarchies at the universities, to fire members of faculty, to discipline them into submission, and to harass them into resignation or early retirement. First, they use these methods against the incompetents. Then they use them against the disobedient who challenged their authority. Then they seek to use their institutional power to eliminate any existing or potential alternative center of power in their academic units. Because much of the managers' power derives from intimidation, it is in their interest to victimize occasionally the most secure and respected professors with laudable research records, international reputations, and admiring students. If a few of these professors can be made redundant or harassed into resignation or early retirement or simply humiliated, *pour encourager les autres*, it becomes obvious to everybody else that no one is safe, however impressive one's records may be. This same logic led the Stalinists to exterminate their most loyal followers—to prove to the others that nobody is safe. Finally, the academic managers go after anybody who is different. The similarity with the establishment of totalitarian regimes is striking: these regimes eliminated their real enemies first, then their “objective” enemies, then anybody who was different. Recall that one of the most convincing criticisms of the Humboldtian university is its tendency to produce homogeneity and uncritical conformity through the selection of new academics among clients prior to tenure. After tenure, academics can and sometimes do become free to the point of eccentricity. Nevertheless, tenure committees do their best to weed out the peas that do not quite fit the pod. Managerialism increases the faculty's homogeneity even further because if there is no tenure protection, the managers can straighten the line of their subordinates by chopping heads at any time. The result is the kind of gray mediocrity and bureaucratic indistinguishability typical of late communism.

At Queens University Belfast, I witnessed how the managers bullied and drove out the incompetents first, then a select group of particularly research-active academics, then foreigners, and finally the Jews. In King's College of the University of London, a decision to lay off some of its best senior and famous professors (many of whom had Jewish names) created an international scandal in 2010. These famous scholars called on American colleagues from Harvard and Stanford for help. A hint that the great American universities might cease cooperation with and recognition of degrees from King's College London did the trick, and the managers retreated, but

not before they, in a hysterical attempt to reassert their authority by firing everybody, demanded that all academics at King's College reapply for the positions they held. The managers kept their jobs and subsidized salaries, and the laid-off full professors kept their jobs, but the reputation of the formerly prestigious college suffered irreparable damage: only unemployed academics (and there admittedly are many good ones these days) would apply to work in such a demoralized environment where any professor, however senior and accomplished, can be made redundant arbitrarily (Grafton 2010; Pears 2010) The reason for such apparently irrational behavior is the absence of constraints that emerges from subsidies and lack of competition. Managerial destruction of the reputation of a college in this system does not affect the amount of subsidies; the college cannot go bankrupt. In contrast, the market will discipline a U.S. institution that takes similar measures: it will become the domain of lackluster faculty and generate less demand from students, less income, fewer donations and grants, less money for salaries for faculty, and hence even more mediocre faculty, worse students, and so on. University trustees will likely step in before long to replace the management. When the state is in charge, however, no one stops the madness.

Without democratic legitimacy or intellectual achievements that command respect, managers must resort to bullying to establish their authority. Almost every issue of the U.K. trade weekly *Times Higher Education* recounts conflicts between managers who cannot tolerate criticism and demand obedience and members of faculty who are used to a culture of open critical discussion. The University and College Union conducts surveys of bullying in U.K. academia and publishes a table of the most bullying universities in the country, a sad parody on the "best colleges" tables of *U.S. News & World Report*. The worst bullying university, with 17 percent of staff reporting being always or often bullied, was the University of East London. The worst member of the Russell Group of 20 self-selected top research universities in the United Kingdom was Queens University Belfast (nicknamed "Bully U"), with 12 percent of staff reporting constant or frequent bullying (Torney 2008).

