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# Wheels Within Wheels: Some Thoughts About the Industrialization of American Higher Education

David W. Robinson

**Summary:** The following article is a brief introduction to some of my reflections about the industrial nature of contemporary American higher education. In it, I have attempted a summary profile of the character of our civilization, and of the advanced structures of learning it has produced. It is not intended to be anything more than a sketching on vast historical canvas; a much larger study would be required to survey such a topic. Nevertheless, I believe that it will give the reader a sense of our culture, and the context that American colleges and universities occupy. As always in the histories of our fallen world, ironies and futilities abound. The United States has generally professed a “Christian” belief structure (of highly uneven and debatable worth) throughout much of its history, but in the modern period of academic development it actually produced colleges and universities that reflect the values of a commercial-industrial republic with notably imperial tendencies.

## Introduction

Earlier Christian institutions were swept aside and marginalized by scientific and technical developments in the aftermath of the American Civil War. Within a generation of that conflict, the modern university – adopting the research-industrial mode, and allied with the industrial consciousness and the money power – conquered the mainstream of higher education in this country. The success of the university model in America, so often hailed as the pinnacle of modern academic achievement, has produced results that are ironically destructive of the possibilities of higher learning. To the dismay of many educators, the contemporary American university now has much more in common with industrial enterprise than it does with the academic vocation, more in common with the board room than the seminar room. Degrees are now products, advanced schooling a commodity mass marketed and produced.

It is my view that the Christian thinker cannot be content with the current general framework of collegiate and university operations in the United States, since it embodies a mode, means, and methods incompatible with true consciousness of the Lord’s Kingdom and biblical values. The personal and pastoral elements of education have been overshadowed and mainly engulfed by the industrial modality, with serious consequences for the calling of teaching and for the pursuit of the mind of Christ in our generation. Recognizing the contours of the problem informs a further discourse about what may be done in the face of this enormous challenge to Christian education.

“The business of America is business.”<sup>1</sup> – Calvin Coolidge, 1923

Higher education in America has become mass production.

In our own time, American colleges and universities are a vast educational enterprise, with millions of students attending degree-granting institutions.<sup>2</sup> Since the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944, both the numbers and velocity of growth in enrollment at American institutions has skyrocketed, with steady growth continuing for many years. Indeed, the complexity, scale and diversity of higher education are so large that compiling the statistics and tracking the activity is a full-time task for groups like the National Center for Educational Statistics; and tens of thousands of college and university employees attend to the administration of educational funds (both public and private), reports, endowments, grants, bequests, donations, student data, government research projects, and all the other aspects of modern American higher education. Literally tens of billions of dollars<sup>3</sup> are spent each year in funding both public and private higher educational institutions in this country, and educational policy debates are a trusty source of politi-

cal heat (usually without much accompanying light) in national forums.

In a number of ways colleges and universities have become largely indistinguishable from large corporations or government agencies over the past century<sup>4</sup>. In their organization, their processes, their values, and their language, modern American colleges and universities have adopted business and industrial modes. This is neither particularly surprising, nor is it an isolated development in our society; this trend in academic organization parallels and mirrors similar movement towards mass and industrialization in business, government, the military, and urban life. What is more, these changes are synergistic, symbiotic, and converge with increasing velocity. In contemporary America, the state, the military, the corporate-industrial sector, and higher education (particularly its advanced research component) have become inextricably linked over a number of decades in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and now share a common power and a common destiny.<sup>5</sup>

### **American Character, Attitudes, and Education**

The history of the United States cannot be understood fully without studying its educational ways. From the earliest days of the original thirteen colonies, America has been a nation whose attention has been particularly attracted to the possibilities, the problems, and the paradoxes of education. Whether debating the allocation of land for schools, the dilemma of payment and taxation, or the organization and structure of college and university life, Americans have a long tradition of determined involvement in their system of higher education. The arguments have been bitter and protracted, usually centering on the question of educational models, their philosophical justifications, and their means of financing. Each generation has come up with its own answers to the challenges of higher education; nevertheless, despite the disagreements collegiate enterprises have been notable for their persistent hardiness in the face of indifference or opposition in some quarters of American life. Indeed, writers like R. J. Rushdoony have gone so far as to identify the devotion to education – bordering on faith – in this country as messianic.<sup>6</sup>

I earlier used the phrase system of higher education, but this is misleading: America has no such system.

