



# PUTTING 'PUBLIC' BACK INTO THE PUBLIC UNIVERSITY

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**ABSTRACT** The American public university is losing status *vis-à-vis* the Ivy League private sector. In mass education it is challenged by for-profit institutions such as the University of Phoenix. Declining state financing is symptomatic of the evacuation of public values inside and outside the university. This has proceeded furthest in the USA. Other university systems are affected by national/local as well as global/American factors. Nevertheless, most public universities are on the defensive. Intensified status competition, locking neatly into neo-liberal government, is reconstituting the field of higher education (Bourdieu, 1988) as a competitive market in private status goods. This, not a structural transformation consequent on changes in scale, is decisive. Universities have a capacity for bounded diversity and an underutilized potential in public discourse that enables them to combine openness with research and academic excellence, but not with high student selectivity and social exclusivity. The article comments on the implications of Craig Calhoun's essay for reinventing the public university, focusing on two theorizations that provide resources for this: Samuelson (1954) on public and private goods, and Habermas (1989) on the public sphere. However, neither fully encompasses the university's role in learning, scholarship, identity formation and self-alteration.

**KEYWORDS** education markets • public good • status • universities • USA

A growing literature suggests the 'publicness' of American public universities is out of step with the times. A highly effective institutional form that bundled together a great range of functions, providing access to an expanding proportion of young people while underpinned by community consensus and public finance, is under pressure from two other models. The first is the private research university, the Ivy League establishments at the

top of the *US News and World Report*, their stellar reputation sustained by student selectivity, star faculty, sticker price and national/global leadership in a 'winner-take-all' market (Frank and Cook, 1995). The second competitor model is the for-profit, intensive teaching vocational universities that offer neither libraries nor research but have become the fastest growing sector in American higher education. The Apollo Group – parent company of the University of Phoenix, now the largest US private university – DeVry and others command \$50 billion in the equity markets. Meanwhile state budget cuts bite deeper into the public universities, while state legislators invoke the public mission of those universities to block publicly unpopular tuition rises. Both the Ivy League and the for-profit benefit from sympathetic regulators in Washington, and from a plethora of public subsidies. The most important are federal student loans, which enable students to imagine US higher education as a single national market in which they can move to the highest status university (meaning the most selective university) that will take them.

The plight of public values in the American university is the topic of several recent books. These works share a common limitation. On one hand the shiny new market juggernaut is described in vivid detail. On the other, the notions of 'public' dissolve into rather tired platitudes, exhortations and sentiment, like *The Way We Were* without the visuals. The strategies to recover the lost democratic ground are unconvincing. In *Shakespeare, Einstein, and the Bottom Line* (2004), David Kirp offers one compelling case study after another of executive marketing strategy and technological transformation. His conclusion is more mundane. The true 'soul of the university', he says, lies in 'communities of scholars' with 'a mission beyond their members' individual private good'. Kirp is vague on just what that public mission might be, variously citing knowledge for knowledge's sake, social cohesion, responsible citizens, individual mobility and stimulation of the economy. When he talks about actual communities of scholars the description slides into nostalgia (Kirp, 2004: 260–3). Kirp seems unable to connect his ideal inner world of the university to his imagined external public. The community of scholars is merely self-referencing – where is the external democratic mission in that? One also suspects that for Kirp the community of scholars is fading fast; the spaces between the universities, and the even larger spaces between the university and the world outside, have already been taken over by the ubiquitous market. Kirp can only gesture with a kind of hopeful hopelessness towards the city of the intellect. It is not so different to Bill Readings' conclusion in *The University in Ruins* (1996). For Readings, neo-liberal globalization is too big, and the nation-building function and the cultural mission of the university are lost. All that is left is to potter around, in a critical fashion, among the ruins. Likewise *Universities in the Marketplace* (2003) finds former Harvard President Derek Bok stuck in the same impasse. University presidents have been fatally compromised

by business, and by the logic of inter-university competition, he says. The trustees are too busy with their own affairs to restore the public's faith. That leaves the academic staff as the last hope of the side. 'Faculty members are in the best position to appreciate academic values and insist on their observance' (p. 189). But by this stage of the book Bok has already explained at some length how academic research has been subverted by commercial interests. If presidents with their institutional power cannot steer an independent course, how is it that professors and lecturers, who have less to bargain with, will find the way to do it?

