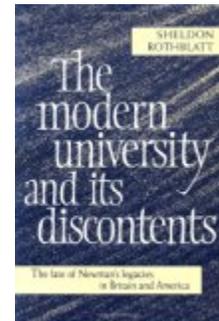


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Sheldon Rothblatt. *The Modern University and Its Discontents: The Fate of Newman's Legacies in Britain and America*. New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997. xiv + 460 pp. \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-45331-8.

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Published on H-Review (June, 1998)



## Which Idea is Best?

<http://www.h-net.msu.edu/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=9289900090778#note1> [1] [fromnote1](#)

Newman's *The Idea of a University* is "the single most influential book on the meaning of the university in the English language," Sheldon Rothblatt notes early in *The Modern University and its Discontents* (p. 7). Newman's thought is Rothblatt's point of comparison in the book, and it may be that the author believes Newman's idea is superior to its alternatives. Rothblatt does not explicitly claim Newman's idea as his preference, but some readers may find that the tone and style of his writing, and his treatment of the market as a significant player in arbiting the idea of a university, is an indication that Rothblatt leans in Newman's direction (see for example p. 14).

What is the modern university, though, and who are its discontents? Let us consider four related issues in order to answer that question: first, the precursors of Newman's *Idea*; second, the key components of the *Idea* as presented by Rothblatt; third, alternative ideas; and fourth, consideration of the *Idea* and all the alternatives in determining which is the superior one.

### Precursors

Rothblatt uses chapter one of his book to look at "the history of the idea that a university derives its identity from an idea" (p. 1). Rothblatt provides an enlightening survey of the precursors of this "history of the idea of the idea of a university" (p. 1). The chapter provides a historical background and traces the development of Coleridge's thought and its impact on Newman. But his

chronology begins earlier, in the eighteenth century. For Rothblatt, the appropriate place to begin the study of the precursors of the idea "in the English-speaking world (is) with the writings of...Edmund Burke. His principal successor is commonly and quite properly regarded as Samuel Taylor Coleridge" (p. 5). "After 1789" Burke felt obligated to defend "ancient institutions like the Church and ancient estates like the aristocracy but without at the same time becoming an apologist for inherited and illegitimate privilege" (p. 5). For Coleridge, "the intellectual problem was similar: not to defend an older world against all criticism nor to forestall change, but to find a middle way that allowed for both continuity and reform" (p. 5). Rothblatt then briefly discusses the impact of Coleridge's methodology on John Stuart Mill and how that methodology resonates even today (pp. 5-12). From this pre-history Rothblatt draws the following conclusion: "The idea of an institution having an idea therefore came into being as a means of stabilising establishments at a revolutionary moment in European history" (p. 5).

Burke recognized that institutions could need reform, but reform should proceed "not in reference to some abstract eighteenth-century theory, such as natural rights, or the happiness of the generality of mankind, but rather in relation to something far more fundamental...which he called human wants or needs (as opposed to appetite)...For Romantics like Burke and Coleridge...Utilitarianism was willy-nilly change" (p. 6).

For Coleridge, reform was a “middle way” between preserving the old forms and completely throwing them off: reform would be based on an examination of “institutions with regard to their essence” (p. 6). Newman “adopted Coleridge’s method for analysing the function of institutions to universities....It was Newman who transformed the inherited legalistic description of a university as a corporate body possessing endowments and privileges pertaining to learning into a thrilling emotion-laden, higher order conception of education” (p. 7).

#### Newman’s University

Newman’s formulation of the idea of a university was essentially a defense of what he appreciated about Cambridge and Oxford as they then were and what they had been (see pp. 12, 13, 15). The general rule of thumb seems to have been that colleges did the teaching (p. 18) and universities the certifying (see pp. 12, 239). Universities (more precisely colleges) taught “universal knowledge” (p. 13), an idea expressed earlier, though with qualifications, by Edward Tatham (p. 13). Newman did not accept the notion that colleges/universities were free markets of ideas; rather, they played a mentoring role: inculcating proper values, dispensing appropriate knowledge, teaching correct forms of interpersonal relationships and aesthetics to prepare the pupil for the practice of noblesse oblige (see pp. 14-20). Newman and other “humanists’...favored knowledge directed towards explicating personal and moral relationships” (p. 19). Newman “was not absolutely opposed to university affiliated professional schools...but professional education was not his primary concern” (p. 20). Additionally, “for Newman the notion that a university could support a programme of studies where religion was not central was apostasy” (p. 20). Rothblatt thinks that Newman was not completely successful in clarifying a cogent and consistent set of criteria for what constitutes a university. Rather, for Rothblatt, the mark of Newman’s and Coleridge’s genius “lies in their desire to elevate the university to the moral centre of modern culture and to do so by freeing the university from the grip of utilitarian and hedonistic schools of thought so influential in their day” (p. 21).

