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**Progressive Social Change in the ‘Ivory Tower’? A Critical Reflection on the  
Evolution of Activist Orientated Research in US Universities**

Mr Michael J. Barker  
Urban Research Program, Griffith University, QLD, Australia

**Abstract**

Universities are host to a world of contradictions: while progressives challenge the increasing dominance of corporate interests on their campuses, their Right-ward leaning compatriots allege that academia’s ‘liberal’ bias is undermining the status quo, and making democratic governance increasingly untenable. The last critique of universities is especially ironic given that universities are meant to be a place of freedom where scholars can challenge the narrow confines of orthodoxy. Indeed, arguably encouraging subversive thinking is a fundamental step that must be taken to promote the development of creative solutions to the numerous pressing problems affecting our world. With a strong focus on American institutions, this paper will critically examine the contemporary democratic role fulfilled by universities. Initially the paper will trace the evolution of universities from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, and demonstrate that in opposition to popularly held utopian notions of universities as havens for free thinking, a powerful argument can be made that their uncontroversial role is primarily to sustain capitalism. With the increasing corporatisation of universities perhaps such a function is becoming more visible, and may be considered to be problematic from two perspectives, (1) universities independence from their capitalist financiers is being visibly broken down, thus undermining their ability to act as supposed disinterested guardians of capitalism, and (2) progressive activist scholarship is being squeezed out of the ivory tower. This paper, however, is primarily concerned with second point, and will investigate the dilemma posed to activist scholars by the ever increasing encroachment of corporations into the university environ. Recommendations for sustaining activist research within society are considered from two directions: a purist arguably more sustainable approach that suggests that radical scholarship within the university only serves to strengthen the status quo; and a second more reformist position that delineates ways by which radical scholars might fight to retain autonomy within a corporatized university.

Universities are complex institutions that are host to a wide range of ideological contradictions, however, as Sinclair (1923, 21) observed many years ago: ‘the plutocracy is immortal; and it is necessary that fresh generations should be trained to its service.’ Gould (2003, xv) observes that critiques of universities from across the ideological spectrum are usually concerned with ‘exactly the same issues – the academy’s social failures, its narrow professionalism, its inability to provide a democratic education – but from different perspectives.’ Progressive scholars, students and citizens citing the increasing dominance of neoliberal cultural regimes over all forms of life regularly draw attention to, and challenge the increasing dominance of corporate interests on their campuses. However, their Right-ward leaning compatriots allege that the universities problems ‘result from social engineering through liberal multiculturalist agendas and political correctness’ (Gould 2003, xv). Critics from the Right also point out that academia’s ‘liberal’ bias is undermining the status quo, and making democratic governance increasingly untenable (Crozier et al. 1975). Both critics, from the Left and Right, are correct in some respects, but the latter charge is especially ironic given that universities are meant to be a place of freedom where scholars can challenge the narrow confines of orthodoxy of society. Indeed, many writers consider that such questioning or subversive thinking is a fundamental prerequisite for developing creative solutions to the numerous pressing problems affecting our world. Moreover it should be self-evident that ‘clear and logical thinking leads to a cumulation of knowledge... and the advance of knowledge sooner or later undercuts the traditional order’ (Andreski 1972, 90).

If one takes a radical perspective on the nature of institutional politics, then it is clear, as this paper will argue that universities are a critical institution for reproducing capitalist cultural hegemony, which makes them an inherently conservative institution. If one accepts this hegemonic purpose, then it is unsurprising that one of the dominant power holders of contemporary democracies, corporations, should be exerting an increasingly conservatising influence on universities (Barrow 1990; Cattell 1913). Yet, as this paper will demonstrate, there is also a legitimate reason why universities in the United States are criticized for being too liberal. This is because many of the most influential universities were in fact created and/or have been heavily funded by liberal foundations. So it is understandable that conservatives would refer to universities as the ivory tower of the liberal intelligentsia, as liberal foundations have long been interested in promoting ‘disinterested’ research that celebrates social engineering. Of course these liberal foundations are not truly progressive as they were created by America’s leading capitalists: thus it is commonsensical that the support that liberal philanthropists have given to universities would in no way seriously challenge the elite-driven status quo – a system that has been referred to by radical writers as a plutocracy, or by more conservative political theorists as polyarchy (Dahl 1971). Consequently, with the dual pressure of liberal philanthropy and corporate funding acting on universities, undertaking progressive activist research within such elitist institutions is problematic to say the least.