Another kind of argument about the public university is also mounted, one that displays a greater certitude but suffers the same strategic limitations. It goes more or less like this. The 'knowledge economy' is manifest not as the renaissance of the university, its flowering at the centre of a new age, but the subordination of the university to capital and to the state on behalf of capital. Neo-liberal government, plus executive management within the universities, rests not on educational cultures but on financial incentives. This privileges short term utilities, vocationalism and the product form. Public accountability and scholarly reflexivity are sustained not by faculty and community participation in university governance, but by performance measurement and the audit culture, where self-regulated autonomy is the principal medium of external control: autonomy becomes heteronomy. Here the erstwhile collective mission of public universities, and the liberal personal formation of students, are subordinated by market competition and weakened by consumer subjectivities. The universities look to the corporate bottom line, which is their own prestige and revenues, rather than social access or the generation of knowledge. Globalization strengthens the grip of economic competition and carries neo-liberal norms to every corner of the world (see for example Currie and Newsome, 1998). The problem with this argument is that while much of it is plausible, it is merely descriptive, and a schematic description in the face of a highly complex problem. The transformation is never so complete, nor solely engineered from above by managers and governments, let alone cosmic forces of 'capitalism' and 'globalization'. It involves also changing identities and desires, and new kinds of reflexivity and self-investment. And there is much national and local variation. More important than description is explanation. For example, *why* is American society giving away the public university despite its historical dividends? Why are the universities and faculty complicit in this?

As one would expect, behind the recurring failure to put the 'public' back in 'public university' lies another limitation, one of interpretation. The university is under-theorized by comparison with other social forms – for example the firm and even the network – and most writing on the university suffers from two contrasting defects (Naidoo, 2004). Either the university is imagined as an institution that is essentially determined from outside: as a cultural or scientific superstructure that rests on something more fundamental,

such as the economy, the changing role of the state, or the reproduction of the social order, as in many of the more critical accounts. Or the university is imagined as a closed system, its disciplinary cultures and executive managers essentially insulated from external relations and social forces. Kirp and Bok veer between one and the other. As they see it, the problem lies in an irresistible force that is externally determined: the generic market. So 'the faculty' in the 'community of scholars' are pressed into service as the immovable object inside the university. There is no coherence between problem and solution, because Kirp and Bok are unable to effectively situate the institutional personality of the university (not to mention the varied personalities of its academic parts) outside and inside at the same time. Yet it is clear that the university is shaped simultaneously by (1) its own varying, inner capacity for self-alteration; (2) the field of higher education; and (3) other networks and interests in which it is implicated. Theorizations of the university must take all of this into account. The one major theorist of the last half century who understood this was, of course, Bourdieu. In *Homo Academicus* (1988) Bourdieu notes that the autonomy of the university makes possible its *habitus*, its cultures and forms of value – what he calls its academic capital and scientific capital, as distinct from values created in commerce and government. At the same time the university controls the techniques whereby university-specific capitals are converted into other forms of advantage, thereby maintaining its purchase on social reproduction. University autonomy in Bourdieu's sense is more than university self-government, which at worst is merely the freedom to follow someone else's agenda. University autonomy is a capacity to develop unique forms of life. At the same time, the power of the university to determine itself is bound to inherited traditions and is scattered unevenly across the national university system, where the different institutions are positioned and self-positioning within a hierarchical field.

Calhoun too is mindful of the inner university, while keeping its social potentials in view. He begins to explain the predicament of the American public university, and lays some of the groundwork for rethinking the public university project, without becoming hypnotized by the potency of the market, or producing an anti-discussion that constitutes not inquiry but closure. The remainder of this short article will respond to just three of the questions raised in Calhoun's fecund essay: first, his remarks about the different meanings of 'public', which suggest it might be fruitful to consider the antecedents of those meanings; second, his argument, drawing on an analogy taken from Habermas, that the 'structural transformation' of the public universities into mass institutions is associated with a growing tension between, on one hand, their openness, their access function, and on the other hand their commitment to research, academic excellence and exclusivity; third, some of the implications of his account of the American public university project for universities outside the USA.