The American model of advanced education is not centralized, but has been constituted in our history as a loose collection of local, state, and regional approaches, both publicly and privately established, and all eventually related in modern times to overarching federal mandates. Even federal power is tolerated only distantly, and (apart from the exception of desirable federal funding) with reluctance. There are western nations which have built higher education upon a national foundation; the English, the French and the Germans, for example, have a long tradition of centralized national authority in their colleges. With but a few exceptions – West Point, Annapolis, and the Air Force Academy come to mind – America has not fostered a national model for its colleges and universities.<sup>7</sup> Instead, like many other aspects of its history, Americans have pursued the design and organization of its schools in a unique, freebooting manner, combining sometimes fierce localism or regional loyalties with an unsteady sense of national identity and a dogged unwillingness to pay for the education of other people's children – and sometimes their own, too.

And yet, despite their ongoing attachment to organized learning, Americans have also wrestled with a suspicion of education; as a general rule, the higher the level of schooling or educational attainment, the more skeptical they are.<sup>8</sup> Deeply practical in nature, democratic (within the bounds of a persistent racism and chauvinism), and distrustful of anything that smacked of the aristocratic or elitism, the American people have mixed support for schools and colleges with a grudging cynicism about the results. Given such an attitude, it is no surprise that the results have been somewhat ambiguous. American colleges and universities are internationally respected for their quality and openness of access, but spiraling costs and the divide of outlook between many Americans and academia sustains a cultural tension. In a sense, our educational history has always been a tragedy about a house divided, with a passionate, progressive faith in things academic warring with a rooted anti-intellectualism, a strong preference for the practical and the applied, and a radical egalitarianism. Only in America have we seen the spectacle of higher education enacted with such divergent themes, and pursued with such cloven zeal. A powerfully individualistic people, generously philanthropic – and carefully calculating; patrons – and patronizing; self-confident – and self-conscious; eager to be first in all things – and all too often, for all

the wrong reasons; a nation that enshrined education – but raised a higher mound to commerce – America is all of these.

### **Americans are other things, as well.**

America is a nation of believers, with faith in one thing or another, including education, driving its people from one end of its history to another. “America is the only nation in the world founded on a creed...a nation with the soul of a church,” noted G.K. Chesterton.<sup>9</sup> Despite Chesterton’s trenchant observation, it is fair to ask which creed America is founded on. He clearly saw the Christian faith (or religiosity, or some mixture of the two) at the heart of this nation, but also saw the darkness possible and present in the ongoing experiment. It is well to proceed with caution here; the wheat and the tares are both abundant in our national history. At all times in American life, the public expression of the Christian faith – what Malcolm Muggeridge was pleased to dismiss as mere “Christendom”<sup>10</sup> – was, and continues to be unstable, isotopic, always capable of degrading into various forms of civil religion.

America is also a nation of acquirers, a materialistic conglomeration of peoples, eager and driven from the earliest days of the colonies to achieve financial gain and the trappings that accompany it. Coequal with the attachment to education evident from the cradle of American history is the fervent pursuit of material wealth, and the means that Americans used to achieve it. The same people that supported schooling were imperial in their approach to the resources of the continent; some of the most philanthropic were also the most brutal in their business affairs, in their pursuit of money and its power. A deep dichotomy infects American attitudes towards mind and mammon as chronicled from its beginning.

Much can be told about a people by their definition of wealth. Christ made this quite clear: “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”<sup>11</sup> While the power of money is a theme in the history of all civilizations, in perhaps no other nation is there such a widely disseminated and determined drive for material success. Whether embodied by the northern Yankee or the southern planter-aristocrat, the western rancher, the Midwestern farmer, the Chicago meat-packer or the middle Atlantic capitalist, Americans have usually defined “wealth” as equivalent to “mate-

rial goods.” Southern wealth might be Abrahamic, peculiarly “blood, land, flocks and slaves”; Northern wealth might be meted out in the Babylonian scales of “money, commerce, and position”; but it made no real difference. These were just matters of denomination. Vast convergence would be found at the altar of success (often designated as “the American Dream”) minted in the coinage of a material, not a spiritual or an intellectual treasure. And the high priests of this temple were the businessmen, industrialists, and corporate powers of the culture that gave them expression, and an extraordinary scope for their enterprises.