What part of this is “modern?” Newman believed that youth “must not be led astray, particularly in times when values are in contention, religion competes with freethinking, and no consensus exists on moral questions” (p. 15). But certainly a defense of mentor-regulated education can be found much earlier—for example in *The Republic*.<sup>[1]</sup> And the claim that a thing has an essence has a Platonic ring to it. The part that is modern,

then, is the defense of institutionalizing proper mentoring and placing a *secular* institution at “the moral centre of modern culture” (p. 21). Or: what is “modern” is the notion that a secular organization ought to serve as a major moral force—one variation of this moral imperative is championed even today.<sup>[2]</sup>

#### The Alternatives

Rothblatt provides a list of what could be considered the elements of a typology of universities. These elements can be stated in the form of questions. First, is the university “a self-governing guild or corporation of junior and senior members, or masters and students” or is it governed in some other manner? Second, what kind of aristocracy is it? That is, what are “its broadest existing social characteristics or identifications”? Third, what are its standards of entrance—is it “elitist, meritocratic, or mass access or open”? Fourth, what is “its geographic location or outlook...is it civic or municipal, provincial, metropolitan, urban suburban or exurban, local, regional, or national”? Fifth, what is “its legal or constitutional status or principal source of financial support”? Sixth, what are “its missions or functions, such as graduate research, undergraduate...instruction, professional education, vocational training, or, more vaguely, ‘service’”? Seventh, in which “educational tier or sector” does it belong: “is it an autonomous campus or a federal component of a larger system”? These elements serve as points of discussion in Rothblatt’s book, though the various components of these elements don’t all receive equally lengthy treatment. Neither the elements by themselves nor the combining of them in a list is (from a Newmanian point of view) sufficient, because not one “evokes the majesty or nobility of universities as does the simple reference ‘idea’” (p. 4). Or, to put the point differently, there has to be some essence which all of these elements serve.

Which is just fine if one knows what the essence is. And if there is a disagreement about the thing’s essence, what is one to do? Coleridge’s methodology for discovering the essence would strike “most readers...(as) casuistry, at best tautology, but in any case hardly the grounds upon which to argue today” (p. 11).<sup>[3]</sup> Rothblatt’s discussion of Coleridge illustrates how difficult it is to know the “essence” or “idea” of something (pp. 9-11). The real crux of the matter is this: if a thing has an essence, why is it so unobvious to so many? Because the essence of the university is at least in part socially constructed (pp. 452, 453)—or, for a post-modernist, it has a continually de/re/constructed and socially negotiated

meaning. Examples follow.

Germany provides the first example. The German essence of the university was “scholarship and science” or what Americans might call research. From this perspective, the university “required vigilant protection from the commercial and vulgar tendencies of modern culture....Nevertheless, the disciplinary crown of the German idea of a university was philosophy (and philology)....Philosophy was the means for unifying the disciplines” (p. 22). One variation was to sanctify method; another was to sanctify result (pp. 22-24). German universities had “no institutional tradition of *in loco parentis* (emphasis in the original), no or little concern with the private or personal lives of undergraduates, no need or desire or opportunity...to develop in young people that sense of wider civic responsibility” (pp. 23, 24).