### MEANINGS OF 'PUBLIC'

Calhoun notes that 'public' is associated with universities in three different ways that do not precisely correlate: the source of their funding, the nature of their output or 'goods' (who benefits and how the goods are distributed), and whether the work is conducted on an open basis and contributes to a larger public sphere beyond the university. Let us look more closely at the antecedents of these meanings.

*From liberal political economy and political philosophy:* Calhoun's first two meanings, source of funding, and the nature of the output or 'goods', originate in the public/private and state/market boundaries in liberal political economy and political philosophy. In liberalism these two different distinctions are freely conflated. The foundational liberal dualism is between state and public on one hand, and private and market on the other (Hayek, 1960). Thus in Calhoun's first meaning, public funding of universities is from governments, as distinct from private funding in the form of student fees, philanthropy, or corporations. This suggests a straightforward juridical definition of 'public', meaning government sector or state ownership. 'Public' in this sense provides the formal boundary of Calhoun's American public university. In the second meaning public outputs or 'goods' benefit a broad citizenry, such as the contribution of universities to community health, and are distributed in open and egalitarian fashion; and these public goods are distinct from private goods, such as places in prestigious Law faculties. Public outputs (the second meaning) are more or less automatically linked to public funding (the first meaning). Public universities that produce public goods are seen to exercise broad responsibilities on behalf of the whole people, perhaps to provide open access in the manner of public libraries. Correspondingly this suggests a potential for detailed legislative intervention: in nations such as Germany or Austria it means the public administration of universities as government departments. It is expected that government should pay for the public goods, but less clear that it should pay on our joint behalf for the private goods. On the other side of the dualism, private universities produce private goods. They have a lesser compass of responsibility, a greater freedom to engage in commercial markets and otherwise pursue their own ends free of state intervention, but they must finance their own operation themselves. This is a simple and transparent symmetry.

Yet when we look closer we find that the meanings of 'public' are held together arbitrarily, after all, and the wall separating the two halves of the liberal dualism is less solid than it appears. In the real world a public/private distinction based on the character of the goods (commercial private goods versus collective public goods) frequently conflicts with a public/private based on juridical ownership. For example in the neo-liberal era, governments and state agencies typically create and regulate markets from the medium distance, and those markets may take in both publicly owned and

privately owned institutions. But if public/state is understood as separated from private/market, then how can we make sense of this state-driven marketization, where much of the contemporary politics of higher education lies? Further, publicly owned universities produce private goods – scarce degrees conferring private income benefits – even in higher education systems where tuition is free or close to it, as in Germany, France or Mexico. Likewise private universities contribute to public goods in Calhoun's second sense, such as basic research and collective literacy. To further complicate matters, some public universities charge high fees, as do universities in Australia in relation to many of their students, while many private universities are subsidized by governments so as to levy low fees or even no fees at all, for example, some private universities in the Netherlands.

Legal ownership and source of funds do matter. All else being equal, state-owned institutions are more directly accessible to policy makers from above and democratic politics from below; and state funding brings with it a measure of state control, either *de facto* or *de jure*. High fee private institutions tend to maximize the production of private goods *vis-à-vis* public goods. But a definition of public/private that is determined by legal ownership or by funding source alone is not explanatory. Nor are state ownership or funding in themselves sufficient for defending and advancing the public interest in collective distribution or democratic practices. In fact they may not always be necessary to the commons. Something more is needed, whether from within political economy or outside it.