The powerful and obsessive drive for material success and the money power is more than just a theme in our annals; it is a massive gravity well of American history, drawing everything within range into its field. Over time, this came to include higher education.

### **Power and Place: Business and Education**

In any civilization, there is a relationship between power and place, between the prestige accorded to a group and its relative influence in that society. More dominant groups have far greater ability to affect the course of a people than the less powerful do. This is particularly important in our national history, for in a fluid democracy like America’s, lacking traditional aristocratic or monarchical restraints, and containing wildly varied cultural and ethnic elements, social structure and its institutions have fluctuated more chaotically over time.<sup>12</sup>

Even at the beginning, colonial history demonstrated a remarkable ability to divide, sub-divide, and scatter ever westwards. As the United States grew, lines of cleavage appeared along denominational/sectarian, political, social, cultural, or ethnic boundaries, acting centrifugally upon American society. With slavery as the proximate casus belli, the nation’s ability to cohere would be put to the test between 1861 and 1865. Was there a sufficient center, or a superior power, that could overcome the tendency of the United States to drift, or fly, asunder? The Civil War was perhaps the supreme summation – but by no means the only evidence – of the diffusive and schismatic in our experience. Countering the chaotic scattering of American culture has been the countervailing theme of business, commerce, material prosperity and industrial might. The centripetal force of commerce and business organized in the

modern industrial state would turn out to be not only the victor of the Civil War, but also the sculptor of the contours of the society that emerged from it. The triumph of the commercial and industrial mind in the aftermath of the Civil War marks a continental divide in our national development.

What this has meant for education in America is intriguing for the student of higher educational philosophy and history. There has been a spillover of weltanschauung, of terminology, of metaphor, of simile, and of standards from the world of business and industry into the world of the colleges and universities.<sup>13</sup> As America grew into an indisputable international power between 1865 and 1920, the foundations of its might in industry and business became ever more clearly evident. And as the makers of this power became themselves ever more powerful, other domains – including the academic – were put under tremendous pressure to subordinate their outlook, their organization, their values, and their very language to that of industry and commerce.

Sketching with broad strokes, one could say that the United States after the Civil War shed its agrarian and rural roots, and by the end of World War II had come to resemble a sort of industrial Roman Empire of the latter days, an imperium of business with all of the irresolvable contradictions, paradoxes, and disparities that accompany such concentrations. It is therefore no surprise that such a commercial colossus should by intent, and a kind of social osmosis, come to use the same language and concepts in its colleges and universities as it did in its marketplaces. In so doing, America moved in directions that are unique in educational history.

In summary, then, beginning shortly after the Civil War, and accelerating rapidly throughout the Twentieth Century, a fusion of business and higher education has led to industrialization of American schooling. The schoolhouse and the university in this country are not precedent to the subsequent world of business and commerce; instead, they have become inextricably bound together in an uneasy alliance. Joined at the hip, if not at the heart, these worlds have come to rely on one another for mutual support. They both produce and consume the goods and services of the other.

For better or worse, the two have become one.

### Endnotes

1 Quoted in Hofstadter (1963, pp. 524-531)

2 In October of 2003, the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) projected the enrollment in degree-granting institutions at between 17.7 and 18.8 million students by 2013. For details see [http://www.nces.ed.gov//programs/projections/ch\\_2.asp#2](http://www.nces.ed.gov//programs/projections/ch_2.asp#2).

3 For example, October 2003 NCES projections are for public higher educational expenditures to hit \$229 billion by fiscal year 2012-2013; see [http://www.nces.ed.gov//programs/projections/ch\\_7.asp](http://www.nces.ed.gov//programs/projections/ch_7.asp).

