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The Obscuring of Education

As this project developed, I encountered an interesting reaction from each person I explained it to. The conversations went something like this: "What kind of project are you doing?" "A critical analysis of university discourse that looks at how the university presents its stance on community activism and involvement in contrast to how its tenure procedures work and the types of work that are encouraged." "Snort; chuckle, chuckle, chuckle." At first, I assumed this reaction was due to the deep cynicism that runs through the graduate student population regarding matters of academic freedom and expression, but when professors I spoke with reacted the same way I began to get a sense that the problem I was interested in might be more significant, in more ways, than I realized. In order to understand this reaction, I found that I needed to expand my inquiry to situate the restraints placed on scholars in the university within the larger redefinition of education at the global and national level, the work of the university, the university's responsibility to its community, and what now "counts" as scholarship.

In *Democracy and Education*, John Dewey argues "...it is the office of the school environment to balance the various elements in the social environment, and to see to it that each individual gets an opportunity to escape from the limitations of the social group in which he was born, and to come into living contact with a broader environment" (25). This conception of the work of education highlights the extent to which Dewey believed education should help, and encourage, a person to enter into society as a being capable of understanding and acting upon his/her world so as to reshape it in a positive manner. In contrast, contemporary, often neo-liberal, ideologies define the role of education as teaching individuals skills they will need in the workplace in service to economic needs with an explicitly anti-political, though not yet openly anti-democratic, focus. This redefinition can be located within the larger discourse of globalization explored by Norman Fairclough in *Language and Globalization*. Fairclough frames his work within Polyani's cultural political economy with special attention to how the "objects includ[ing] economic systems, economic organizations, the division of labour, the state, forms of management and governance and so forth...are socially constructed" and that "the processes of socially constructing them construct not only the 'objects' themselves but also the social 'subjects' associated with them" (27). While Fairclough does not focus on American education in his analysis of the discourse of globalization, his methods can be applied to education as an object constructed by globalization's ideology of market freedom. He defines this ideology, using Steger, as "...having created a space for unconstrained and highly profitable action on the part of the corporations of the most powerful countries on earth, especially in the USA, on the basis of the claim that markets work benignly without external regulation" which "...has provided legitimacy and cover for the consolidation and extension of asymmetries of power and wealth" (41). Within this deregulated environment, social concerns, such as a livable wage, sex and gender parity, and equal access to education, are pushed aside under the assumption that the market will somehow balance itself while helping societies flourish. Citizens, then, become subjects whose role in society is to serve economic interests through corporations, not to

participate in democratic governance, and education becomes an object constructed by discourses that focus on economic/financial viability and gain rather than on social or humanitarian concerns.

As Fairclough noted, this narrative actually served to strip the middle and lower classes of resources, both economic and cultural, and to consolidate governing power in the hands of the wealthy, who control the very market claimed to be operating freely (44). Society, however, has remained largely unaware of the extent to which individuals' (subjects) options and opportunities are restricted by the redefining of education (object) not as a public service focused on the welfare of the state and society, but as a market product that helps the subject attain financial goals in service to corporate power. This state of affairs is preserved through the elaborately intertwined fictions of meritocracy and personal responsibility. Meritocracy is the idea that all persons are equally able, and those who work the hardest will achieve at the highest levels. It chooses not to take into account factors like race, gender, class, socio-economic status, and ethnicity, to name but a few, and places the responsibility for success directly on the individual. Personal responsibility becomes the deciding factor regarding a person's success in a meritocratic system in this fiction—if one does not succeed, it was due to a lack of drive or will power and had nothing to do with the system. Christopher Newfield's *Unmaking the Public University: The Forty-year Assault on the Middle Class* explains how meritocracy has been applied in two distinctly differing ways in the university. "Meritocracy I" assumes that standardized testing is an accurate and acceptable measure of an applicant's aptitude and ability (96). "Meritocracy II" functions on a belief in the ability of all people to achieve and succeed in an environment that includes everyone and works toward the "democratization of intelligence" (100). Importantly, Meritocracy II supports Affirmative Action and programs that seek to assure admittance for underprivileged or underrepresented groups into the university. Newfield traces the ascent of Meritocracy I in the university through the post-Vietnam years to become firmly cemented as admissions policy in the 1980s under the guise of being more "fair."