Do these difficulties mean we should abandon the liberal distinction between public and private in all its forms? Not yet. Aside from the fact that the politics of universities are soaked in this distinction, so that it can scarcely be evaded, there is a more rigorous kernel to the liberal argument about individual and collective goods. The definitive version is a short article by Paul Samuelson (1954) titled 'The Pure Theory of Public Expenditure'. Samuelson defined 'public' goods as goods or services<sup>1</sup> that are non-rivalrous and non-excludable. Goods are non-rivalrous when they can be consumed by any number of people without being depleted, for example, knowledge of a mathematical theorem. Goods are non-excludable when the benefits cannot be confined to individual buyers, such as social tolerance, or law and order. Few goods are both fully non-rivalrous and fully non-excludable and so constitute 'pure' public goods. Many goods have one or the other quality in part and so constitute part-public goods. Much of the time, university education and research fall into the latter category. Samuelson noted also that pure or part-pure public goods tend to be under-provided in economic markets. For example, it is unprofitable to pay privately for goods that could be acquired free, such as clean air in the countryside, or for goods that are acquired as the result of someone else's purchase because the goods concerned are non-excludable, such as the economic 'externalities' generated by the education of one worker on the productivity of the

others in the work team. Hence there is a case for the non-market financing and/or provision of public goods. Samuelson's public/private distinction still holds a broad sway in policy circles, being employed by neo-liberals and UN development advocates alike (Kaul et al., 1999). And indeed, notions of excludability, rivalry and the under-production of public goods in economic markets are helpful in understanding the collective social functions of universities and explaining why the role of government in education has developed as it has. For example, language and discourse, and knowledge as 'know-how', as distinct from knowledge expressed in particular artefacts such as texts, are about as close to natural public goods as we can get. The mathematical theorem retains its value no matter how many people use it. Nor are its benefits confined to individuals for long: knowledge can only ever be a temporary private good. It can be codified in intellectual property regimes and subject to alienated private ownership, but once it is out there, it can no longer be so confined, especially in a networked environment (hence the ambiguities of 'plagiarism'). This is more obvious in theoretical conversation, where nothing is ever completely new, than in the applied sciences. Nevertheless, all forms of knowledge tend to be under-produced in economic markets. Even American bio-technology research, where the industry is heavily implicated as funder and beneficiary, is partly subsidized by governments.

So far so good. However, Samuelson also set out to naturalize the public/private boundary so as to privilege the private sphere and economic markets. He imagined all goods as naturally rivalrous and excludable unless they possessed intrinsic characteristics that prevented them from being offered on a full price basis in a market. The marketplace was the norm, and it was non-state and private. Allocative efficiency and negative freedom demanded that private goods should be produced in markets, so that public functions were exercised only when market production was insufficient to meet intrinsic needs. However, there is nothing particularly intrinsic about human needs for complex cultural and economic goods. Higher education, like health, can be organized either as public goods or as private goods. Whether universities are public, in the sense of producing non-rivalrous or non-excludable goods under-produced in markets, is determined not by nature but by government policy and social practice. Even knowledge can be subjected to private ownership and commercial distribution, up to a point at least. Universities can be free, open to all and focused on research designed to solve problems of public health, ecological instability or international conflict; or they can be costly, closed and focused on the provision of privately valuable degrees and technologies sold to the highest bidder. The nature of the goods does not determine the character of production. The character of production determines the nature of the goods. In sum, Samuelson's notions of private goods help us to trace commodification and the growing role of status competition in higher education, while his partial

insights into collective and inter-subjective knowledge goods are useful – provided that his market/state dualism and his market essentialism are abandoned, and it is acknowledged that ‘public’ and ‘private’ are historically relative and are always open to political contestation.

This is not to say that liberal political economy and political philosophy constitute the horizon of possibility. Samuelson’s theory measures the economic value of private goods more precisely than that of public goods. In economics, calculations of the private returns from a university degree are easier to imagine than the social returns, and appear less arbitrary. The calculations of the economic externalities of education, the benefits of one person’s education for another, are assumption driven, and likewise the collective benefits of university remain rather shadowy and diffuse. Social democrats place a higher value on the public benefits of university than do neo-liberals, and so argue for higher levels of public funding. But these arguments are not conclusive.<sup>2</sup> More significantly, Samuelson’s theory constructs a generic economic framework that fails to capture what is distinctive and formative about universities, compared to other institutions and social sites. Bourdieu’s insight was that the autonomy of universities has enabled them to evolve distinctive forms of inner life and modes of social value. The notions of rivalry and excludability do resonate with the personalized nature of Bourdieu’s forms of capital, but tend also to homogenize all sites in economic terms. Investment in university means plunging into a protracted process of self-alteration, becoming soaked in disciplinary mentalities and in new kinds of lateral sociability. But for the economist, investment in university parallels a private investment in equity or a public investment in street-cleaning. The democratic dimension is reduced to the politics of distribution.