Recognizing the historical importance of progressive activist research, this paper attempts to understand how such scholarship might be promoted by scholars to empower citizens to reclaim democracy from elites (Fay 1987, 4). By initially elaborating on the hegemonic role of the modern day university, this paper will trace the influence of liberal philanthropy on the establishment’s evolution from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards. It will then demonstrate that the increasing corporatisation of

universities is problematic for two reasons, (1) their independence from their traditionally liberal financiers is being visibly broken down, thus undermining their ability to act as ‘disinterested’ guardians of capitalism, and (2) progressive activist scholarship is being rapidly squeezed out from the already narrow confines of the ivory tower. However, this paper is primarily concerned with examining the dilemma posed to activist scholars trying to conduct meaningful research within universities. Thus after providing a brief review of universities long-standing relationship to subversive scholarship, this paper will examine how activist scholars might continue to carry out emancipatory research in the face of serious resistance. Recommendations for sustaining activist research within society are considered from two directions, (1) a purist, arguably more sustainable approach, that suggests that radical scholarship within the university only serves to strengthen the status quo, and (2) a more commonly taken reformist position that delineates the ways by which radical scholars might fight to retain autonomy within corporatized universities. In conclusion I argue that while the second strategy is an appropriate strategy to adopt at this present juncture, future longer-term strategising must begin to grapple with the possibilities of implementing the former more radical strategy.

### **The Liberal Roots of US Universities**

In opposition to popularly held utopian notions of universities as havens for free thinking, a powerful argument can be made that their uncontroversial role is to sustain capitalism. Indeed, as Horowitz (1969, 34) observes: ‘The development of the modern American university was not left to the natural bent of those within its ivory towers; it was shaped by the ubiquitous charity of the foundations and the guiding mastery of wealth.’ Smith (1974, 95) also points out in his excellent, albeit rare, discussion of the influence of liberal philanthropy on universities that during the ‘crucial formative years’ at the beginning of the twentieth century, the most powerful liberal foundations set up by the ‘biggest of the big robber barons were allowed to define and control American higher education.’

Horowitz (1969) highlights how throughout the ‘radical upsurge’ of the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century a ‘series of exemplary firings of liberal scholars took place, usually as a result of the professors having linked some of their abstract ideas with the issues of the hour’ (also see Barrow 1990, 89, 177, 203-4). While this treatment of dissent scholars will be familiar to readers aware of Norman Finkelstein’s ongoing tenure battle, Horowitz (1969, 37) accurately observes that although the strategic use of such dismissals is no doubt useful in some instances ‘the carrot is always more efficacious and gentlemanly than the stick’.

Given the massive power liberal foundations have welded over academia it is perhaps not too surprising that discussing their corrosive influence is a taboo subject within academia. Their evasion of critical commentary also relies upon the fact that their very subtlety has been their strength because if ‘[I]ooked at *formally*, the foundations were imposing nothing’ (Horowitz 1969, 37). Unsurprisingly, university research that serves elite interests is promoted first and foremost.<sup>1</sup> Thus behavioralism and

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<sup>1</sup> Horowitz (1969, 41) notes that: ‘Exceptional and isolated support for individual radicals may be useful, however, in establishing the openness of the system at minimum risk’. Thus Bowles and Gintis (1976) noted in the foreword to their classic critical work, *Schooling in Capitalist America*, that they

pluralism dominated the field of political science (Seybold 1980), and such studies 'soon were in high demand, from government to business directorates, from the military to the CIA' (Horowitz 1969, 43).

Writing in the late 1930s, Coon (1938, 53) observes: 'Beyond occasional remarks about the Foundation serving as a means of avoiding inheritance and income taxes and the observation that such organizations would be superfluous in a socialist society, not even the radicals have attacked the Foundation.' Not much has changed, so it is fitting that as universities are a product of the Middle Ages, that the scholars within them should be trapped in the proverbial Middle Ages, that is, at least in regards to their knowledge of liberal philanthropies influence on the evolution of academia. Although perhaps this statement portrays the Middle Ages in a negative light, because in opposition to conventional wisdom that paints this era as a dark time of lost knowledge, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that this vision owes much to the industrious propagandists of the Renaissance who sought to make themselves as separate and better than their predecessors (Harris and Grigsby 2007).<sup>2</sup>

### **Channelling Research Agendas**

Created in 1903, the General Education Board proved to be a critical means by which liberal philanthropists were able to shape the contours of American higher education (Hollis 1938, 162). Thus the first president of the Board, William H. Baldwin Jr. 'worked closely with Booker T. Washington in addressing the South's racial and economic problems' (until his death in 1905), 'advis[ing] blacks to abandon their pursuit of equality' (Anderson 1980, 155). Yet as the following review of the influence of liberal foundations on education will demonstrate: 'It is hardly an exaggeration to say that foundations have been the source of almost all innovations in education (private as well as public)' (Roelofs 2003, 70).