The United States Department of Education currently states: "*Our mission* is to promote student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access" (italics original). This statement frames education as a necessary precursor to an individual entering into civil society as an economic entity—one *prepared* to *compete*. The unspoken message in these words is that life is war, but the spoils are strangely unnamed...perhaps because a person not of the higher economic class is unlikely to ever "win." Additionally, in order to achieve this mission, the department has instituted the Common Core Curriculum and expanded Pell Grants to help students become better prepared for and able to attend college as well as the Ladders of Opportunity, and Promise Zones initiatives to address poverty and inequality ("Progress for America's Children"). While these programs certainly help students access higher education more equally with higher skill levels, they reinforce the fictions of meritocracy and personal responsibility by suggesting that with the addition of these programs all American students will suddenly become able to access and succeed in the university without addressing the economic and social conditions that occur when power and capital accrue unequally.

The contemporary university has also become governed by the same type of efficiency and productivity logic that market economics apply to businesses, much to the detriment of humanities disciplines. In *The University in Dissent: Scholarship in the Corporate University*, Gary Rolfe notes: "Inevitably, the adoption of market values at the very core of the university has been at the cost of traditional academic activities with less than tangible outcomes that cannot be exchanged or bartered" (12). Christopher Newfield more specifically explains that:

> The humanities fields were said to produce no useful knowledge, only complications, ambiguities, multiple interpretations, and attacks on current social arrangements that arose from an irrational grudge against capitalist success. In politics, the humanities were linked to social movements and identities—Asian American, queer, the so-called underclass—that made new claims for recognition and resources. In the economic

sphere, the humanities were associated with a restive middle class that in the 1960s had revolted against the iron law of productivism, and had come to demand job satisfaction, personal freedom, self-actualization, and plenty of mind-expanding leisure. While science and engineering fields were seen as producing profitable knowledge, the humanities were often cast as the source of nonknowledge, one that led to social division and economic costs. (25)

He further argues that instead of pushing back against this redefinition of the humanities and the university, English departments chose to fall in line with the prevailing "economic determinism" and allow their departments to be cut and restructured along lines of "customer" demand rather than working to push back against the cultural factors that allowed market rhetoric to prevail while they became reliant upon adjunct and graduate student labor in order to preserve faculty lines and how this "solution" actually resulted in further weakening of the department (143, 150).

My research has focused at the local level on the English department within the University of Houston, a large state university, as a specific example of how the redefining of education, the role of the university, and the university's responsibility to society may impact professors who seek to perform activist work. I have chosen the University of Houston not because of any factors that make it more susceptible to the type of analysis I seek to perform here, but because I am currently enrolled there in the English department's doctoral program; it is, quite simply, the institution to which I have the best access. For the purposes of this project, I have defined activism to mean any work that seeks to confront, expose, explicate, or work against hegemonic power structures. This definition is more broad and less pointed than the traditional one— the *American Heritage Dictionary*, for example, defines activism as "the use of direct, often confrontational action, such as a demonstration or strike, in opposition to or support of a cause,"—in order to accommodate the variety of activities or projects that can be found in the academic setting. I realize here that I could be accused of exactly the same type of redefining to suit my needs that I have upbraided global discourse for performing on education in service to the economic ideology. My work differs from this, however, in that I do not seek to redefine activism in order to narrow its function and redistribute capital, as in the case of education becoming preparation to enter the economy, but rather to expand the scope of its use to include not only direct actions but also all the activities a professor might engage in, such as essays, presentations, speeches, teaching, and published works.

The University of Houston (UH) has chosen to create a mission statement for itself as a means of projecting its identity to future students, alumni, the community, and potential partners. The existence of a mission statement highlights the university's desire to create an image of itself similar to that of a corporation, where mission statements are used to define the role of the corporation. This statement can be easily found on the website under the "About" tab; it reads:

> The mission of the University of Houston is to offer nationally competitive and internationally recognized opportunities for learning, discovery and engagement to a diverse population of students in a real-world setting. The University of Houston offers a full range of degree programs at the baccalaureate, master's, doctoral and professional levels and pursues a broad agenda of research and creative activities. As a knowledge resource to the public, the university builds partnerships with other educational institutions, community organizations, government agencies, and the private sector to serve the region and impact the world.