The methods that I observed the managers employing bear surreal yet striking similarities to some of the Gestapo-style methods that totalitarian regimes and their secret police use. When the managers take over and replace the elected heads of departments, they decree a long, vague list of regulations, which give them a pseudo-legalistic basis for starting disciplinary proceedings against anybody at any moment arbitrarily. As in Kafka's *The Trial*, everybody is always guilty but may be granted a reprieve. Among the grounds for disciplinary proceedings I witnessed at Queens University Belfast were "inattention to detail" (for typos in an email), "lack of responsiveness to student concerns" (for answering a student's email in a way that the managers decided to interpret as not noticing the student's main concern about a lecture's scheduling), "inattention to student progression" (for assigning a take-home essay for first-year students), and "inappropriate attitude" (for making a joke during a faculty meeting).

I witnessed and was told by my students how managers used disaffected students as agent provocateurs: because managers had access to the university's electronic

databases, they could find out which students were at the bottom. When they targeted a professor, they summoned these students directly or used an intermediary, such as a favored student, to connect with one or more of these students and to suggest that if the students lodged complaints against their professor, the managers would have grounds to revise their grades upward. Some of these weak students came to believe that they had found a universal method for improving their grades, only to be rudely awakened when they attempted to bring complaints about other professors who were not targeted at the time.

The managers exerted themselves to divide and rule the faculty. I witnessed how they encouraged, augmented, and even initiated conflicts between faculty members. In academia, factions form, and interpersonal frictions arise spontaneously. When all power is vested in the hands of a single manager and nobody is tenured, the manager is the sole arbitrator of conflicts. The more conflicts there are, the more powerful is the manager. As in large corporations, academic managers can read the employees' work email accounts. When faculty members do not realize that their accounts are being monitored, they become the victims of spying and provocation. I witnessed how managers used email correspondence to learn of friction between coworkers and to exacerbate them. The result was to turn people who worked reasonably well together into sworn enemies, with the manager acting as their arbitrator. The management sought to atomize the faculty, breaking all possible alliances. In totalitarian societies, the ultimate method for achieving that object is to turn citizens into informers. On this count, I had a telling personal experience.

I was called in for an urgent meeting with my "line manager." She first bombarded me with a series of nitpicking accusations about wrongly filled-in forms and a grade that had been submitted late. I became defensive and answered that I submitted the grade on time, that the late submission of the grade was the fault of the second marker, a professor who used to be the dean. The former dean had made enemies during his tenure in office, and some of them had later advanced to managerial positions. Because there was no tenure and he had not published during his years as dean, he was vulnerable, and his enemies sought to collect condemnatory evidence against him. The manager mentioned that I would coteach a course with that former dean in the coming semester, and she would like me to inform her of any complaints I heard about him or regulatory violations I witness by him. This informing was in my interest, she explained, because otherwise that former dean would shift to me the responsibility for his own failings, as in the late submission of the grade in question. I declined. But the manager insisted; she told me of emails she had received from him denouncing me and invited me to return the favor. I replied that I do not inform on anybody, friend or foe, but the manager persisted, mentioning my colleague's "big fat" salary, hoping to generate and then manipulate envy from a lower-paid but intellectually more accomplished colleague.

Having failed to make me an informer, the manager later "recruited" a resentful Ph.D. student who was the teaching assistant in the class that the former

dean and I were forced to teach together to inform on both of us. When I protested this “encounter,” a pro-vice chancellor, the second in command at the university, explained to me calmly that he considered a requirement to inform on colleagues a “managerial technique” that he did not see fit to interfere with. He was unable to utter correctly the word *totalitarianism*, which I used in my complaint; it was too long.

Mine was not an isolated incident. The head of my school complained to the faculty in one of his Castro-like, three-hour speeches about an unnamed professor who was informing on him to the university’s vice chancellor. Without speculating about American civic, moral superiority, I decided at that stage to return home. The next year, the former dean against whom I was blackmailed to inform accepted early retirement in his late fifties. A year later, the manager who blackmailed me to inform also accepted early retirement at age sixty. All the loose ends had been tied. As Stalin put it, “If there is a person, there is a problem. If there is no person, there is no problem.”