According Slaughter and Silva (1980, 62) the Carnegie Institute of Washington – which was founded in 1902 – provides the 'earliest example of sustained resource support for a specific group of academics and public service professionals engaged in producing ideas that addressed clearly defined social issues'. However, the type of research they funded was not disinterested research, because as they go on to argue the Institute 'funded the construction of a pragmatic ideology of ameliorative reform that justified the perpetuation of industrial capitalism' (Slaughter and Silva 1980, 62). That said, Slaughter and Silva suggest that the Institute was fairly unsuccessful in carrying out this task until after World War I, because by then 'groups holding deviant ideologies... [had been] decimated through the use of wartime statutes', so:

In the 1920s foundations returned to funding research on social issues. However, this time foundations worked in a field from which many deviant ideologies had been uprooted, where the consensus of normality obtained, fostered by the rapid rise of centralized electronic media, and where the idea structure of professionals already supported industrial capital. Foundations were now able to direct their resources toward ideological formation unbothered by a

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were 'indebted to the Ford Foundation for a three-year grant, without which the statistical and historical studies which underlie this book could not have been undertaken' (1976: ix).

<sup>2</sup> Similarly as Isakhan (2007) demonstrates, the Middle-East can take pride that it, and not Greece, was the birthplace of modern day democracy (contrary to popular beliefs promoted in and by the West).

free marketplace of ideas, and with a much greater probability of success. (Slaughter and Silva 1980, 80)

Prior to World War I the National Academy of Sciences also created the federally funded National Research Council, which proved successful in ‘mobilizing the scientific and technical resources of the country for war’ (Marks 1980, 100). As a result of its success in 1919 the Council was reorganized so that its activities were no longer funded by the government, and instead was supported by foundations, corporations, and individuals. Significantly between 1919 and 1922 just over 60 per cent of its total funding (US\$8 million) was derived from the Carnegie Corporation (Marks 1980, 100-1). According to Marks (1980, 101), the then chairman of the board of trustees of the Carnegie Institute, Elihu Root ‘had no doubt that America under the guidance of the National Research Council could successfully combat her “traditions of separate private initiative” and organize “scientific research for practical ends as effectively as an autocratic government” could give “direction to a docile and submissive people”.’ Incidentally, in 1922, Elihu Root, went on to be an integral founding member of the elite planning group, the Council on Foreign Relations (Barker 2008a).

In the early 1920s, foundation funding also led to the creation of the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) (Berman 1983, 105). The SSRC then had a significant influence on the subsequent development of the social sciences in the US, but it seems that their ‘goal was not to create a social science relevant to public policy – but one that accented quantitative and business-orientated research’ (Feagin and Vera 2001, 93). Slaughter and Silva (1980, 74) suggest that perhaps as a result of the controversial Walsh Commission – a critical investigation of the influence of philanthropic foundations on democracy – which noted that that ‘mixing funding with direct project management automatically invalidated results’ of academic research, the big foundations began funneling their monies through academic holding companies such as the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) and the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS). The ACLS and SSRC were formed in 1919 and 1923 respectively, and between 1925 and 1960 the former organization received US\$20 million from foundations (60 per cent of which came from the big three), and from 1925 to 1960 the SSRC received US\$28 million (95 percent of which was funnelled to them by the big three) (Slaughter and Silva 1980, 74-5).

In 1929, Hutchins claimed that the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial (an independent branch of the Rockefeller Foundation) ‘in its brief but brilliant career did more than any other agency to promote the social sciences in the United States’ (cited in Fosdick 1952, 200). Fosdick (1952, 199) observed that during Beardsley Ruml’s seven years as chief executive at the Memorial (1922-29), the foundation distributed more than \$58 million for social science work to Chicago, Yale, North Carolina, Vanderbilt, and a number of other universities both in the US and abroad. Furthermore, according to Ross (1991, 400), one of the major direct impact of the foundations support of research during the 1920s was that the ‘professional base of scientism was strengthened’ considerably. Ross (1991, 429) adds that the arrival on the scene of the SSRC ‘plunged the [sociological] profession into empirical research, from which they hoped a basic science of social control would emerge’.

Given the emphasis that liberal foundations placed on social engineering it is not surprising that Fisher (1980, 239) noted that during the 1930s the Rockefeller Foundation attempted to 'increase in the cooperation between social scientists and the business community' in order that the social sciences could be 'harnessed to solving Western capitalism's problems and to providing on-the-spot service to "men of affairs."' Furthermore, as Marks (1980, 88) demonstrates, by working closely with psychologists (like Edward L. Thorndike), philanthropic foundations also helped refine the means of ideology formation by promoting 'both theoretically and monetarily, a world view emphasizing individual differences'. Critically the development of this new world view happened to serve a vital purpose for ruling elites as it 'furnished a powerful rationale and legitimation of industrial capitalism' (Marks 1980, 89). If anything as more time passed this phenomena only intensified, and according to Smith (1974, 118), during the 1950s 'with the rise of state spending and the end of the overwhelming significance of giant foundations like the GEB and the Carnegie Foundation, the "philanthropy" of foundations and newly conscious corporations came very close to merging.'