Nowhere in these lines does the word "education" appear. Instead, UH has chosen to define its work as "offer[ing]," not guaranteeing or providing, "opportunities," not an education, which leaves the burden of becoming educated on the student—a form of personal responsibility. Additionally, choosing not to use this word absolves UH from any social responsibility to its students as a setting for learning about social and democratic engagement. The first sentence echoes the same type of 'education is war' rhetoric as the Department of Education in its reference to national and international competition in a "real-world

setting." Like the absence of "education," the inclusion "real-world setting" places responsibility for success on the student and removes any responsibility from the university. It also lightly references the ideology of meritocracy, since "real-world" is a term often used to explicate inequality or unfairness as the way the world works, never mind how it *should* or *could* be. The second sentence reads quite like a menu stating the base options, "baccalaureate, master's, doctoral and professional levels," and the students' choices for customization, "a broad agenda of research and creative activities." The final sentence defines UH's public role as a "knowledge resource," not an educative body, while noting that it "*builds partnerships* with other educational institutions, community organizations, government agencies, and the private sector to serve the region and impact the world" (emphasis mine). This constructive activity very specifically does not link UH to the community of Houston, or even the state of Texas; instead, it engages only in business-like relations with entities that can further its mission, quite like a corporation, while "serv[ing]" in a very unspecified way an undefined region and forcefully striking the world in a manner even less explained. All of this saying something and nothing at once allows UH to appear dedicated to helping students when it is actually redefining education as a chance for the student to access its resources at a price.

In addition to the mission statement, UH offers two corollary statements as additional links from the mission statement page to further explicate its position, the "Shared Values of the Mission" and "University of Houston Goals." "Shared Values of the Mission" are:

> As its primary goal, the University of Houston is dedicated to becoming a nationally recognized institution in the 21st century. The university will anticipate and respond to changing demographics in an increasingly diverse and globally interdependent world. It will use its resources to:

- ☺ Meet the challenges of educating a dynamic mix of nontraditional and traditional students.
- ☺ Promote excellence within the context of basic and applied research and scholarship.
- ☺ Identify and respond to the economic, social and cultural challenges affecting the quality of life in the city of Houston, the state of Texas and the world through its education, research and service.

Here UH privileges its desire to become "nationally recognized" for the "dynamic mix" of the very students it seeks to attract. "Excellence" is not only relegated to very specific areas, but it also seems to function as "an empty signifier bereft of any ideological intent, a unit of measurement rather than something to be measured" in this statement (Rolfe 9). The third point performs the same type of narrowing as the second in that UH defines its engagement with the outside world only in terms of its university work on issues of "quality of life," which also reads quite like an empty signifier. Further, within this statement, UH never states how it intends to fulfill the "challenges" mentioned or identifies exactly what these entail.

The "University of Houston Goals" are:

- ☺ Nationally Competitive: UH will become a nationally competitive public research university as measured by the Top American Public Research University analysis and/or Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.
- ☺ Student Success: UH will have a student profile consistent with a nationally competitive public research university by creating an environment in which student success can be ensured.
- ☺ Community Advancement: UH will commit to fulfilling regional and state workforce needs while becoming the primary engine of social, economic, and intellectual development.

⏱ Athletic Competitiveness: UH will provide a comprehensive educational experience to its students and, within this context, it will seek to build the strongest athletic program possible.

⏱ Local and National Recognition: UH will be known for its accomplishments locally and nationally.

⏱ Competitive Resources: UH will build a resource base that enables it to accomplish its mission and realize its vision.

