on_education
Journal for Research and Debate

reconstructing the academic profession

Eric Lybeck

Anyone engaged in higher education research, particularly Critical University Studies, encounters a paradox: never in human history has higher education been so widespread in its reach and global significance. A rough estimate would place around 2.8% of the world's population as currently being enrolled in tertiary education, with proportionate numbers of academics, support and administrative staff, and buildings to house them. At the same time, however, even as the centrality and importance of academic research, teaching and knowledge exchange has grown, the relative status of the academic profession has suffered a precipitous decline.

A Paradox

Anyone engaged in higher education research, particularly Critical University Studies (Petrina & Ross, 2014; Williams, 2012), encounters a paradox: never in human history has higher education been so widespread in its reach and global significance. A rough estimate would place around 2.8% of the world's population as currently being enrolled in tertiary education (UNESCO IIEP, 2017), with proportionate numbers of academics, support and administrative staff, and buildings to house them (ACTA & IEG, 2017).

At the same time, however, even as the centrality and importance of academic research, teaching and knowledge exchange has grown, the relative status of the academic profession has suffered a precipitous decline. Sure, there is the occasional naturalist or historian who appears on television documentaries; or, the honoured academic judge or respected economist who advises policymaking circles. But, increasingly these are the exceptions that prove the rule: the authority of experts is under siege by right-wing populism, dissatisfied workers and even other experts and academics with opposed views (Lybeck, 2018).

This paradox of the simultaneous growth and decline in status of the academic profession may lead to a lack of reflection, if we fail to observe that universities are not just passive "victims" of transformations in the global knowledge economy. We are, in fact, perhaps more than any other institution, the producer of those changes critics tend to call "neoliberalism", "post-Fordism", "late capitalism" and so on (Jessop, Fairclough, & Wodak, 2008). In other words, what universities experience as the gale of creative destruction, emanates from the current figuration of the university system, which I argue is the contradictory synthesis of two types of university: elite and mass.

What this paradoxical university system produces is a contradictory type of graduate – an individualized, status-seeking professional who increasingly mistakes technique for knowledge – who is expert in deconstructing established truths and authority, including the very authority on which their social status rests. An "individualized professional" is almost an oxymoron, insofar as

professions are collective entities – lawyers, doctors, therapists – and, of course, academics themselves. As academics have become more and more specialized and individualized within their workplaces, we have lost sight of our collective interest in shared, common knowledge which is not identical to "common sense". We believe that our research is "ours", our degrees are like a deed of property and we think of knowledge from the "nowhere" epistemic position of the (adult) individual, rather than thinking of knowledge as a social fund, which improves or declines in quality at a supra-individual level (Elias, 1987).

Because we have not properly reckoned with the contradictions of a "mass elite" university, in which nearly 50% of young adults in OECD nations enrol (OECD, 2018) – meaning the educated "elite" is nearly the popular majority – we find ourselves paralysed by fears of being either too elitist or an impostor or both. We engage in robust critical scholarship that demonstrates we are privileged in the grand scheme of things and yet we still struggle to pay the bills, including interest on student loans, wondering how those non-academic professionals seem to have so much more wealth, leisure and, again, paradoxically: time to read. We may know we are elites, but how often do we feel empowered?

The Pinch

I begin here by sketching some trends and causes for why academics find themselves in this position. Why has the academic profession been effectively deconstructed in the past few decades, producing these increasingly large cohorts of anxious individualized professionals?

– The New Left – while many would blame contemporary neoliberalism on the New Right (see next bullet below), my interpretation here is that the recent trend toward what the sociologist Robert Bellah called "expressive individualism" began during the 1960s amongst the baby-boomers (Bellah et al., 2007; Bell, 1996; Lasch, 1991). Initially motivated by just causes including civil rights, anti-war protests, gender inequality and so forth, this generation's political organization fell short of cultural promises to themselves, including a neo-Romantic, East-meets-West ideal of self-actualization and "freedom" defined in sexual terms on the one hand, but technological terms on the other, particularly within Silicon Valley utopianism, which imagined non-hierarchical networks and systems that would allow humans to interact without authority structures or big government bureaucracies. The introduction of expressive individualism within the baby boomer generation and thereafter, has had a number of consequences for social organization (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005); and was significant in asserting the individual's right to be "free" to do what they want, especially vis-a-vis welfare state authority structures, of which professions and universities remained a constitutive part. Thus began our sustained auto-criticism of the very institutions in which we work, obtain income and status from.