### **Undermining Education**

According to Bowles and Gintis (1976, 206), the work undertaken by the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education between 1967 and 1973 was '[b]y far the most important effort to restructure U.S. higher education'. However, as opposed to improving the educational system, the Commission, chaired by Clark Kerr, was used to 'elucidate the evolving strategy for the restructuring of higher education to meet the needs of stable capitalist expansion' (Bowles and Gintis (1976, 206). Indeed, Rhoads and Slaughter (2006, 106) concur and state that the 'initial point of marketization with regard to student aid came with the Higher Education Amendments of 1972.' They go on to note that although most universities wanted institutional grants the Carnegie Commission, many economists, and the pro-business Committee on Economic Development 'articulated a market discourse of student quality through the efficiencies of the market: Give consumers the money, and the competition for them among institutions would yield improvements' (Rhoads and Slaughter 2006, 106).

Acting as a buffer between the citizenry and the capitalists profiting from exploiting the citizenry, the Carnegie Commission helped alleviate of 'tensions generated by a clearly stratified industrial society' by advocating the 'controlled expansion of mass higher education' in a manner that was first and foremost compatible with capitalist interests (Darknell 1980, 404). Then as Darknell (1980, 405) observed, with the Carnegies Foundation's 'work at center stage done' it could 'safely move to the background' as the Carnegie Commission had successfully defused higher education 'as a mechanism of democratization, and it no longer threaten[ed] to confound the established social order of the American corporate system.' While scholars appear constantly surprised by the failure of such foundation supported ventures, the writing was long on the wall as Coon (1938, 276) observed: 'Philanthropic and business interests are not merely complementary, they are identical. Just as you can't run a steel mill without machine guns, so you can't run a capitalist democracy without a pretense of philanthropy.'

## The Corporate Takeover of Academia

Although there has been an acceleration of the conservatising trends acting upon universities (globally) under the dominating influence of neoliberal politics and transnational capitalism, these are processes that have been in train for some time. Aronowitz (1998, 209) points out that ‘most faculty have long since capitulated to the strictures of the conservative disciplines and to the civility and professionalization demanded by academic culture’. Croteau (2005, 26) supports this contention and notes that recent trends toward increasing corporatisation have meant that ‘higher education hasn’t [just] *served* big business, it has *become* big business’ (Croteau 2005, 26).

On top of the literal corporate takeover of universities, over the past several decades conservative think tanks have worked to effectively temper and discourage both liberals and more radical progressive activist scholars from pursuing legitimate avenues of academic enquiry. Such right-wing think tanks, and their associated corporate front groups and astroturf groups, engage in extensive flak creation, publicly denigrating left-leaning academics for speaking out – or merely teaching – in support of progressive causes. This well-funded, ideological offensive which in extreme cases has resulted in the removal of tenure has had the expected result that many scholars have become less vocal advocates for progressive politics: in effect an ideological strait jacket has been imposed on scholarship. Moreover, the poor links that exist between progressive academics and the rest of society are not aided by the media’s portray of conservatives as ‘common-folk’ and progressives (and even Democrats) as ‘liberal elites’ from the ‘ivory tower’. Arguably, the accusation of universities ‘liberal’ bias operates in the same way that such a charge has been falsely (and successfully) applied to mainstream corporate media itself (Herman 1999).

In many ways, the corporate takeover of universities might be seen to be seen as a combination of a conservative backlash against the liberal roots of universities, and also as the liberal foundations typical strategy of providing early leadership on specific issues and then letting corporations and governments sustain their initiatives. Moreover, the naturally elitist heritage of universities has made them an easy target for well funded right- wing demagogues: this phenomenon is aggravated by the fact that most progressive authors have tended to view the history of universities through rose-tinted lenses, and have failed to acknowledge the importance of hegemonic function of liberal philanthropy.

Yet while many liberal elites may support the corporatisation of universities, it should not be surprising that some of them may consider this corporate takeover as simply too extreme. This is because the rapidity with which this process has unfolded may actually result in the collapse of the myth of the independence and objectivity of university scholarship. For instance, critical scholars like Giroux (1983: xiii) note that while he had formerly thought that ‘universities generally provided a setting where a critical dialogue could be constructed’, he now understands ‘that there are very few universities left in the United States where academic freedom is taken seriously.’ Indeed although Giroux fails to consider the historical links between universities and liberal philanthropy he notes that the ‘ideological and material forces that link schools to the dominant industrial order no longer appear to be constrained by the principles of social justice that informed liberal pedagogy in the 1960s and 1970s’ (Giroux 1983,

43). The end result of this change may well be that the public may begin to see that the university is not a neutral institution for solving the problems of humanity but is little more than a powerful guardian of capitalism. A situation that is troublesome for liberal elites.