As with the Values statement, these goals seek to define UH as an institution only in specific areas that focus more on the university promoting itself than on its role, let alone responsibility, in the community of Houston. These goals prioritize the university's ranking above all other measures. Though student success appears second, the "student profile" mentioned harks back to Newfield's Meritocracy 1 (testing as measurement of aptitude and ability) and suggests that a particular environment will be created for these students as part of a "nationally competitive public research university" rather than for all students who seek to attend UH as a means of becoming better educated in the field of their choice. "Community Advancement" offers perhaps the most telling redefinition of the role of UH, and universities as a whole, as "fulfilling regional and state workforce needs" and driving development—none of which commits UH to engaging with the community on more than a business level. The only real mention of education in this section occurs in the "Athletic Competitiveness" goal's commitment to "provide a comprehensive educational experience to its students;" however, this seems to only include student-athletes and was quite possibly designed to keep UH from being accused of taking advantage of these students. The final two goals read like repetitions of the mission statement, as if someone thought a university should have more than four goals but UH doesn't actually seek to do more than become recognized for research while having an excellent sports team and funneling students into the workforce.

The university also offers a "UH in the Community" page that details its work within Houston. I have written an analysis of each of the listed programs in the order they appear on the webpage to maximize readability of this text; all bulleted items are directly quoted from the website.

⏱ Houston Area Teacher Center—The Center is a forum for the College and area school systems to collaborate on solutions to issues of common concern, such as teacher supply and demand, teacher quality, policies and procedures for the placement of student teachers, and for working with partner schools. (UH Community Projects Page)

The Houston Area Teacher Center appears to be a community oriented program that seeks to help schools and teachers work to find solutions to problems through communal assistance. I would question, however, the specific examples cited as being focused on teachers as the shared problem rather than looking at the education system, curriculum, or standards.

⏱ BOUNCE Healthy Lifestyle Program—promotes healthy eating, exercise, positive body image, and self-esteem in Hispanic and African American (AA) adolescent girls and their families. (UH Community Projects Page) (http://bounce.uh.edu/)

The BOUNCE Healthy Lifestyle Program is a state recognized program conducted as summer camps with a $10 application fee and a $1000 program fee for the four week camp. Scholarships are available for up to the full cost of the program for students who meet financial need criteria as demonstrated by submitting a W-2, WIC, or CHIP form, but specific criteria are not mentioned nor does the website state the total amount of scholarship aid available. The cost of this program and small number of girls (approximately 25 judging by the photos on the website, no numbers were provided) means that the impact of this particular program is quite small in relation to the population of Houston.

⏱ Houston PBS—series of 60-second informational spots that feature stories of UH's innovative research, programs and successes. (UH Community Projects Page)

I am unable to see how this program performs a community service or why it was included as part of this webpage.

⊙ Mayor's Back to School Fest—the event welcomed almost 20,000 students and their families to our campus to help prepare them for the new school year. Immunizations, school uniform vouchers, hair cut vouchers as well as other school and health related information was provided to all who participated in the event. The University of Houston College of Optometry also participated by providing vision screenings to students; and other UH colleges and programs assisted by participating in the event's expo area by providing community oriented information. (UH Community Projects Page)

This event is not actually a community event; rather, it is a celebration for UH students led by the Houston mayor. As with the PBS Series, I am uncertain about its inclusion on this page.

⊙ College of Optometry Mobile Eye Institute—The University of Houston Mobile Eye Institute (MEI) is equipped with the latest in ophthalmic technology and brings comprehensive on-site vision services to patients in need of optometric care. Subsidized by the City of Houston and area foundations, MEI services are designed to be offered to patients who don't have access to the traditional healthcare system or who are unable to travel to the University Eye Institute or one of its three neighborhood clinics. (UH Community Projects Page)

Similar to the Teacher Center and BOUNCE Program, the Mobile Eye Institute does help the Houston community; however, its impact is also very small, and the College of Optometry is able to use this program as training for its students.

⊙ Community Design Resource Center—The mission of the Community Design Resource Center is to enhance the quality of life in low-to-moderate income communities throughout the Houston region through design, research, education and practice. (UH Community Projects Page)

The webpage linked here goes to the Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture main page, where I was unable to find any specifics about this program or works it had completed.

⊙ Connecting Bauer to Business Corporate Projects program—The corporate projects are group research projects that culminate in a final deliverable, usually a PowerPoint presentation and executive summary. Corporate sponsors choose a project topic relevant to their company and on which they would like to have some research done and hear a new perspective from the next generation of business professionals. (UH Community Projects Page)

According to the description as it appears on the website, this program appears to be a pretty straightforward way for corporations to outsource their work to UH at no cost. It does not seem to be focused on helping the community in any way.