*Habermas and the university as public sphere:* Calhoun’s third meaning, the extent to which universities and scientific researchers ‘conduct their work in public ways’, opens a more complex terrain. On one hand ‘public ways’ refers to the nature of relationships inside the university, for example whether the production and circulation of knowledge takes place under conditions of free and open debate among researchers, on the basis of reason – rather than being subjected to corporate controlled intellectual property and the pragmatists’ famous test of value, not ‘is it true?’ but ‘is it useful?’ On the other hand, this meaning of ‘public’ extends to communication between the university and ‘a broader public sphere beyond the university’, where ‘public’ academic work is shaped by and shaping of both a broad public discourse and more specialized policy making by public agencies. This suggests the terrain opened up by Habermas’s public sphere (Habermas, 1989) which Calhoun draws on in his essay and has discussed elsewhere (1992).

In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989), Habermas does not explicitly discuss the university as contributor to the democratic public sphere. The heyday of the bourgeois public sphere predates the

modern university, while his story of the 20th-century public sphere is one of contradictions and failure. Still, the notion of the public sphere is suggestive in relation to the university. Habermas notes that education set the boundaries of the public sphere, though later on he misses the opportunity to incorporate education and literacy into his account of structural transformation (Habermas, 1989: 37; Calhoun, 1992: 24). Like the university today, Habermas's public sphere provides for a non-violent form of social integration based on discourse rather than power or money. Information and education enable the public to reach not just a common opinion but a considered one (Calhoun, 1992: 6, 14, 29–30). The classical public sphere had a capacity for criticism independent of the state, sometimes directed to it, while contributing functionally to the state (Habermas, 1989: 41, 51). This describes contemporary state/university relations at their best. Taking it further, Calhoun remarks on 'Habermas's inability to find in advanced capitalist societies an institutional basis for an effective political public sphere' (1992: 30). The university could contribute to this project. In certain respects it transcends the expressed limits of Habermas's public sphere. The rational-critical function of the bourgeois public sphere foundered because it could not simultaneously sustain homogeneity and openness. Unlike Habermas's public sphere, the university has a viable credentialling system ensuring that those inside the public conversation are qualified to contribute. At the same time the university has no requirement for homogeneity of interest or view. It does not face Habermas's trade-off between its critical capacity and its scale. It is notable for its potential to sustain a bounded heterogeneity, in terms of both its disciplinary conversations and the social and cultural origins of its students. Here the university can also disappoint. Its capacity in horizontal social diversity is diminished to the extent that it is dominated by status differentiation in a hierarchical field. For example, when high intellectualism in the humanities is confined to a few highly selective universities, the potential for social criticism is reduced. At the same time, the university retains even in many of its selective institutions a capacity for international cosmopolitanism.

Brian Pusser (2005) suggests that it is useful to imagine the university itself as a public sphere that provides institutional space for reasoned argument and contending values. It has been the vehicle for successive social transformations: the civil rights movement, the 1960s/1970s campaigns for student power and grass-roots democracy, the second wave of feminism in the 1970s, gay liberation and environmental movements. Whether there are multiple public spheres or articulated sites within a single public sphere is less important than whether the university has the potential to sustain the democratic function. On a good day it is like Habermas's public sphere. The argument is carried by the merits of the case not the identity of the arguer; and the university rests on 'a kind of social intercourse that, far from presupposing the equality of status, disregarded status altogether', replacing 'the

celebration of rank' with the 'parity of common humanity' (Habermas, 1989: 36). As Calhoun notes, this potential for flat discursive association is undermined by the necessities of expertise, a tension integral to any democratic project that involves the university. Perhaps its democratic potential is more accessible in relations between students than between the different university estates. This potential is weakened by factors not forever essential to the university, but prevalent in its present: by traditional scholarly collegial hierarchies, by newer managerial hierarchies, by the potency of government and external economic markets within the university, and most of all, by the dynamics of status competition in higher education (of which there is more below). As Kirp's book suggests, it is possible to reconcile the status market with the public sphere as the 'community of scholars' inside the university only at the price of a loss of connectedness between the internal and external public spheres. Also, in the long run, a high status culture with its star faculty payments corrupts the potential for flat collegial relations inside as well.

