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BOOK REVIEWS

The Capitalist University: The Transformations of Higher Education in the United States since 1945, by Henry Heller. London: Pluto Press, 2016, pp. 252.

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The neoliberal counterrevolution which began with the collapse of the Bretton Woods system has touched all aspects of American life, including university. Henry Heller in *The Capitalist University: The Transformations of Higher Education in the United States since 1945* aims to put these developments into context by investigating the link between American capitalism and the American university system. Inspired by the intensification of managerialist governance of academia, Heller seeks to understand the context behind these shifts through a study of the post-war history of the social sciences and humanities and of how trends in teaching and research activities are linked to the political-economic environment of the time. Heller's book is an accessible critical history of the American university system from World War Two until the present, though its breadth often prevents it from making deeper insights.

Heller's main argument is that the American university is best understood in terms of its relationship with the United States' role as post-war hegemon and the associ-

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ated requirements of American capital and the American state. He argues that the capitalist university exists as a contradiction between a site of critical knowledge and as an adjunct to capitalism. It exists within capitalism, and so must facilitate general capitalist reproduction, but at the same time purports to fulfill a more universal function beyond the scope of capitalism – to increase the general welfare of citizens and to generate ‘pure’ knowledge. While this contradiction has been more or less suppressed for much of American post-war history, it erupted in the 1960s and, Heller suggests, we may be on the cusp of yet another crisis.

Heller begins with the early 20th century, where Universities essentially acted as a “finishing school” for the upper and upper-middle classes and served to reproduce class, race, and gender dynamics across the country. Universities were driven from above by the demands of private foundations financed by the largest American capitals, who sought to finance production of knowledge required for their activities. However, during the depression, universities experienced funding problems and shortly thereafter, World War Two marked a fundamental change as the government replaced private capital as the largest funder by financing war-related projects.

After the war, the university system was designed to facilitate American imperialism and American businesses and was particularly attuned to the needs of the Cold War American state. He characterizes the university of this time as focused on defending liberalism and capitalism through an embrace of value-free knowledge, methodological individualism and positivism. Overall, knowledge produced by the Universities helped facilitate the golden age of US capitalism, but restricted freedom of thought. However, this, combined with increasing enrollments, led to a backlash from below in the 1960s as students demanded an opening of the intellectual space. This re-

vealed the contradiction between the university as a capitalist ‘knowledge factory’ and as a site for pure knowledge. However, Heller argues that the mobilization of reactionary forces, as well as the splintering of the student radical movement into smaller groups focused on identity politics, meant that this revolution was short-lived.

From the late 1970s onward, Heller analyzes the university system in the context of the shift from productive to financialized capitalism. At the same time, budgets were being cut back and academics embraced the *en vogue* theories of postmodernism and neoliberalism. These paradigms laid the intellectual groundwork for neoliberal university reforms which aimed to run universities as ‘knowledge factories’ by increasing the role for administrators and disciplining academics through quantitative performance assessments. However, Heller argues that neoliberal university reforms risk undermining their very foundations by eroding their capacity to generate positive thought and critical knowledge, which in turn threatens to undermine capitalism more broadly. While Heller sees modern university students as passive and individualistic, buying into the ‘student-as-consumer’ model of the neoliberal knowledge factory, he argues that universities are likely to be a key location for ideological and class struggle in the near future.

Heller’s main strength is his accessibility. The book is grounded in Gramsci’s understanding of the non-coercive state apparatus, but largely eschews complex theory in favour of providing an easily digestible critical history of the American university system. At the same time, this prevents the book from providing a more incisive theoretical contribution and those already familiar with the topics covered are unlikely to get much from the book. The book offers a very well-done literature re-

view, and the various themes he covers in each epoch – influences on faculty, major research paradigms in each field, and the political-economic context –and this weakens some of the causal arguments. Overall, the book is an interesting and approachable history that does necessary work in grounding the university within the broader dynamics of American capital accumulation and should be of interest to undergraduate and postgraduate students not only in the American university system, but abroad.

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