⊙ Houston Leadership Academy—The Leadership Academy develops, challenges, and supports student-athletes and coaches in their continual quest to become world-class leaders in athletics, academics, and life; the Academy functions to equip participants at every level with skillset necessary to be a confident, cooperative, critical decision maker and ethical contributor in a competitive and ever-changing world. (UH Community Projects Page)

As with the Mayor's Back to School Fest, this entry is a UH specific event that offers no community benefits.

The UH community page only features three (of the listed eight) programs that actually help the Houston community, and, interestingly, only the program link for the Teacher Center is live at the time of this writing. The other five programs, whose links work, seem to function as padding intended to make UH appear to be more communally active and responsible. The result of the previous

consideration of UH's mission statement, values, goals, and community involvement reveals how UH seeks to define itself as an entity primarily focused on attaining recognition at the national and international level for the undefined quality of "excellence" in research while offering "opportunities" for students to drive "social, economic, and intellectual development" at UH, where the results of their work will presumably stay after they enter the "workforce." UH is not opposed, however, to engaging with the community of Houston as long as it can reap some benefit from these programs such as student training (optometry), research (BOUNCE), and keeping tabs on teachers.

In addition to paying lip service to community service, UH also promotes its faculty as "making things happen in every classroom, working closely with each student to open up new worlds and new possibilities" (UH Faculty Page). In stark contrast to this apparent promotion of academic freedom, the faculty handbook states:

> A. The faculty member is entitled to full freedom in research and in the publication of the results, *subject to the adequate performance of the faculty member's other academic duties*; but research for pecuniary return should be based upon an understanding with the authorities of the component university.
>
> B. The faculty member is entitled to freedom in the classroom in discussing the subject matter, *but the faculty member should be careful not to introduce into the teaching controversial matter which has no close relation to the subject.*
>
> C. The faculty member is a citizen, a member of a learned profession, and an officer of an educational institution. When speaking or writing as a citizen, the faculty member shall be free from institutional censorship or discipline, *but the faculty member's special position in the community imposes special obligations.* As a person of learning and an educational officer, the faculty member should remember that the public may judge the profession and the institution by the faculty member's utterances. Hence, the faculty member should at all times strive for accuracy, exercise appropriate restraint, show respect for the opinions of others, and *make every effort to indicate that the faculty member is not speaking for the institution.* (emphasis mine) (Academic Personnel Policies and Procedures)

The portions of this "Academic Freedom" statement italicized highlight the extent to which UH attempts to define academic freedom as conformance to university policies, adherence to non-provocative themes and subject matter, and constant self-censorship lest the university image be tarnished. Further, the UH English department "Standards for Promotion and Tenure" specify that "scholarly and creative achievement is the *most important single factor* to be considered in the process of tenure and promotion...[through]...high quality contributions to the discipline, normally through peer-reviewed scholarly or creative publication" though "effective and *responsible* teaching is a necessary condition" and "*professional* service will be considered *when related* to one's teaching, scholarly, or creative activity" (emphasis mine) (1). These criteria limit a person's scholarly work to activities and publications only within his/her field of specialization that do not provoke discomfort in students or step outside of UH sanctioned rules of expression if one wishes to attain promotion or a tenured position, and the rigors of the publication process leave precious little time for additional work one might undertake with a social responsibility focus.

I better understand the snickers and air of resigned cynicism I encountered in relation to this topic now. I can see that the restraints placed upon education in Dewey's sense of the term make community activism quite dangerous to a person's career. A loophole lies in scholarly activity focused on social problems, but this type of work is only done in a few humanities fields, which leaves no options for scholars of other disciplines. The reading I did to prepare for this essay and hoped to use in my analysis just doesn't seem to fit. It all says the same things about other universities and the academic climate as a whole that I pulled from a close reading of UH webpages and documents. I am left wondering about the profession I intended to enter, which seemed to have more possibilities than this

analysis reveals. I find myself at the end of a project with questions rather than answers: Why are professors content to let this repression exist and perpetuate itself in each new class of scholars and students? I am quite certain it is not that they do not care—So, what is left that I still cannot understand?

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