The arguments of both Habermas and Calhoun strongly suggest that if the university is to be immersed in the democratic public sphere, the central issue is communication. In the last 15 years universities in the Anglo-American countries have developed a remarkable facility for internal and external marketing, and a benefit of neo-liberalism is that it has foregrounded transparency. Universities have neglected the evolution of two-way flows and flat dialogue. But they have the technologies and discursive resources for conversations at a previously impossible scale. The Internet enables construction of the discursive forms of university community across multiple sites and with student populations of 30,000 and more. The larger 'Habermasian' goal is to deploy the communicative resources of the university to build forms of coordination based on discourse rather than money and hierarchies of power. If so, the university needs to more explicitly value its own contributions to public debate and policy formation, and to favour not just creators of saleable intellectual property but socially communicative faculty. For example, the public university could position itself as the medium for translating expert science into popular forms. This would reduce the expert/democratic tensions in disciplinary knowledges – with internal as well as external democratic dividends – and provide a practical grounding for socially responsible science. It also offers a more attractive rationale for public support than the notion of a self-referencing city of the intellect.

At the same time the norms of the public sphere leave other issues unresolved. History suggests that there is no necessary correlation between the inner democracy of the university and its outer public missions. If the corporations and state machine are not the voices of the community – if these so-called 'stakeholders' are not to be privileged – then who is? With which democratic agents from outside the university, whether configured as representatives or as direct participants, should the university deal? It can readily be argued that the resolution of this issue is a matter for the larger

public sphere, for institutions outside the university; yet if the university is to initiate its own collective 'responsibilisation' (Rose, 1999), it needs someone to be responsible to. The university in the public sphere suggests a double act. The problem is to both recover autonomy from state- and market-driven heteronomy – persuading government that it is in its interests to free the university from the intrusive steering mechanisms of recent years – while reconfiguring the university in a larger democratic setting. As Bourdieu suggests, self-alteration is essential. Without it the university loses not just its capacity for criticism but its power to construct new democratic forms. The public sphere is a tall order for the university: publicly responsible and responsive expertise, intervention in the larger evolution of social coordination, the reassertion of scholarly independence, breaking the invisible chains of performance management and the audit culture. However, this kind of strategy problem is not altogether new. It is analogous to operating in the global environment. The key is to sustain and develop one's own identity, in the context of full external engagement.

In sum, Habermas's theorization of the public sphere, which is heterogeneous to the public/private goods distinction drawn from political economy, is suggestive of the forms of life associated with democratic public political projects inside the university. Community, criticism and social awareness might make a platform for regenerating a public university that has been boxed into a losing position by status competition. Habermas's later focus on communicative action points to the potential of an institution combining high communicative competence with specialized expertise. This is a more fertile, open-ended notion of the 'knowledge society' or 'knowledge economy' than accounts that subordinate the university to global economic competitiveness. The public sphere also provides a set of norms by which to judge the public university, and to trace some of the ways its 'publicness' is compromised. It allows us to imagine certain 'public goods' which in Samuelson are elusive. However, we lack a clear line of strategy for implementing the public sphere.

At the same time, both the notion of public/private goods and that of the public sphere are theorizations which in their origins were indifferent to the particularities of universities as sites. Arguably, because they are translated from larger bodies of political economy and political theory respectively, neither theorization can fully encompass what universities do. Both focus too much on direct effects and downplay the role of the university in the building of individual and collective capacity with open-ended long term potential. Arguably, neither theorization is able to work inside the processes of teaching and learning, and scholarship and research, where the main effects of the university are played out. Neither theorization captures the potency and variety of university education, particularly the disciplines in forming and transforming self-altering subjects. Neither grasps the contribution of university education to hybrid and multiple identities, and in the building of

'bridging social capital'<sup>3</sup> between people from different backgrounds. Thus there has been surprisingly little attention to the role of universities in geographical and cultural mobility, compared to sociological focus on their contribution to upward social mobility – despite the fact that universities are much more effective and generative in horizontal mobility than vertical mobility.