– The New Right – while historians of ideas trace the origins of neoliberalism to the meeting of (then, oddball) economists and political philosophers at a Swiss hotel (Mirowski & Plehwe, 2009; Harvey, 2005), we must remember that neoliberal views did not begin their ascendance until the basic mechanisms of Keynesian fiscal management began to malfunction; when stagflation – a theoretical impossibility in Keynesian macroeconomics – began to occur. This crisis of expertise happened more-or-less concurrently across advanced industrial economies beginning in the early-mid 1970s, pushing the anti-monopolist, anti-tax, subjectivity-oriented and methodologically individualistic views of economists to the forefront of economic policy. Not coincidentally, many professionals' view of themselves preconditioned them to accept this due to the aforementioned

changes in expressive individualism amongst the middle classes. From the right, thereafter, neoliberals challenged the collective authority of professions as being self-interested guilds, in which any reference to public purpose, social or civic function, was mere ideological window-dressing for self-interested, rationally-calculating, greedy actors. Again, this was increasingly the way professionals seemed to view themselves.

The rest is history, as we know: the privatization of public finances began under Reagan and Thatcher in America and Britain, with similar reforms made in their images elsewhere (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2009; McGettigan, 2013; Newfield, 2016). The power of unions was smashed, with reference to the perceived oligarchical structure which stood in the way of efficiency and growth; which was politically effective in terms of eliminating counter-powers in "old Left" unions and political factions. Universities were also caught up in this anti-monopolist wave, having tenures stripped, academic union rights diminished and new public administration audits put in place. These reforms were justified as challenging academic elitism, which supposedly held back the participation of wider populations who would otherwise benefit from higher education; academics, left-wing loafers and their arcane subjects were criticized for being useless to both their students and the wider public. The state would have to intervene to undermine academic authority in their interests (Deem, 2004).

What the state accomplished was the opening of the higher education "market" to other non-academic professionals, namely those trained within business schools employing management and auditing techniques that were inappropriate for the non-economic sectors these consultants colonized (still drawing on "expertise" rooted in university degrees). After decades of trashing public services, which has resulted in greater inefficiencies and costs, dramatically increased economic inequality, still stagnating wages and (often disguised) inflation and unemployment, it is not difficult to see why this mode of organizing firms, societies, healthcare, cultural and media institutions and universities, is undergoing a sustained legitimacy crisis of its own (Streeck, 2017).

We are presently living through an interregnum.

Where We Are

The ascent of populism on the left and right, but especially the right, is rooted in a loss of faith in experts. This anti-expert populism was, of course, prefigured in climate denialism, but has a long tradition going back to evangelical disbelief in Darwinian evolution in the 19th century. Thus far, much of the contemporary academic reaction to these claims has taken the form of doubling down: the public is wrong/racist/ignorant and so on. This may be emotionally satisfying and perhaps factually correct at times, but I will argue this reaction misrecognizes several dynamics that, again, are important for us to see as being the result of long-term sociological trends:

– The internal and international migration of students and graduates has led to an evacuation of young people from rural and suburban communities toward metropolitan cities and university towns – this concentrates the knowledge-economy in these regions and contributes to demographic statistics showing, for example, counties that voted for Brexit are "older" and "less educated" (Becker, Fetzer, & Novy, 2016).

– By moving from elite to mass levels of enrolment, we have restructured national class systems around credentials and status. In the USA, political scientists now measure "class" according to

whether voters have college degrees or not (Hendrickson, 2016).

– As globalized, Schumpeterian states have shifted toward STEM research and innovation, universities organize themselves isomorphically around global rankings' criteria produced by Times Higher Education, QS, The Guardian and other publications, while competing for students (especially international or Chinese) framed as "consumers" (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). This channels the mission and purpose of higher education into the individualistic frames noted above, while also further restricting the incentives for universities to function as regional and local institutions.

– As student numbers grow, unregulated development of student accommodation – both purpose-built and multiple-occupancy homes – dramatically impacts housing prices. These pressures on the cost of housing for "locals" can result in dissatisfaction, displacement and gentrification within metropolitan spaces – or, results in segregation of spaces into town and gown (Smith, Sage, & Balsdon, 2014).