It is ironic that when in 1945 the British military occupied the section of Berlin where the Technical University is located, it ended narrow technical vocational training and demanded the teaching of the humanities to engineers and technicians to prevent the education of trained professionals who were unethical moral nihilists. From an ethical perspective, perhaps the British academic system should try military governors instead of managers.

## Command Economy

As in all command economies, without a pricing mechanism to coordinate supply and demand and to transmit information about what is in excess demand and what is in excess supply, managers cannot know what and how much to produce. Without a price mechanism, academic central planners can only guess which subjects to teach and how many students to admit. Managers must evaluate which of their workers are most valuable, which new workers to hire, and which to fire or encourage with varying degrees of coercion to retire early or resign.

When deciding on resource allocation, central planners can infer from trends and analogies. They can produce what has proved successful in the immediate past. But all trends come to an end, and then they are no longer trends, but only tendencies that have lost their momentum or bubbles that have popped. The Soviet central planners noticed that the great success stories of nineteenth-century industry were in heavy industry and energy, so they directed their resources toward steel and electricity and their higher education toward generating engineers. They thus missed what followed—electronics, information technology, and biotechnology. Central planners in higher education likewise can notice employment trends and invest in training students for vocations that were in demand in the past and yet still miss what will be in demand in the future. Whatever the great next fields of economic growth and

employment may be, they will be known on a limited local level long before any central planner can spot them. People with this local knowledge will then create demand for the kind of education that will be useful for these new fields. When there is a market, the prices of education in these fields will go up, signaling the need for increased quantities to be supplied.

Central planners also looked at free or freer markets where prices served as signals for demand. They inferred that what was in demand in one market, from Coca-Cola (whose East European versions had names such as “Kofola” and “Kola Loka”) to televised soap operas, might also be in demand in their nonmarket (Bren 2010). By analogy, academic central planners look at trends in the freest higher-education market in the United States and attempt to draw analogies for their own local situations. They also note demand patterns from international students who pay unsubsidized though still centrally fixed tuition fees, but such students are usually a minority of all students with specific demand patterns and career prospects.

Grants and fellowships can be used as signals of faculty members’ value. People who do not conduct research cannot get research grants, and success in getting them may indicate quality and trendiness. However, grant income must be appraised relative to its corresponding costs. Theoretical fields of study cost less than experimental science. Granting agencies and foundations know this fact and properly apportion less money to them. But if academic managers through ignorance or anti-intellectual vandalism simply compare grant income in all fields, they have another excuse to eliminate theoretical programs they do not understand, this time for not raising as much money as their colleagues in the laboratories.

In the absence of market mechanisms, central planners pay excessive attention to tables and charts that evaluate universities by quantifiable measures. One of the targets managers have is to lift their organization’s rank in the yearly charts and not just in the bullying chart. Few people who use these charts note the controversial values that underlie them. The most famous one, prepared by the Shanghai Jiao Tong University, pertains to the best five hundred universities in the world. The Shanghai criteria are based on an algorithm in which 10 percent of the weight reflects whether the university’s alumni have won a Nobel Prize or a Fields Medal in mathematics, and 20 percent of the weight reflects whether the university’s teachers have won a Nobel Prize or Fields Medal.<sup>1</sup> Because the Nobel Prize is awarded only in physics, chemistry, physiology/medicine, and economics (Peace and Literature Prize winners are rarely academics) and the Fields Medal is in mathematics, the rating is obviously biased in favor of these disciplines. A weight of 20 percent reflects how many articles academics have published in the two most prestigious scientific journals, *Science* and *Nature*. This criterion biases the rating further in favor of the natural sciences in general. A weight of 20 percent reflects the quantity of publications in international

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1. The Shanghai ranking criteria and methodology can be seen at [http://www.universityrankings.ch/en/methodology/shanghai\\_jiao\\_tong](http://www.universityrankings.ch/en/methodology/shanghai_jiao_tong).