### **Progressive Activist Research in a Neoliberal Ideological Factory?**

In spite of the increasing domination of universities by corporate interests academia still provides a narrow breathing space for a handful of activist-scholars. Unfortunately in many ways this tokenistic accommodation of radical scholars helps fuel the myth perpetuated by elites (and the corporate media) that universities are dominated by progressives.

Giroux and Giroux (2004, 38) argue, the ‘central issue for scholars in the academy’ should be: ‘How does our work encourage or undermine the civic capacities of those we attempt to educate?’ Yet as they go on to note:

It is a curious contemporary circumstance that many progressive academics will describe their work as political, even radically transformative, and yet refuse to name, however provisionally, the kind of political regime they hope to put into place, or even acknowledge the ethics that drive their political commitments, alliance, and decisions. (Giroux and Giroux 2004, 38)

Academia may have become a velvet cage for activist-scholars, because in reality its promise of an autonomous working environment is heavily constrained by the professional dictates of the academy (Croteau 2005, 20). As Chomsky (1969, 252) noted in his prescient discussion titled *The Responsibility of Intellectuals*: ‘In an age of science and technology it is inevitable that their prestige [specifically, that within the social and behavioural sciences] will be employed as an ideological instrument’ to protect the actions of political elites from critical analysis. This commonsensical analysis is supported by Croteau’s (2005) take on universities, he concludes:

Those satisfied with contemplating the world from afar or in the abstract – even radical social critics – can find a comfortable home there. Those engaged in practical efforts that reaffirm the status quo or promote mild reform can also pursue lucrative academic careers. But those who are intent on trying to develop – in collaboration with social movements – scholarship that promotes fundamental social change face a formidable challenge that may only be growing. Universities, in ways both subtle and overt, are hostile to the efforts of such scholar-activists. (Croteau 2005, 38)

Yet despite the longstanding opposition of academia toward progressive activist-scholars there has been a long history of activism within universities. For example, Croteau (2005, 21-2) describes how for a quarter of a century – beginning in the early 1890s – women (like Jane Addams) working as sociologists at Chicago University considered their research participants as ‘partners for change’ and ‘took committed stands on aiding the poor, immigrants, and women in a rapidly changing city facing significant problems.’ However like the many other activist-scholars whose research has become incorporated (or coopted) into capitalist structures, the radical nature of these sociologists work ended in the 1920s when their work was channelled away

from radical reform and into a newly devised *social work* department, which ‘no longer had a change-orientated focus’ (Croteau 2005, 22). The deradicalization of such progressive work like Jane Addams’ settlement movement probably wasn’t aided by the fact that it was always reliant upon finances provided by upper-class women, whose intentions for funding such projects were certainly not only due to disinterested altruism (see Domhoff 1970, 45-53).

Given the influence of liberal foundations over university curricula, it is not coincidental that shortly after the end of World War II, US mass communications research was dominated by proponents of the limited effects media thesis. Unsurprisingly, this paradigm shift away from the former hypodermic injection model or strong media effects paradigm did not occur within US policy making elites, or within liberal foundations: indeed, both these groups worked hand-in-hand with those same academics who promoted this paradigm shift, as they clearly understood the power of the media to help destabilise (‘communist’) foreign governments, and to manufacture the consent of their own populous (Barker 2008b; Buxton 1994; Parmar 2002). Such problems in communications research are still evident today, as Carragee (2005, 79) draws attention to the failure of the applied social sciences, but highlighting ‘communication consulting in particular’ for failing to deal with the numerous pressing issues facing American society.<sup>3</sup> He goes on to chastise these disciplines for ‘serv[ing] to advance the interests of [the] powerful... while neglecting challenges confronting marginalized communities and groups’ (Carragee 2005, 79-80).

Ironically, although the hard sciences are strongly positivist in their theoretical orientation (in contrast to the social sciences) they still understand that progress comes about through ongoing critiques of established thinking. Indeed Chomsky (2003: 198) points out that although they may not use his terminology, the hard sciences appreciate that ‘the social and intellectual role of the university should be subversive in a healthy society.’ So contrary to popular expectations in actual fact the social sciences are in many ways less free to criticise the status quo than even the hard sciences. This is because ‘the results of inquiry that is truly free and unconstrained can rarely be taken over to enhance private power’, especially when it is considered that ‘universities, at the core of intellectual culture, are expected’ to legitimise elite democracy or plutocracy (Chomsky 2003, 199). These expectations place social scientists in the difficult (in some cases untenable) position of carrying out critical research, while at the same time relying upon state and private benefactors to sustain their very existence (a problem discussed by Agger (1998) with reference to US sociology departments). This perhaps helps to explain the antagonistic relationship which exists between scholars (who are often considered to patrol the philosophical ‘ivory towers’ of academia, serving dominant elite interests) and progressive activists (whose lives revolve around the streets, in the service of the oppressed).