– Not only do these economic trends affect "locals", but early career academics themselves who can rarely afford to live near their universities, in contrast to their older professional peers whose equity in nearby housing has increased exponentially. This occurs alongside the casualization of fixed term teaching staff and the internal bifurcation of the academic profession into elite researchers and precarious teachers. There are also substantial gendered dimensions to the trend, as is typical of the emergence of any "semi-profession" (Etzioni, 1969; Lybeck, 2018).

– Lastly, discourses surrounding social mobility reinforce the idea that one should aspire to leave one's community if one's hopes to obtain, not just higher incomes, but participation in society, politics, economics and science. This process encourages a more rootless, less attached relationship to one's "place" and a greater attachment to cosmopolitan ideals (Calhoun, 2002).

These are only a few related trends, but consider this emergent structure from the vantage of a pensioner living in an abandoned, deindustrialized town. If a politician arrives and says, "Do not believe the experts – remember how they ruined the economy in 2008? – you know, they never talk about immigration? – they want to tell us we cannot make our own rules? – that, our fate is in the hands of global trade and a bunch of faceless bureaucrats in Brussels?" Or: "Do not believe those intolerant latte-sipping Democrat elitists who want to replace coal with solar power from China – we are going to bring back the mines/factory/mill that used to be the heart of this town – anyone who tells you we cannot is lying – fake news!"

From their position within the emerging knowledge-economy, the appeal of these messages becomes somewhat more understandable, if nonetheless ill-informed. But, amongst academics and professionals, is our best reaction then to continue to speak amongst ourselves about how Brexit "really" is a reaction to post-imperial decline? Or, hold seminars on campus demanding our regions develop a "global vision" that fits our university's strategic plans? Or, that those who believe we can "take back control" from unaccountable bureaucrats are essentially stupid. Further examples abound, in which few if any lessons are being learned about our post-Brexit, post-Trump, post-truth world that is not directed internally within academia / metropolitan / "liberal" spaces and communicative systems.

We may further consider that even within this emergent structure – particularly from far from the

"top" of the hierarchical rankings – not all is quite right. Imagine, for example, being a student from a disadvantaged background who has enrolled at a not-so-top-tier institution. One may still have to leave home, become a stranger to both friends "left behind" at home and one's peers at university who are not first-generation students (Reay, David, & Ball, 2005). Or, imagine being an academic working in, or a professional graduate from, one of these institutions. The message from the broader professional environment is clear: you remain "less than". You may have a degree, but it is "Mickey Mouse". You apply for dozens of jobs, but you are competing against graduates from "top-tier" universities. Accordingly, the job you do have is insecure, because you are "replaceable" – by either a new graduate or an as yet not invented artificially-intelligent machine. You may be aware you are in what anthropologist David Graeber (2018) calls a "bullshit job". Will you too become "left behind"?

Now imagine the politician who says: "Do you know all those elitist academics going on about social justice, feminism, transgenderism and so on? – when will it end? – it is never enough for these people – and they have the nerve to talk about us being 'privileged' – Ha!" Wouldn't it be so much more convenient if the source of one's problems lay at the door of those irritating, arrogant, "virtue-signalling" academic elites? Not only do they seem to control the centre of expertise, culture and power, if one tries to challenge their wisdom, one is accused of being a racist, sexist, privileged white man or similar.

These are just a few points of view that look differently at the elite centre of the academic profession, which remains despite the increase in mass student enrolment. Indeed, as overcredentialization makes bachelors' degrees a standard baseline for employment, the status hierarchy of institutions (i.e., global rankings) determines one's chances of obtaining work (Collins, 1971). As long as the hierarchical structure of higher education institutions remains in place, any efforts to widen participation within the elite universities will fail to improve the condition of the majority of students from non-traditional backgrounds, who will be enrolled at less-than-top tiered universities.