journals, and another 20 percent reflects how well cited the published articles are in other articles. The quantity of institutional publications is a strong indication of achieving an international level of competence. A shortcoming of this method is that it does not consider books. This feature displays again a bias in favor of the natural sciences. Original research in the natural sciences is usually published in articles. Scientific books are usually textbooks or popularizations, not groundbreaking new discoveries. In contrast, books can be and often are the main vehicle for substantial new and original research in the humanities, social sciences, and law, and so in these fields they are valued more highly than articles because they require more research and are read more than articles. The citation of an article in other articles should indicate its importance, presumably meaning that the article was important enough for other researchers to comment on or to base their own research on. Again, however, this criterion does not measure citations in books or of books, which again penalizes the fields in which scholars publish books rather than articles. It also cannot take into consideration the reasons for citations or their absence; some articles are cited because they are so outrageously provocative that many people write about why they are so wrong. Other articles address fashionable topics, but some very good articles may deal with difficult or unpopular topics that do not receive attention. Some articles require their readers to possess advanced skills that only a very select group of other researchers has. As with other artificially set quotas and targets, the citation count can be gamed by academics who commit to quote each other and publish each others' articles regardless of quality or relevance. Finally, a 10 percent weight reflects the university's size. So, put together, these criteria express a clear bias in favor of the natural sciences and large universities. Such highly biased criteria are hardly surprising given they were formulated in a late totalitarian state that builds megauniversities that emphasize the nonpolitical natural sciences and engineering. It is surprising, however, that such a clearly biased ranking that reflects Communist values is taken seriously in democracies where people should know better. Be that as it may, when academic central planners and managers attempt to game their university's ranking according to these criteria, they are in effect serving a totalitarian state's soft cultural power. Central planners, who work to reform their universities so that they advance on this chart, labor to engineer their society to fit the Chinese model. Other charts rest on other criteria, but they all are necessarily value laden and represent different biases. The only chart that can take into consideration all the biases of all the customers of higher education is the market.

### **Moscow on the Hudson**

Despite the state, some green shoots of private higher education are emerging on the margins of Europe, in the post-Communist countries and Turkey. In Poland and the Czech Republic, unlike France and Norway, private universities are legal, accredited,

and may compete with the state sector, whether self-governing and incompetent or centrally managed and dumbed down (Dobbins 2011). These private universities face the challenge of an uneven playing field tilted through regulations and subsidies in favor of state universities. The accreditation process, which the older state universities usually control, can be used to pressure private universities to employ retired professors and young graduates from the state sector as the price of accreditation. When competing with subsidized state universities, private higher education can thrive only by differentiating the quality and types of education it offers from the state's generic variety rather than by offering similar products for a higher price to students who were not admitted to free or subsidized state universities, as is still the case in the "new Europe." Some progress was made toward leveling the playing field in Lithuania, for example, where the government issues higher-education coupons that encourage competition between all universities (though cynics point out that it also aims at limiting emigration by giving young Lithuanians an incentive to remain in the country). Private universities in Prague, which I happen to know well, started with only a skeleton staff of full-time employees and with most of the teaching being undertaken by part-timers. The better-run private universities, however, have recently attempted to introduce research and full-time staff in order to attract better students.

The current trend in European countries with budgetary problems is to introduce or increase tuition fees. Therefore, the price gap between public and private higher education is shrinking. In the United Kingdom, tuition is set to rise in 2012 to as much as £9,000 annually (about \$15,000). Although the state will continue to plan and manage the system centrally, it will pay much less for it directly and offer grants and loans to local students instead (Shepherd 2011). The more affordable American colleges may then attempt to attract British students because they will offer a higher-quality education for a comparable price. Neil O'Brien (2011) hopes that this reform will gradually lead to creative destruction, and ill-managed universities in the United Kingdom will go bankrupt or merge with better-led institutions. Competition between universities should prevent some of them from charging the maximum permissible tuition. I doubt that O'Brien's optimistic conclusions are warranted. The state will pay less to the universities, but it will not relinquish any control of their management. A comparison with the U.S. market indicates that £9,000 in tuition may not suffice for running a university with empirical research and professional schools but no endowment. When large universities with tens of thousands of students approach bankruptcy, they will lobby for subsidies, claiming they are too large to fail and thus leave tens of thousands of student in the middle of their studies and major urban centers without higher education. Most significant, the state will continue to plan the system of higher education and set subsidies, even if reduced ones. This reform is not privatization, but a weakened state's continuing attempt to control its higher-education system without having the funds to pay for it.

