



Critical review

Review essay: Imagining the techno-capitalist future(s) of higher education



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ABSTRACT

Higher Education is frequently said to be in a time of disruption, and narratives of how that disruption will play out have become a cottage industry. This essay critically reviews four such narratives – two journalistic works, one corporatist, techno-capitalist vision of the unbundling of Higher Education in America, and one critical, scholarly defense of the university as a center of critical thinking. The essay reflects on what the latter text can tell us about how this coming disruption can be collectively managed by education professionals.

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Higher Education is frequently said to be in a time of crisis, a time of disruption. 'Thriving in a time of disruption in Higher Education' is a featured theme at the 2016 Association of American Geographers meeting. Likewise, narratives of how this disruption will play out have become something of a cottage industry. They describe a range of topics, from academic labor, to commercialization of the university, to rising tuition and the prospect of student debt-driven financial bubbles, to the role of technology in the age old question of Higher Education as a public good or a private benefit. The normative implications of such narratives range across a broad spectrum of speaking positions, including the media, corporate elites, administrators and educators. One could read them, then, in terms of Gramsci's (1971) theory of education as part of the conjunctural structure of hegemony. Gramsci famously argued that everybody is an intellectual, but only amongst the elites is their intellectualism in service to and reproduced by the hegemonic order. Education as an institution risks complicity in this to the extent that it defines the social function of theoretical and instrumental knowledge. This review essay focuses on four recent narratives of college 'disruption' in terms of how they imagine the social function of education. I begin with Jeffrey Selingo's *College (Un)bound* (2013) and Goldie Blumenstyk's *American Higher Education in Crisis?* (2014) as journalistic portrayals of disruptive influences on Higher Education. I continue with Ryan Craig's *College Disrupted* (2015) as a classic example of an elitist, techno-capitalist claim on the intellectual commons known as 'college.'

I conclude with Tanya Loughhead's *Critical University* (2015) as a critical, scholarly counter-weight to Craig's book, one that serves almost as a guide book for preserving the academy as a space of transformative learning and resistance.

The issues discussed throughout are also crucial for those of us who advance the cause of critical pedagogy. Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1986 [1968]) became the foundational text of critical pedagogy precisely because it highlighted how the teacher-student relationship can transform not only teacher and student, but the very relations of hegemony that structure the value of intellectual output in the first place. Though he read Gramsci only after he published *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire admired Gramsci's work, and both scholars see education as advancing the cause of freedom through organic intellectualism (Mayo, 1999). bell hooks, who studied under Freire, has written extensively on the role of critical pedagogy in decolonizing not only literal space, but the space of the mind. As she argues,

More than anywhere else a dominator-controlled mass media, with its constant manipulation of representations in the service of the status quo, assaults us in that place where we would know hope. Despair is the greatest threat. When despair prevails we cannot create life-sustaining communities of resistance. Paulo Freire reminds us that "without vision for tomorrow hope is impossible" (hooks, 2003, 12).

This review is also about those visions, both dystopic and utopic, oppressive and liberatory. In covering a range of perspectives it explores whether university life can sustain as a community of

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resistance, if indeed it ever has been, or whether and how capital might privatize the intellectual commons in service of the hegemonic order.

Chronicle of Higher Education editor Jeffrey Selingo opens *College (Un)bound* with the typically grim scenario of spiraling student tuition and decreasing educational quality. To Selingo this is the result of universities' desire to attract students with lavishly renovated campuses, vast increases in administrative costs to facilitate technology, grants, admissions, student aid and retention (read: the rise of the 'deanlet' [Arum and Roska, 2010]), and decreases in state aid. In reaction to this institutional decay, Selingo (2013) cites "investors... lining up to cash in on the college of tomorrow" (xi) and that "talk of a coming disruption to the traditional college model has reached a fever pitch in some corners of Higher Education" (xii). So-called 'disruptors' are primarily, but not exclusively, venture capitalists in the educational technology industry. The growth of online education (for instance the Khan Academy) has enabled access to educational credential, but "the rush to embrace technology as a solution to every problem has created tension on campuses over whether the critical role higher education plays in preparing the whole person to be a productive citizen in a democratic society is at risk" (Selingo, 2013, xvii). One example of this is the technical possibility of "digital badges" to replace degrees. Collective ownership of what a college degree signifies is backed by accreditation. Digital badges are non-accredited signifiers to employers that students have acquired particular skills they seek, and since they would be created and recognized by large scale employers they would not need accreditation to be attractive investments for many students. The disruption then comes as digital badges can be secured through any combination of for-profit colleges, Massive Online Open Courses (Moocs), the Khan Academy, part time or continuing education, etc. Selingo warns that this may result in the 'unbundling' of the traditional public good of a college education (hence 'college unbound'); in the same way that iTunes and the like unbundled the music album into individually marketable tracts, and the airlines unbundled luggage and dining from the price of airfare, the role of Higher Education in shaping democratic society could be unbundled into a mish mash of vocational skills sought by capital. Such a dystopic vision may sound alarmist, and Selingo certainly acknowledges that such a movement would never be fully complete. But he is not wrong to question "how long colleges can firmly protect their turf" (Selingo, 2013, 109) from disruption if demand shifts to a more disaggregated product.