Reconstruction

Having deconstructed much of what is taken for granted as the natural structure of higher education in a globalized, knowledge-based economy, it is worth considering what should be done to improve the situation. Taking the last observation first: if the problem is the hierarchical structure of institutions, worldwide, what the academic profession can begin to do is reassert our collaborative relationships and horizontal and segmental patterns of differentiation. Those of us in more "elite" institutions might recommend further collaborations with "lower status" universities, not just in developing countries as the British government is encouraging through its Global Challenges Research Fund (https://www.ukri.org/research/global-challenges-research-fund/), but within local cities and regions. The recent proposal in Berlin to develop a citywide strategy for Humboldt, FU Berlin, TU Berlin and Charité medical schools is a promising development in this direction (https://www.berlin-university-alliance.de/en/index.html). Indeed, the re-emergence of explicitly "civic universities" through the UPP Foundation in Britain and amongst collaborators I am working with internationally as editor of the new journal, Civic Sociology, may point us in the direction we need to go.

Not to put too fine a point on it: we need to take responsibility, not just for our scholarship, but for our societies. It is our responsibility to empathize, engage and explain what we think is the "truth" to

those who may not see the value in what we do. We must abandon our instincts to be either patronising or dismissive of those who feel the knowledge economy has nothing to offer them. In going through such processes, maybe some of our most certain truths will change. Maybe together, we can become something new.

While this task may seem difficult given the present circumstances, we should remember that the academic profession is over 1,000 years old. Founded as guilds to preserve the quality of degrees, the social value of universities has waxed and waned over the centuries. What is most interesting about the current situation is the paradox between the expansion of mass higher education and the criticism of academics as out-of-touch elitists. As I have argued in the past, perhaps a return to the idea of universities as self-governing guilds could provide a basis upon which we reconnect with wider populations (Lybeck, 2018). Immediately this suggestion will strike us as a contradiction: how would reconstructing the "exclusivity" of guild "privileges" result in a reengagement with the public? History suggests that universities were not just "A" guild, but the original guild, upon which all others organized themselves (Wei, 2012). Other histories suggest unions and artisanal associations were similarly modelled on guilds, especially as these privileges were undermined by utilitarian principles of "free trade". Indeed, historians have revisited the history of guilds to see that they not only provided the earliest conception of citizenship, but were also transnational in scope (Prak, 2018; Hoogenboom et al., 2018). Moving forward we may wish to consider our relationship as academics and professions to more traditional "trade" and "craft" guilds, such as Les Compagnons du Devoir and other forms of apprenticeships and non-academic education.

After all, the great success story of the 20th and 21st century expansion of higher education has been the rising proportion of university graduates. But, have we adequately considered the fates of those without such credentials – in both the older and younger populations – who do not go on, immediately, to higher education? Perhaps the current crisis we are facing is, in fact, an opportunity to rethink the role of academic knowledge in contemporary, globalizing (and deglobalizing) societies. In other words, perhaps we must collectively rethink ourselves.

References

ACTA & IEG, (2017). *How Much Is Too Much? Controlling Administrative Costs through Effective Oversight.* Washington, D.C.: American Council of Trustees and Alumni | Institute for Effective Governance.

Becker, S., Fetzer, T., & Novy, D. (2016). *Who Voted for Brexit? A Comprehensive District-Level Analysis.* Centre for Competitive Advantage in the Global Economy, Department of Economics. University of Warwick.

Bell, D. (1996). *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism. 20th Anniversary Edition*. Basic Books.

Bellah, R. N., Madsen, R., Sullivan, W. M., Swidler, A., & Tipton, S. M., (2007). *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. University of California Press.

Boltanski, L., & Chiapello, E. (2005). *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. London and New York: Verso.

Calhoun, C. (2002). The Class Consciousness of Frequent Travelers: Toward a Critique of Actually Existing Cosmopolitanism. *South Atlantic Quarterly*, *101*, 869–897.

Collins, R. (1971). Functional and Conflict Theories of Educational Stratification. *American Sociological Review*, *36*(6), 1002–1019.

Deem, R. (2004). The Knowledge Worker, the Manager-Academic and the Contemporary UK University: New and Old Forms of Public Management? *Financial Accountability and Management, 20*(2), 107–128.