The evident tension between activists and scholars eased somewhat after a decade of successful collaborations during the 1960s, which gave rise to modern social movement research (beginning in earnest in the 1970s). The social movement research launched in the 1970s – characterised by resource mobilization theory, which

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<sup>3</sup> A notable exception being Boston Universities Media Research and Action Project. <http://www.mrap.info/>

has been dominated by the work of Douglas McAdam, Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly – marked a significant break from previous movement theorizing which envisaged social movement activism as a deviant behaviour driven by irrational ideologies. However, since then while ‘social movement scholarship has become more abundant and sophisticated’ the working associations between activists and scholars have been ‘dramatically weakened’ and their connections ‘largely lost’ (Croteau *et al.* 2005, xi). The end result is that: ‘Movement theorists usually speak to themselves, rarely reaching beyond the narrow confines of specialized academic journals and conferences’ (Croteau *et al.* 2005, xii). Croteau *et al.* (2005, xii) adds that: ‘As a result, movement activists generally do not know or use social movement theorists’ work. If they are familiar with some of it, they often think it trivial.’ This is concerning on a number of levels, because:

The study of movements should, if we were doing it correctly, help us have better movements. But it is rare to find social movement theory being published through progressive outlets that see themselves as servicing the movement. It is rarer still to hear activists responding to or in any way reflecting on social movement theory coming out of the academy. (Peters 2005, 45)

Hoynes (2005, 100) adds that:

Social movement theorists study media coverage of social movements, but with rare exceptions have done little to explore the implications of their evolving understanding of media-movement relations for movements themselves. Similarly, many activists are aware of social movement and media scholarship that tries to clarify media’s role as both resource and constraint for activist organizations, but see it as too abstract to be useful for building media strategies. (Hoynes 2005, 100)

Indeed, Flacks (2005, 4) suggests that recent trends in theorizing about social movements is ‘coming to resemble that mix of inflated theorizing and abstracted empiricism that Mills [1959] thought was dominating sociology as a whole in the late 1950s.’ So it is no surprise that recent research (carried out by Bevington and Dixon 2003) on ‘antiglobalization activists’ found that ‘current literature in the sociology of social movements is not high on activist reading lists, [while] historical and contemporary case studies, biographies, and memoirs are’ (Flacks 2005, 13). This certainly helps explain the decidedly anti-intellectual stance adopted by many activists (Darnovsky *et al.* 1995) and the problem of ‘terminological proliferation [within social movement studies, which can be seen] as a symptom of withering dialogue with activists’ (Ryan 2005, 118).

The point of raising these criticisms is not to deny the existence of critical scholars or the utility of social movement research to activists, but merely to highlight existing research problems, so that appropriate solutions may be sought to remedy them. Yet despite evident problems, which in recent decades a chasm has certainly grown between activists and social movement scholars in both thought and practice, Croteau *et al.* (2005, xiii) contend that this gap should really be thought of as an artificial divide. This is because ‘[b]oth activism and theory... are diminished by the failure to integrate the two’ (Croteau *et al.* 2005, xiii). As history illustrates, progressive social

change in society is almost always conditional upon long hard won campaigns waged by dedicated activists (Zinn 2003). Likewise, progressive advances within academia are intimately tied to the support that activist-scholars receive from the public. So while admittedly the progressive credentials of universities were bolstered in the fall out of the social movement organizing of the 1960s, these advances are gradually being rolled back as corporations have come to replace the broader community as the external constituency most concerned with supporting university research.

### **Reinvigorating Activist Research**

Peters (2005, 43) observes that to date, ‘producing and disseminating information’ about the glaring inequities generated by capitalism has been one of the ‘most productive’ outcomes of work undertaken between scholars and activists. However, perhaps such educative efforts have already persuaded enough people of the systemic inequities of our society, and it is possible that the missing element preventing many people becoming involved in challenging such problems is ‘not information and understanding of all that is wrong, but rather [having] a sense that it is worth trying to do something about it?’ (Peters 2005, 43).

Unfortunately the idea that *there is no alternative* (to corporate capitalism) has also been internalised by many progressive activists, as many find themselves continually reacting to current crisis’s and feel that all they can realistically hope to achieve is to temper the more extreme aspects of capitalism. Healey and Hinson (2005, 61) suggest that one of the reasons for this might be the result of post-1960s activists focus on ‘single-issue advocacy approaches’ and on *organizing* rather than *theory* (that is ‘more... Alinsky than Aronowitz’). This in turn led to what they describe as a non-ideological approach to organizing, a strategy that is still dominant today (Healey and Hinson 2005, 65). Despite the evident successes achieved in recent decades by this fractured approach to social change, it appears that many of these successes have been short-lived, and that such tactics may not be sufficient to counter neoliberal hegemony in the long-term. Without a doubt there is an urgent need for progressive academics to respond to present circumstances and form ‘alliance[s] with groups inside and outside academe’ so they can more effectively resist the powerful conservatising forces acting on their environment (Smith 1998, 256; Croteau *et al.* 2005).