In contrast to Selingo's overall techno-optimism, journalist Goldie Blumenstyk's *American Higher Education in Crisis?* (2014) paints a more dystopic picture of the university, one that describes Higher Education as a driver of social inequality. She describes, for example, widening class and racial stratification as private colleges replace need based with "merit" based financial aid and racially conscious admissions policies are challenged (as in the Fisher v. The University of Texas case). She also observes that "more than ever a college education is seen less as a process and more of a product, a means to an end" (4). And like Selingo, she sees that product as one unnecessarily bundled with frivolous expenditures, what she terms the "edifice complex" (95). Blumenstyk describes these so-called 'climbing wall wars' as an opening for the corporate unbundling of a college education. Digital badges are but one example. Blumenstyk also claims that market pressure from Moocs and for-profit colleges is primarily behind Southern New Hampshire University's movement of much of its course content into one of the biggest and fastest growing online programs in the United States. This was ostensibly to 'scale up' access to Higher Education, but also potentially unbundles the role of the college educator in the development of that 'whole person' ready for democratic society.

Even if Blumenstyk's book reads more as a 'what you need to know' manual, she highlights the for-profit educational sector's investment in the unbundling process. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, for example, is investing not only in low cost, online college courses, but has also launched a project to re-tailor financial aid in ways that 'encourage' students to finish college faster. Adding to criticisms of this project as elitist, as it obscures real challenges that effect students' ability to graduate on time, Blumenstyk questions "whether they are using their vast philanthropic resources to create a political consensus for their preconceived ideas" (120). Even if well intended, I would argue that this is most certainly the case – political consensus can be understood in Gramscian terms as the hegemonic class relationship produced by elites, wherein education means vocational skills for the poor and working class but the language of critique for the wealthy. As Blumenstyk puts it, "many investors and reforms advocating for such alternative models are themselves the product of elite universities" (141).

Ryan Craig's *College Disrupted* (2015) reveals Craig unquestionably as one of those elites. Craig opens with a vignette of his high school days in Toronto and his aspirations to join the Ivy League: He and his friends thought the University of Toronto was for "losers who wanted to stay at home" (1); he was unaware there were schools in the United States cheaper than the Ivy League; he bemoans his first week at Yale when he heard gunshots; he never communicated with students at other universities, let alone those who experience those gunshots much more intimately. He relates these experiences to suggest that his 'myopia' about Higher Education outside the Ivy League is what plagues American Higher Education in general – apparently nobody else is aware of the rich diversity of Not-Ivy-League universities in the U.S. He then lauds this diversity as "designed to produce excellence at top institutions while addressing accessibility at others" (8). Accessibility is great, but the way he imagines this two-tiered "diversity" belies that rhetoric. This also sets the context for his central argument for the unbundling of Higher Education: that success in life is due to a "self-selection bias" (13), and that Higher Education is useful only because it shows employers that one has the "talent and grit" to complete a multi-year project. But in the digital age, Craig argues, such gate-keeping exercises are obsolete, as employers will be able to reverse engineer (unbundle) the university such that *non-elite* students can extract only the vocational skills they need (the 'college experience' is to be preserved for elites).

Given Craig's role as the founder of University Ventures, a private investment firm focused on Higher Education, it is perhaps not surprising that he sees technology as "the most potent 'disruptor' to the current college business model" (52). The failed college business model to which he refers certainly is not neoliberalism (in fact he chalks the 'climbing wall wars' up to poor values, not market competition between universities). Rather, it is the lack of a clear objective that for-profit colleges have (profit), and the shared governance model traditional to Higher Education. He attacks the latter on grounds that faculty are not sufficiently invested in the welfare of their students. In addition to the technologies mentioned above, Craig lauds Gates and Lumina Foundations' investments in the development of a system to longitudinally track post-graduate wages. This would be to provide prospective students with more information about selecting a college (to which Blumenstyk (2014) counters that there exists far more variation within than between universities). He cites universities' unfair monopoly on accreditation as the unfortunate reason Moocs have not yet taken over. He praises for-profit colleges. He tells the tale of how digital slot machines in casinos were designed with bells, whistles and instant gratification as a case lesson in how online learning can be re-designed in order to attract more customers

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