Some of my European socialist friends think that the higher-education reforms in the United Kingdom and parts of Europe, such as the Netherlands, were designed

to make public higher education so horrendously intolerable for teachers and students alike that when the universities are finally privatized, everybody will breathe a sigh of relief rather than protest.

Meanwhile, the bad news for U.S. universities is that they have little competition. The more the state tries to improve higher education elsewhere, the worse education becomes everywhere. Nevertheless, American states face budgetary constraints similar to those of European states. As a result, some Americans propose to alter the American state universities so that they will resemble their European Brezhnevian counterparts—with managers, quantifiable targets, student assessments that give teachers incentives to inflate grades, artificial separation of research and teaching, restrictions on academic creativity and research, and the dumbing down of the curriculum (Allen 2011; Anderson 2011). It is striking that the American debates about these proposals ignore the tried, tested, and failed European experience with Napoleonic (direct) and Brezhnevian (managerial with quotas) models. The considerable edge that American higher education possesses, its near-total domination of the top higher-education market, is wholly research driven. More foreigners pay to study in higher-education institutions in the United States than in any other country, including the European countries such as France and Germany where they can study without charge if they pass language entrance exams. If anything, the current problem with U.S. higher education is that not enough high-quality research is being pursued. Because of the financial crisis, universities are cutting their expenses by hiring temporary lecturers or even part-time adjuncts, who are paid very little, are not expected to produce any research, and sometimes do not have the time or resources for it. In many cases, these temps and part-timers are the cream of the crop of their generation, recent graduates who cannot find better jobs. These academics with hyper-research potential are under severe economic pressure to leave the academic profession altogether or to stop conducting research. If this situation persists, this lost generation may cost American higher education its competitive edge.

Some people who oppose the managerial state-planning model are misled by the use of managerial jargon about production targets, corporate identity, and line managers, and so they consider this model “neoliberal” or “conservative” (Wolf 2010; Head 2011). For example, according to Michael Dobbins, “the [European] Commission also puts forward a clear market-oriented vision for European universities. This includes . . . a diversification of funding sources, an intensification of ties between universities and industries and a closer match between the supply of qualifications and labour-market demands. In other words, ‘universities have a duty to their “stakeholders”’ (students, public authorities, labour market, and society at large) in order to maximise the social return of the investment” (Dobbins 2011, 28). This passage might have come from Orwell. The model referred to is not “market oriented,” but a statist model with elements of corruption thrown into the mix. Without a market, private universities, and a pricing mechanism to coordinate supply and demand, the managerial universities are to a classical-liberal free economy what the

Soviet Constitution was to human rights. As under communism, the higher-education central planner's greatest achievement is to confuse language sufficiently by Orwellian identifications of opposites to make criticism of the system linguistically impossible (Tucker 2010). How can anyone criticize central planning if everyone has come to believe it is "market oriented"?

Nevertheless, the level of systemic vandalism that state managerial models can inflict on the American system of higher education is far more limited than it is in Europe. Without central planning in Washington as in London or Paris and in a market where universities compete for the best faculty members, the best students, and prestige, a university that adopts the Brezhnev managerial model would become highly uncompetitive. Its most competitive and mobile faculty would leave for universities that offer them better conditions; faculty members who stay behind would be demoralized; the university would lose prestige among its peers, and it would become less attractive to the better students. The market would marginalize such universities. Students who graduated from these programs would have paid less in tuition, but their savings will be offset with exorbitant interest once they enter the job market and their degrees go unrecognized, or they find themselves forced to take marginal jobs that the graduates of more research-intensive departments do not want.