DiMaggio, P. J., & Powell, W. W. (1983). The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields. *American Sociological Review, 48*(2), 147–160.
Elias, N. (1987). *Involvement and Detachment*. Oxford, UK; New York, NY, USA: Blackwell.
Etzioni, A. (1969). *The Semi-Professions and Their Organization: Teachers, Nurses, Social Workers*. New York, NY: Free Press.
Gouldner, A. W. (1979). *The Future of Intellectuals and the Rise of the New Class*. New York: Seabury Press.
Graeber, D. (2018). *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory*. London: Penguin UK.
Harvey, D. (2005). *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Hendrickson, C., & Galston, W. A. (November 18, 2016). *The Educational Rift in the 2016 Election.* [Web Log Entry] https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2016/11/18/educational-rift-in-2016-election/
Hoogenboom, M., Kissane,Ch., Prak, M., Wallis, P., & Minns, Ch. (2018). Guilds in the Transition to Modernity: The Cases of Germany, United Kingdom, and the Netherlands. *Theory and Society, 47*, 255–291.
Jessop, B., Fairclough, N, & Wodak, R. (Eds.). (2008). *Education and the Knowledge-Based Economy in Europe*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.
Lasch, Ch. (1991). *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*. New Ed edition. New York: W. W. Norton and Company.
Lybeck, E. R. (2018). The Coming Crisis of Academic Authority. In Geelan, T., Hernando, M., & Walsh, P. (Eds.), *From Crisis to Social Change: Towards Alternative Horizons*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
McFarland, G. W., (Ed.). (1975). *Mugwumps, Morals and Politics, 1884-1920*. Illustrated edition. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.
McGettigan, A. (2013). *The Great University Gamble: Money, Markets and the Future of Higher Education*. London: Pluto Press.
Mirowski, P., & Plehwe, D. (2009). *The Road from Mont Pelerin: The Making of the Neoliberal Thought Collective*. 1 edition. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
Newfield, Ch. (2016). *The Great Mistake: How We Wrecked Public Universities and How We Can Fix Them*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
OECD. (2018). *Education at a Glance*. https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/education-at-a-glance_19991487
Petrina, S., & Ross, E. W. (2014). Critical University Studies: Workplace, Milestones, Crossroads, Respect, Truth. *Workplace: A Journal for Academic Labor, 23*, 62-72.
Prak, M. (2018). *Citizens without Nations: Urban Citizenship in Europe and the World, c.1000–1789*. Cambridge, United Kingdom; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
Reay, D., David, M. E., & Ball, S. (2005). *Degrees of Choice: Social Class, Race and Gender in Higher Education*. Stoke on Trent, UK; Sterling, USA: Trentham Books Ltd.
Slaughter, S., & Rhoades, G. (2009). *Academic Capitalism and the New Economy: Markets, State, and Higher Education*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
Smith, D. P., Sage, J., & Balsdon, S. (2014). The Geographies of Studentification: 'Here, There and Everywhere?' *Geography (Sheffield, England), 99*(Sept.), 116–127.
Stoner, A. M., & Melathopoulos, A. (2015). *Freedom in the Anthropocene: Twentieth-Century Helplessness in the Face of Climate Change*. New York, NY: Palgrave Pivot.
Streeck, W. (2017). The Return of the Repressed. *New Left Review*, II, 104, 5–18.
Wei, I. P., (2012). *Intellectual Culture in Medieval Paris: Theologians and the University, c.1100–1330*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Williams, J. J., (February 19, 2012). Deconstructing Academe. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. https://www.chronicle.com/article/An-Emerging-Field-Deconstructs/130791

Recommended Citation

Lybeck, E. (2018). Reconstructing the Academic Profession. *On Education. Journal for Research and Debate*, *1* (3). https://doi.org/10.17899/on_ed.2018.3.5

Download PDF version

Do you want to comment on this article? Please send your reply to editors@oneducation.net. Replies will be processed like invited contributions. This means they will be assessed according to standard criteria of quality, relevance, and civility. Please make sure to follow editorial policies and formatting guidelines.

eric lybeck

Eric Lybeck is Leverhulme Early Career Fellow at the Manchester Institute of Education at the University of Manchester. Working in the emerging field of Critical University Studies, his work draws on processual and civic approaches to social knowledge and practices to make new connections between the disciplines of sociology and education. His doctoral research at Cambridge explored the history of the social and legal sciences during the late 19th century transfer of university models from Germany to America. He is currently editor-in-chief of the journal, Civic Sociology, published by University of California Press.