### **STRUCTURAL TRANSFORMATION OR STATUS MARKET?**

In his account of the historical evolution of the American public university, Calhoun emphasizes the transformative effects of growth in scale, directly invoking Habermas's (1989) argument. In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* the principle of open access led to the extension of the public sphere beyond the bourgeoisie, undermining the capacity of the public sphere to sustain a homogeneous rational-critical discourse. Calhoun (2006) notes that in the American university sector, as student numbers increased, public universities that once educated all the qualified students in their state became selective and the provision of more open access was pushed down to institutions of lesser status. For a time the stratification of institutions was not fully apparent, but 'a trade-off between excellence and accessibility was being exacerbated' (p. 11). Later he suggests that the tension between excellence and access is furthered by the growing role of research and its function of sorting institutions within the field. Research is specialized and mostly inaccessible to common discourse: 'knowledge may be in the public interest without itself being very widely disseminated to the public. Indeed, it is a striking characteristic of universities that their excellence is often measured in terms of their exclusivity' (p. 16).

Perhaps this suggests that mass higher education forces a closure of access to rational-critical culture which is confined to the exclusive universities. But Calhoun also emphasizes the central role of status competition: 'universities are . . . important distributors of private goods' (p. 6); 'the market for higher education is . . . a "positional" market in which relative standing in a hierarchy is crucial' (p. 24); 'there is increasing competition for students in a national market' (p. 11). Status competition is the instrument of structural transformation, the means whereby it is played out. 'The key here is the hierarchy, and the way excellence/accessibility trade-offs are built into it' (p. 25). Thus status competition is both the product of scale and driver of its transformative effects. Something is not right here. The suggestion is that structural transformation and status competition are reciprocal. Are they? Positive sum changes in scale have no necessary implications for a zero sum contest for social advantage, while status competition has broader roots than the size and shape of the field of higher education. Arguably Calhoun is right where he focuses on status competition. This, not structural transformation, is at the root of the American public university's troubles.

Perhaps *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* has here been stretched too far. While 'excellence' (like university 'quality') is ambiguous, Calhoun conflates two different kinds of excellence/exclusivity: student selectivity and research. Too often universities themselves blur the distinction between intellectual selection and social exclusion. It is true that research knowledge is intrinsically specialized and there are always questions about its articulation with a larger public. But student selectivity is a product of social systems, a matter of cultural habit and policy choice. Around the world, growth of scale in higher education is associated with a wide range of status configurations. Moreover, selective student entry is associated with exclusivity, but not necessarily with excellence. Selective universities do not necessarily constitute higher quality teaching and learning (though they do have an easier job). Nor does student selectivity necessarily sustain a rational-critical culture. All this suggests that the link between research functions and student selectivity in American research universities is less integral than conjunctural. We do not find the same interface in the elite American liberal arts colleges, for example.

Higher education in the USA is unusual in the intensity of the status competition, the extent to which federal policy, student mobility, foundation funding and system-ideology have driven the concentration of status and resources in the elite institutions. It is also unusual in having an Ivy League private sector that leads research as well as student formation.<sup>4</sup> The University of California's system of public institutions provides a framework in which the trade-off between excellence and access is partly overcome. World-leading research universities such as Berkeley are linked down to two year colleges with access pathways at all levels. Sometime in the last 30 years a tipping point was reached. The stratification effect of national status competition became so strong that even the UC research universities were decisively subordinated in market terms, judging by their *US News and World* report rankings.<sup>5</sup> Arguably, this final undermining of the conglomerate public university project was driven primarily by status competition (which is at least partly independent of scale) rather than driven by scale itself, or by the difficulties of communicating science.