The United States provides the second example. American universities are “multi-purpose institutions which continue to add functions and responsibilities without disregarding older commitments” (p. 27). Clark Kerr’s study of universities in the United States led him to conclude “that American universities could not be said to be animated by a single idea, that is, by an inherited referent serving as a touchstone or guide” (pp. 29, 30). Part of the way through his consideration of universities in the U.S., Rothblatt wonders: “Is there really no single idea of an American university” (p. 38)? His answer: “‘Knowledge’ comes closest, but knowledge in every conceivable form and application” (p. 38). Later Rothblatt claim that “American academics have had to live without an idea of a university for at least a century” (p. 45). Universities in the United States have been responsive to market demands.[4] Indeed, cynics may be inclined to say that the essence of American universities is money.[5]

France and Scotland provide the next two examples. France pursued an “anti- or non-essentialist idea of a university.” While it is “The most highly centralised of all western European systems...French higher education institutions are virtually disembodied....Individual universities tend toward high specialization.” One institution teaches, another does research (p. 48). By contrast, Scottish universities had “a curriculum responsive to market demand and amenable to change; flexible programmes of study including part-time; a low-cost system of professorial lecturing; non-residential instruction; and a particular spirit of general and professional education concentrated more on the well-educated student of a service culture than on the potential, social, political and reli-

gions leader of society” (p. 356). Universities succumbing to influence from Scotland stressed “the notion that education was a national responsibility to be undertaken in the interests and well-being of the many” (p. 28).

#### The Superior Alternative

“For the sake of argument we might say that the idea of a university is education, but what kind should it be? Liberal, vocational, technical, research-related” (p. 2)? It is our inability as a society to provide a singular answer to that question which causes the discontents of the modern university, at least from the perspective of Newman-through- Rothblatt. But how are we to know which is the superior alternative? Each of the four examples discussed above carry with them justifications for selecting it as the superior alternative. Additionally, we can create a multitude of other alternatives by creating a continuum for each of the elements of the typology (outlined at the beginning of the previous section), then combining the elements according to the variety that could be generated from the continua.

Which is precisely the genius of the American system of higher education: it consists of a multitude of alternative “ideas.” Whether the idea preceded the institution is important only if one insists on a strict adherence to a certain kind of philosophic approach. I am concerned about the willingness of universities to respond to market demand. In my opinion, a university is more than just an organization with a line of products trying to attract customers. But there are after all many markets: there is a market for limited-access, prestigious, private universities—of which there are many varieties; there is a market for limited-access, prestigious, public universities—of which there are many varieties; there is a market for “lower-tier” public and private universities of many different sorts; and there is a market for a variety of community colleges and vocational schools. The important challenge, for American universities at least, is for each university to ask: which particular “market” (read: “idea”) is most appropriate for this institution? The clash over how that question should be answered is the most pressing conflict facing American universities today.

#### Notes

[1]. *The Republic of Plato*, Second Edition. Translated, with notes, and interpretive essay, and a new introduction, by Allan Bloom. Basic Books, 1968.

[2]. See for example James S. Coleman. 1993, “The Rational Reconstruction of Society.” *American Sociolog-*

*ical Review* Vol. 58 (February): 1-15. Rothblatt writes: "The "idea" of a university is invariably, one might say inevitably, a moral one, so that departures from it, or modifications of it, are a form of betrayal to be repented or an act of treason to be punished" (p. 3).

[3]. Rothblatt summarizes the tautological nature of Coleridge's methodology thusly: "We gather the purpose of an institution from its antecedent idea, we know its antecedent idea from its ultimate aim, we deduce its ultimate aim from a great many pieces of historical information, but the method requires us to maintain at all times a careful distinction between an idea, sometimes called a principle, and a conception. Ideas may be embedded in certain institutions—liberty in the social contract—but the latter is false, only the former true" (p. 11).

[4]. See for example pp. 27, 28, 33, 272, 273, 429. For additional commentary on or relating to American

universities, see pp. 79-92, 102, 103, 134, 282-285, 345, 428-431, 435, 436, 431-450, and 453.

[5]. Rebecca S. Lowen, *Creating the Cold War University: The Transformation of Stanford*, Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1997. Lowen's book on Stanford can be read in part at least as an illustration of the point that the desire to create a great university is motivated by more than just the desire to find money (see for example her discussion on pp. 14 and 15 of the role of entrepreneurship and ideology). Her book is a fascinating study of Stanford and the question of what a university should be.

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**Citation:** Arthur L. Morin. Review of Rothblatt, Sheldon, *The Modern University and Its Discontents: The Fate of Newman's Legacies in Britain and America*. H-Review, H-Net Reviews. June, 1998.

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