

Higher Education Under Attack

by *Immanuel Wallerstein*



For a very long time there were only a few universities in the world. The total student body in these institutions was very small. This small group of students was drawn largely from the upper classes. Attending the university conferred great prestige and reflected great privilege.

This picture began to change radically after 1945. The number of universities began to expand considerably, and the percentage of persons in the age range that attended universities began to

expand. Furthermore, this was not merely a question of expansion in those countries that had already had universities of note. University education was launched in a large number of countries that had few or no university institutions before 1945. Higher education became worldwide.

The pressure for expansion came from above and below. From above, governments felt an important need for more university graduates to ensure their capacity to compete in the more complex technologies that were required in the exploding expansion of the world-economy. And from below, large numbers of the middle strata and even of the lower strata of the world's populations were insistent that they have access to higher education in order to improve considerably their economic and social prospects.

The expansion of the universities, which was remarkable in size, was made possible by the enormous upward expansion of the world-economy after 1945, the biggest in the history of the modern world-system. There was plenty of money available for the universities, and they were happy to make use of it.

Of course, this changed the university systems somewhat. Individual universities became much larger and began to lose the quality of intimacy that smaller structures provided. The class composition of the student body, and then of the professorate, evolved. In many countries, expansion not only meant a reduction in the monopoly of upper strata persons as students, professors, and administrators, but it often meant that "minority" groups and women began to have wider access, which had previously been totally or at least partially denied.

This rosy picture came into difficulty after about 1970. For one thing, the world-economy entered its long stagnation. And little by little, the amount of money that universities received, largely from the states, began to diminish. At the same time, the costs of university education continued to rise, and the pressures from below for continued

expansion grew even stronger. The story ever since has been that of the two curves going in opposite directions - less money and increased expenses.

By the time we arrived at the twenty-first century, this situation became dire. How have universities coped? One major way was what we have come to call "privatization." Most universities before 1945, and even before 1970, were state institutions. The one significant exception was the United States, which had a large number of non-state institutions, most of which had evolved from religiously-based institutions. But even in these U.S. private institutions, the universities were run as non-profit structures.

What privatization began to mean throughout the world was several things: One, there began to be institutions of higher education that were established as businesses for profit. Two, public institutions began to seek and obtain money from corporate donors, which began to intrude in the internal governance of the universities. And three, universities began to seek patents for work that researchers at the university had discovered or invented, and thereupon entered as operators in the economy, that is, as businesses.

In a situation in which money was scarce, or at least seemed scarce, universities began to transform themselves into more business-like institutions. This could be seen in two major ways. The top administrative positions of universities and their faculties, which had traditionally been occupied by academics, now began to be occupied by persons whose background was in business and not university life. They raised the money, but they also began to set the criteria of allocation of the money.

There began to be evaluations of whole universities and of departments within universities in terms of their output for the money invested. This might be measured by how many students wished to pursue particular studies, or how esteemed was the research output of given universities or departments. Intellectual life was being judged by pseudo-market criteria. Even student recruitment was being measured by how much money was brought in via alternative methods of recruitment.

And, if this weren't enough, the universities began to come under attack from a basically anti-intellectual far right current that saw the universities as secular, anti-religious institutions. The university as a critical institution - critical of dominant groups and dominant ideologies - had always met with resistance and repression by the states and the elites. But their powers of survival had always been rooted in their relative financial autonomy based on the low real cost of operation. This was the university of yesteryear, not of today - and tomorrow.

One can write this off as simply one more aspect of the global chaos in which we are now living. Except that the universities were supposed to play the role of one major locus (not of course the only one) of analysis of the realities of our world-system. It is such analyses that may make possible the successful navigation of the chaotic transition towards a new, and hopefully better, world order. At the moment, the turmoil within the universities seems no easier to resolve than the turmoil in the world-economy. And even less attention is being paid to it.