### **GLOBAL IMPLICATIONS**

At present the UK and Australian governments are steering their university systems closer to American norms. In Australia, following the Nelson reforms, which established a full fee undergraduate market supported by government supported income contingent student loans, institutional stratification is proceeding apace. There will be a greater concentration of research functions and status in the leading public universities, the 'sandstones', while the middle level research universities face serious difficulties in sustaining their current profile (Marginson, forthcoming). At the same time

the doors are being opened to US for-profit providers. Perhaps this is the closest thing going to an Americanization strategy, though at present Australia lacks an Ivy League non-profit private sector, and it will never have alumni and foundation funding at the American scale. In contrast, in several West European nations all research universities are still seen as equivalent in standard. China's research universities are locked in competition with each other, but all are being vigorously fostered by national government. In Mexico the leading university is Universita Nacional Autonoma de Mexico (UNAM), a mega public institution of 270,000 students. UNAM only recently became selective, though it is one of the world's top 200 research universities. In Malaysia students are allocated to universities by government and their entry scores are only one of the many elements considered.

Everywhere the shape of the field is different to the American field. In all national systems there are trade-offs between selectivity and access. Not all face present questions about the sustainability of public universities *qua* public. Whether or not Calhoun's argument about structural transformation applies in the US, it is clear that there is no general law of structural transformation, whereby mass higher education necessarily leads to an American-style stratification and status market. Calhoun does not argue this. He respects national situatedness and debunks notions of a global American model that can be freely transported (Calhoun, 2000).

Despite this the rise and rise of the American status market, and the struggles of American public universities despite the strength of their tradition, are suggestive and salutary for universities in other nations. They are suggestive of what they tell us about the field of higher education, because governments in an Americanized world are prone to isomorphism. They are salutary because all research universities are now part of a common global market. For the first time in history we can talk about 'the university' in terms of not just a national field but a global field. Universities are networked by cross-border flows of staff and students, knowledge and ideas; the object of converging government policies and global measurements of research performance; and subject of global strategies to position themselves to advantage (Marginson and Sawir, 2005). As the measures of comparative research performance show (Shanghai Jiao Tong University of Higher Education [SJTUIHE], 2005), the global university field is led by the major US and UK universities and shaped by Anglo-American linguistic and cultural hegemony. On these asymmetrical terms, led by policy, markets and communications, all research universities are becoming more similar to each other (Marginson, forthcoming).

This does not mean that all universities are becoming identical. The university will continue to be the product not only of global commonalities but of national policies and local histories and identities. Globalization also foregrounds diversity in that it obliges us to take account of the full range of institutional types and possibilities – not all of which are Anglo-American

possibilities – instead of just staying with what we know, whether the ideal types of the American university 2005 or the French university of *Homo Academicus*. Bourdieu's data were gathered in the mid 1960s prior to neo-liberal government, globalized communications, world markets in elite universities and for-profit degrees, and the problems of American public universities. Since Bourdieu the external dimension now looks more pressing, and the independence of the university more threadbare, especially in English-speaking nations where his university-specific forms of 'capital' are being jostled by the capital of Marx (Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004). At the same time state funding in China and Singapore is reinventing national universities as global players, while Western European public universities continue their slower march from direct state administration to semi-corporate autonomy. The problems of the American public university are, after all, American problems. Being American problems, they have something to say to universities everywhere.

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### Notes

1. In this article the term 'goods' is used in a generic sense to refer to all forms of production, including those industries conventionally characterized as 'services', such as education. 'Goods' refers to benefits obtained, which includes benefits that are intangible/non-corporeal, as well as those manifest in corporeal commodities.
2. Thus some neo-liberals argue that Samuelson was wrong about market failure, and adequate public goods can be generated by private expenditures on education (Friedman, 1962), while others even claim that the net public goods are zero (Fane, 1984).
3. The theorization of the role of education in the formation of 'bridging social capital' is one the few useful notions to emerge from the social capital literature.
4. In most nations with substantial private sectors in higher education, such as Japan, the leading private universities are predominantly teaching institutions. Outside the US substantial science-based research is largely publicly funded and housed.
5. There is now only one public university in the *USNWR* top 20.

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