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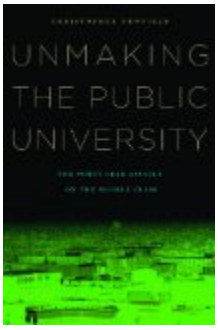
Christopher Newfield. *Unmaking the Public University: The Forty-Year Assault on the Middle Class.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008. viii + 395 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-02817-3; $21.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-674-06036-4.



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A Tale of Two Visions? Conservatives and Culture Warriors in U.S. Higher Education

At the dawn of the second decade of the twenty-first century, conservative politicians are flexing their political muscles against academic unions and universities. Legislators in Ohio and Wisconsin have sought to limit collective bargaining rights. The governor of Texas (and a Republican presidential hopeful) touts "breakthrough solutions" that promise to boost productivity and accountability while his state government has quietly slashed physics programs. The governor in Florida mimics Texas rhetoric and has issued a death sentence to anthropology programs in his state.[1] Harvard University Press responds by issuing a paperback edition of Christopher Newfield's *Unmaking the Public University*.

Newfield is not new to the field of higher education history. His *Ivy and Industry: Business and the Making of the American University, 1880-1980* (2003) traces the ties between business and higher education throughout the century before 1980. *Unmaking the Public University* picks up the story roughly where he left off, this time arguing that the past forty years have witnessed an assault on the public university orchestrated by surging conservative elites who feel threatened by the democratizing influences of the G.I. Bill of 1944 and the civil rights movement. When Newfield talks of the "public university" he means "public research universities" and when he speaks of the "middle class" he means the "college educated" (pp. 2-3). His story unfolds as a clash of two visions rooted in the economy.

Part 1 of the volume lays out a vision of public higher education rooted in the history of the 1950s and 1960s. The principles of egalitarianism, meritocracy, and educational necessity dictated educational priorities that fostered general development and greater movement toward majority rule. The public research university emerged as the institution that wedded access and equality while promoting public works and social activism for the benefit of all–"the daughters of the artichoke fields and the sons of the auto body shops would study with Pulitzer-prize winners," as Newfield puts it in one of his more felicitous phrases (p. 3). But there was a snake in this garden. Growing multiculturalism and the education and empowerment of the middle class threatened conservative elites who would mount a counterrevolution.

In part 2, Newfield explains that conservatives in the 1970s began to promote a second vision of higher education, intended to replace the bastion of free speech and democratization with a "privatizable knowledge factory" that would produce "flexible, adaptable, innovative workers" (p. 9). Conservatives employed the culture wars as a cover for their efforts to roll back the economic gains of the middle class. They began by attacking political correctness, associating it with "race consciousness, which they in turn described as an internal enemy that challenged national unity" (p. 65). Conservatives then introduced a new language of economic development that effectively "allowed the Red menace to be replaced by the rainbow menace" (p. 65).

In part 3, Newfield moves to the heart of the matter. The culture wars, it turns out, are really just economic wars. The decline in public funding of higher education paralleled a decline in the economic fortunes of the middle and lower classes. Public research universities felt pressured to grow up into flagship institutions, impoverishing both students and campuses along the way. "Administrators at times had to rob Peter's teaching budget to cover Paul's new research institutes while hoping Mary would get a similar gift to stem the deficit later on" (p. 10). The only way for universities to survive was to rely increasingly on private funding. Students, however, have far fewer options for recourse. Social mobility is now lower in the United States than it is in Canada and northern Europe, even in France and Spain.

Newfield ends the volume by proposing several remedies. Public universities (and all Americans) must reaffirm racial equality as a guiding value, maximize access and the highest intellectual quality, promote individual and collective development in terms other than economic, restore public funding of higher education, and understand other global societies as more than commercial markets. In short, he calls for a return to the first vision of the 1950s and 1960s.

A brief review cannot do justice to the nuances of Newfield's argument and the intricacies of his analysis of university life and economic necessities. His evidence comes primarily from literary works, court cases, and stories about the transformations in the state of California. "Conservatives" and "culture warriors" generally receive monolithic treatment, and "public research universities" are generally assumed to function like the University of California at Berkeley or Newfield's own University of California at Santa Barbara. It might have been instructive to examine the effect of the growing number of female degree holders or of the ways that Hispanic-serving or other non-University of California system campuses have struggled through the past few decades.

Unmaking the Public University should be read by all who worry about the "crises" in higher education, in general, and the humanities, in particular. Policymakers, pundits, and parents are likely to find much of value here. Journalists, bloggers, and any who are inclined to talk of a "conservative resurgence" as "news" are certainly to benefit from a study of the effect of conservative educational policy over the past four decades. Any movement toward a workable solution for the future must begin not with a dream of the past but a sanguine assessment of present conservative policies, the politics of education at all levels, and the ways that culture war narratives serve all of the participants in the debates.

Note

[1]. Reeve Hamilton, "Seven Breakthrough Solutions Would Boost Productivity and Accountability at Public Universities," *Texas Tribune*, May 31, 2011; John T. McNay, "The War on Higher Education," *History News Network*, September 11, 2011; and Audrey Williams June, "Florida May Be the Next Battleground over Faculty Productivity," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 13, 2011.

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