Peters (2005, 46) suggests that academics may strengthen their community ties by openly identifying as an activist (either at work or in their local communities) and actually ‘taking on an organizing challenge’ to work collectively with others to bring about social change (as opposed to just teaching and writing about it. Additionally, there is a need for scholars to move towards research that focuses on strategies and visions that can guide and invigorate – not just reactive, but also – proactive and sustainable progressive social change (Peters 2005, 44). On the other side of the equation, it would also be advantageous if activists outside academia would let bygones be bygones and make time to re-evaluate their (limited) engagement with academia in the light of the theoretical resources it might bring to their work. Indeed, it is clear that scholars can provide a useful service to activists by critiquing their work, encouraging more ‘reflective, analytical, and strategic’ thinking (Healey and Hinson 2005, 74), and by making the study of questions that matter to activists their primary rather than secondary goals (Meyer 2005, 193).

Said (1994, 11) once said the public intellectual is someone whose ‘place it is to publicly to raise embarrassing questions, to confront orthodoxy and dogma, to be someone who cannot easily be co-opted by governments or corporations’. Yet as this paper has demonstrated in many ways the numbers of intellectuals situated within academia that are able to overcome such pressures are few and far between. Nevertheless intellectuals play a critical role in society as they ‘represent an important instrumentality of cultural domination as well as potential agents of revolutionary change’ (Arnove 1980, 18). The dual role of scholars is a phenomena that has not been lost on foundations, and it is no coincidence that for the past century liberal foundations have consciously ‘enlisted the support’ of up and coming academics all over the world; ‘channel[ling] their energies and research activities in directions they have deemed important; and... promot[ing] modes of inquiry which circumscribe the examination of value questions and ideological issues’ (Arnove 1980, 18). This is something that needs to be fought against at every turn, because ironically:

... academic freedom, as presently constituted, far from being the liberating right to test the limits of thought and deed, is in fact the very chain that immobilizes university-based intellectuals, always separating their thoughts from deeds and keeping their ideas from reaching systematic limits. (Silva and Slaughter 1984, 303)

Silva and Slaughter (1984, 303) argue that with universities ‘academic freedom is a fragile and weakly institutionalized expectation’, adding that an ‘adequate academic freedom – one permitting systematically developed ideas to be tested pragmatically and corrected in everyday life – does not exist’. Moreover they note that this is even more problematic because academics have failed to ‘comprehend the historical causes and consequences of the exchanges that shaped their highly prized but essentially illusionary academic freedom’ (Silva and Slaughter 1984, 303). Thus a useful starting point for all critical intellectuals – not just a handful of historians – is to attempt to understand the liberal chains that have ensnared academic freedom, and then to publicly write and talk about the best ways of breaking them.

This is not to deny that liberal foundations have not funded (and continue to fund) progressive research to combat inequality, and sometimes even challenge the premises of capitalism itself. But it is strange that even though some scholars, like Morrow (2006, xviii), acknowledge that there is some ‘truth in the charge that higher education has colluded in reproducing the dominant social order’, they often go on to note – like Morrow does – that ‘such effects have been outweighed by contributions to envisioning alternatives and social criticism’. There is no telling what shape or form academic culture may evolved into without the deradicalising presence of liberal foundations, but one can be sure that ‘foundation patronage has helped impede the formation of a critical scientific and intellectual community which examines basic mechanisms and thought systems of repression’ (Arnove 1980, 18).

To be sure, an important task that lies ahead of critical scholars – especially for those who were previously unaware of the insidious influence of liberal foundations – will involve revisiting existing literature whose analyses overlook the role of liberal philanthropy, and also challenging the intellectual legitimacy of foundation-induced paradigm shifts within their respective fields. These revisionist studies will help

scholars and concerned citizen activists to develop effective social change strategies to counter the insidious influence of liberal philanthropy.

Social scientists will of course still need to undertake research at the ideological level to ‘strengthen the de-legitimation routinely presented by everyday experience in advanced corporate capitalist society’ (Silva and Slaughter 1984, 316). However, while Silva and Slaughter (1984: 316) simply counsel the need to expose the raw power of self-centered corporate elites, a more urgent priority should be to uncloak the soft understated power exerted by liberal foundations. Yet as Silva and Slaughter (1984, 316) point out, there is a risk that in the face of such massive forces potential activist citizens (or scholars) will become immobilized, or alternatively such disclosures may have the effect of ‘transform[ing] decent concern into cynical opportunism’: this is especially likely when dealing with the insidious ideological domination of liberal philanthropy (heaped on top of raw corporate power). Thus critical researchers must ‘create an ideology to guide and give meaning to oppositional practice’, which will involve ‘specifying the social conditions morally condemning North American capitalism to the trash heap of out-moded social structures while compelling its replacement by a clearly more just and equitable society’ (Silva and Slaughter 1984, 316).