The Humboldtian model, in which the state finances but does not manage the universities, is deeply flawed, yet it is superior in most aspects to the Napoleonic or Brezhnevian models. A superior alternative to these three models might be called the "platonic model." Plato was not only the founder of Western philosophy, but also an entrepreneur, the founder of the first university, his academy. His business model was so successful that it was imitated by competitors, such as his most talented student and fellow educational entrepreneur Aristotle, who founded a competing school at the Lyceum, a sacred grove. Aristotle's business model obviously saved on investment in real estate and offered a less formal type of education. Plato and Aristotle's "universities" were "research intensive." That is why we still know about them.

A "platonic" system of higher education would solve the current crisis by privatization. Privatizing many of the U.S. "flagship" state universities is likely to be smoother and easier than that of their European counterparts because the portions of the U.S. institutions' operational budgets that come from their states is already quite small. The universities might fill the gap in their incomes by raising their tuition modestly or by cutting their budgets; without the state in charge, they should be able to save by eliminating several bureaucratic layers. If privatized universities have to purchase their real estate and equipment, it may be too expensive. But as in real-estate privatization in eastern Europe, if the state wants to privatize, it can sell properties for a nominal sum, rent them in perpetuity for a symbolic amount, or give them away with the limitation that they cannot be sold for another purpose.

Greater efficiencies would follow the breakup of large public universities into smaller private units, as in the case of large state monopolies in the post-Communist world. Economies of scale may make some collaboration in sharing facilities and

purchasing (for example, libraries) rational, but their organizational structures and the costs of education should be independent of each other. If each academic unit may set its own tuition, competition should bring down the cost of college education. The least competitive faculties and departments—notably graduate programs staffed with tenured academics with weak research records who operate little more than academic Ponzi schemes because their poor reputations prevent their students from obtaining jobs even when they exceed their teachers’ achievements—would be the objects of creative destruction. Students would receive more personalized service from smaller schools, as in Plato’s academy. Such “boutique” schools may have an interest in “smartening up” the education they offer. If students pay tuition to get jobs, a brand name for selectivity and rigorous training, including in quantitative methods and languages, will be the ticket for success. Student attrition may prove just how rigorous and selective the training really is.

Public higher education can be privatized in at least three practical ways, whether the private university is for profit or not. In the Humboldtian and medieval collegial traditions, universities may become joint stock companies or cooperatives in which each faculty member is also an owner. They may hire managers, but such managers would be accountable to the faculty, not the other way around. As owners, members of the faculty may acquire an interest in accommodating accomplished thinkers who may not conform to a hegemonic dogma but attract students. Public universities may merge with successful private ones. This avenue to privatization might be particularly useful for European universities if they are bought by successfully run American universities. Finally, one or more investors or philanthropists may wish to run their own universities and so buy an existing institution instead of founding a new one.

Communism was a grotesque parody of modernity. The centrally managed university is a parody of a university, a Potemkin village that has the facade of a university. Instead of teaching, it has cheating; instead of Socratic dialogues, it has bullet points; instead of a community of scholars united by a search for truth, it has atomized individuals suspicious of each other and informers for the manager; instead of intellectual and spiritual life in truth, academic life is devoted to the implementation of absurd, senseless, immoral, and harmful policies that percolate down through an anonymous, unaccountable bureaucratic hierarchy.

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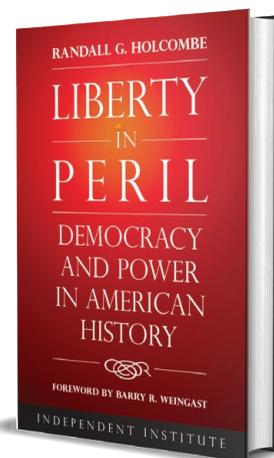
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