4 “Universities have changed with this world. They no longer collude with big business; they have become increasingly identical to business. The wall between the two has grown thin... What is new about today’s university is not only that it serves the corporation – for it has always done that – but that it emulates it.” [The italics are the author’s.] (Johnson, Kavanagh, & Mattson, 2003, pp. 12-13) Eric Gould analyzes the interest groups and agendas in modern university life, gives a well-balanced presentation of the complexity of the interplay among them, but then says, “Overall, though, power settles with those who control the university as a corporation of learning. ...the culture, as seen in the rhetoric we use, is corporate rather than academic.” (Gould, 2003, pp. 85-86) Concentrating on the commercialization of university life, Derek Bok notes that the context is much larger: “Commercialization has plainly taken root, not only in higher education, but also in many other areas of American life and culture: health care, museums, public schools, even religion. Entrepreneurial initiative, high executive salaries, and aggressive marketing techniques are all spreading to fields of endeavor quite outside the realm of business.” (Bok, 2003, p. 6) Bok rightly notes that the growing commercialization of academia is not the result of a plot by some corporate cabal, but rather is the inevitable outcome of an increasingly technological, market-driven society. Nevertheless, he also observes “...that something of irreplaceable value may get lost in the relentless growth of commercialization.” Ibid, 17.

5 Leonard Minsky commented on this trend in his prefatory notes to Soley (1995, pp. ii-iii) According to Minsky, “In the 1990s, corporate influence in universities has continued unchecked...universities have been the eager partners and co-participants in industry’s

interventions on campus. Universities, once proud defenders of academic freedom and critical thought, are now ever more exclusively the cradle of industrial invention.”

6 Rousas John Rushdoony, *The Messianic Character of American Education: Studies in the History of the Philosophy of Education* (Vallecito: Ross House Books, 1995), 18-32. Rushdoony was in no sense complimentary when he characterized American schooling in this way; a more accurate depiction of his condemnation of secular American faith in education would require the use of “Anti-Christian” in place of “Messianic.”

7 This resistance to a national university has been seen in American history since the days of George Washington, who unhappily found little support for such an outlandish notion. Thomas Jefferson also strongly advocated such an institution. A summary of Jefferson’s developing views on the subject can be found in Malone (1993) John Quincy Adams was another President who espoused a national establishment of higher education, mentioning it in his premiere address to Congress (among a blizzard of many other desirable goals); see Smith (1997).

8 The classic portrait of this double-mindedness in American life is Hofstadter (1963). Hofstadter’s brilliant critique tempts one to use passim here, but particular attention should be paid to chapters 2, 9, 10 and 12.

9 G.K. Chesterton, *What I Saw in America* (From *The Collected Works of G.K. Chesterton*, Vol. 21, San Francisco: Ignatius 1990), <http://www.chesterton.org/qmeister2/25.htm> (22 April 2002).

10 Muggeridge, ever pithy, was particularly incisive in his clear refusal to equate the Kingdom of Christ with “Christendom”; see Muggeridge (1980, pp. 10-24)

11 Matt. 6.21, *The Defender’s Study Bible*, King James Version (Grand Rapids: World Publishing, 1995), 1014.

12 De Tocqueville was one of the first Europeans to mediate extensively on the emerging nature and dynamic character of American society; he would not be the last. In some ways he would be prophetic about the American genius for business, and the possibilities for a powerful and corrupting industrial aristocracy (see, for example de Tocqueville, 1991, pp. 524-531).

13 Alan Trachtenberg noted the exceptional significance of such spillovers (which I elsewhere term “social osmosis”) when he said, “...as a student of culture I am drawn especially to the figurative language by which people represent their perceptions of themselves and their worlds. Figures of speech, tropes, images, metaphors: I take these as materials of prime historical interest, for they are vehicles of self-knowledge, of the concepts upon which people act. They are also, especially in the public domain, forces in their own right, often coloring perceptions in a certain way even against all evidence. At the same time, figurative representations occupy the same social world as other forces, material and political.” See Trachtenberg (1982, p. 8).

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