### **Activist Research: From Without and *Not* Within?**

Santos (2006, 80) writes that ‘part of the university’s crisis is the result of its passive incorporation of and co-option by the forces of hegemonic globalization’. The answer Santos presents is an ‘active response to this co-option, in the name of counterhegemonic globalization’ (Santos 2006, 80). So the question remains, ‘can (or should) such a counterhegemonic project be launched from within universities?’ A look back to 1960s and 1970s suggests that the answer to the question is no. Indeed, while there was much revolutionary resistance during those tumultuous decades, this has been successfully channelled away from radical solutions/alternatives by the philanthropic colonization of progressive social movements (Faber and McCarthy 2005, 13). Unfortunately:

While many activists recognized the university as part of the process of domination, they did not grasp the operation of institutional power. Therefore they battled over university policies (admissions, requirements); they criticized personalities (faculty, deans); they attacked the apparent bifurcation of university and outside world as well as internal divisions between student services. They never noticed the hidden curriculum that structure academic life and were designed to channel oppositional practices into mere alternative choices. (Soldatenko 2001, 194)

As this paper has shown, the pressures emanating from corporations and foundations on the university environ make it unlikely that there will ever be more than a handful of radicals labouring (tenaciously) within its margins. Therefore, it is critical that intellectuals must rise to the challenge presented by the present critical juncture and ‘discard the professionalism, careerism, and isolation that make them largely irrelevant’ (Giroux 2007, 38). Many critical scholars consider that activist-scholars must ‘participate in the creation of autonomous spaces of radical teaching and learning that stand apart from, but relay with, pockets of dissent in the university’;

citing as potential models the University of Openess in London, Copenhagen Free University, and the Critical U project and Anarchist Free University both of which are based in Toronto (Cote et al. 2007, 329, 331-2). This may of course require academics' to sacrifice their comfortable salaries, because although Giroux (2007, 38) states that there is a need for intellectuals both 'inside and outside the university', all university scholars need to accept that any work that truly attempts to foster radical social change will involve risks (which should be carried by both themselves and the activists on the streets).

So while 'our obligation as scholars [is] to place an understanding of the multifaceted processes of globalization in the service of those individuals and organizations that are dedicated to fighting its harsh edges' (Appelbaum and Robinson, 2005: xiii), we must also be prepared to fight our ideological war at these harsh edges. If critical scholars concur with my arguments, that is, that working within conventional universities only serves to legitimize the status quo, ultimately they may need to move to these harsh edges and reject their comfortable lives within the neoliberal ideological factories that we presently call universities. Either way, whether one adopts a purist approach that seeks to delegitimize universities as ruling class institutions, or alternatively attempt to break down their ideological dominance from within (for tips see Schmidt 2000, 265-6), the fight for equality will not be an easy one.

## **Conclusions**

The primary purpose of this paper has been to outline the historical barriers that have served to minimize the critical members of the public from becoming involved progressive social change as intellectuals. There are no single solutions to the ongoing dilemmas that will always be associated with activist research, but understanding the powerful forces shaping such research is critical to identifying meaningful solutions to overcome such impediments. While direct corporate power presents a serious threat to intellectual freedom, it has been argued that liberal philanthropy (or indirect corporate power) poses a much greater threat, given that few scholars or activists are even aware of the vital hegemonic function of liberal foundations.

As evidenced by this paper, progressive activist scholarship still exists within universities, but its presence is being rapidly squeezed out of the system. Sustaining useful autonomous activist research within universities requires that radical scholars who choose to remain within the system fight to retain vital connections with one another and with activists working outside of the university environs. However, arguably undertaking such scholarship only lends a fig leaf of respectability to what are at root capitalist enterprises; consequently a purist arguably more sustainable solution requires that radical intellectuals step out of the university world and work to create alternative people powered institutions that can seriously challenge the status quo. Under such circumstances one can only hope that the example set by dedicated scholars will invite a greater number of people who might not normally be selected by the capitalisms educational selection criteria to become public intellectuals, and help 'provid[e] an intellectual environment that will encourage the learner to dispense with intellectual authorities and to become her own authority' (Aronowitz 2000, 143). Only then will truly public intellectuals be able to collectively delineate long-term

strategic plans for strengthening democracy that do not rely on the largess of either corporate funds or liberal philanthropy.

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