

# The Insidious Work of the University: From Nationalism to Excellence to Entrepreneurialism<sup>1</sup>

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"We are committed to grow the skills and competence of men and women who are or soon will be at the center of making decisions associated with strategic and operational security matters in the public or private sector. Content of our 2-week courses will expose them to the next generation of security thinking and allow them to interact with and learn from colleagues of other agencies and organizations. It will take them to the next level of their careers both intellectually and professionally."

- Flyer for the National Security Studies Program, Maxwell School, Syracuse University

**T**he business of universities is chasing money. This has not always been the case. From the founding of the "modern" university in Germany in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century until – perhaps – the early-to-mid 1960s, the business of universities was nation-building. Universities were sites for the production not only of national culture (through the promotion of various humanities disciplines), but also of learning to regulate national populations (in the burgeoning social sciences), and for creating nationally-based sciences. Military science and instruction were, historically, a central part of this nation-building enterprise.

As Bill Readings detailed in his book, *The University in Ruins*, the "post-modern" university no longer has nation-building as its guiding ideology.<sup>2</sup> Rather, in the wake of the global upheavals of the post-World War II period, colleges became what Readings calls "universities of excellence:"

they had no other *raison d'être* than "excellence" itself. Of course "excellence" is an empty term, and Readings' point was that under this banner room was made for all kinds of things: corporate-led (or -controlled) science; radical social science; abstruse theory; you name it. All that mattered was that each university (including its labor force and its students) was more excellent than the next.

The true proof of excellence, of course, is cold, hard cash. The bigger the endowment, the more numerous the grants, the flashier the donations, the better the university. And money proves itself: more money always makes more excellence possible. In this world, money doesn't just shape excellence; it determines it. Money is not pursued so that scholarship may be advanced; rather scholarship is advanced so that money may be pursued. The most interesting fact of this state of affairs is this: it means that in universities there is now room for just about anything. Marxist geographers or anthropologists occupy offices next to professors committed to deepening the neoliberal destruction of social welfare; military scientists share buildings with anti-nuke physicists; chemists thoroughly beholden to the pharmaceutical companies sip cocktails at the president's house with English profs thoroughly beholden to the relativity of all knowledge. As long as each – in his or her own way – is excellent, and can prove that excellence with publications, applications from aspiring grad students, but especially grants, gifts, or consulting contracts, then each is welcome. The only ground for exclusion is failure to be excellent.

In such a circumstance, it becomes not just difficult, but almost impossible, to fight against

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to sharpen them.

<sup>2</sup>Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).

military money on campus, against ROTC, against defense contracts, against the use of university facilities to advance the killing machine of US military might, against programs (taking a couple of examples from my own university) like the Maxwell School's National Security Studies, or the College of Law's Institute for National Security and Counterterrorism, *for there is no sound ideological basis upon which to do so*. By inviting all these in – just so long as they bring money with them – the university is doing not just as it should, but as it must. And besides, if a university were to get rid of this excellent program in (say) learning to be culturally sensitive occupiers of foreign lands, then what would keep it from getting rid of that excellent program in (say) the critical analysis of geopolitical power?

For those of us interested in struggling for a more just world, a world in which US military might and US imperialism are things of the past, then our target cannot – or cannot *only* – be specific programs (like Maxwell's National Security Studies program); our target must also – and *especially* – be the university itself. We need to raise the question not of what the nationalist university, or the university of excellence, was but what the university of *justice* could and should be. And we must demand answers.

When we demand answers we cannot only train our eyes on particularly odious examples of military entanglement in university work and life. We must note seemingly more innocent, and thus more insidious, programs and projects of the university that much more quietly, covertly, and not always consciously, promote the remaking of the world – *and of our own lives* – in a way more suited to American-led *capitalist* hegemony.

Those of us interested in the construction of a just world need, for example, to take a hard look at the growing cult of entrepreneurship.<sup>3</sup> Universities are in the business of chasing money, and (again focusing on the place I know best) one of Syracuse University's biggest catches in recent years was a \$3 million dollar grant from the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation to establish a "Syracuse Campus-Community Entrepreneurship Initiative." Those of us who work and study in the university know, now, that each must become (for there is money to be had!) "entrepreneurial" professors, "entrepreneurial" students, "entrepreneurial" secretaries and janitors. Members of the community

are expected to become "entrepreneurial" activists and "entrepreneurial" entrepreneurs. Even artists now are expected to be "entrepreneurs."

Make no mistake, behind the cult-like language of entrepreneurialism lurks a project, and it is not a good or a just one. In announcing the grant, here is what the CEO of the Kauffman Foundation said: "Syracuse University, along with the other new Kauffman Campuses schools, will empower all students on campus to access the skills, orientation and networks that can lead to greater individual opportunities and to the creation of jobs, innovation and prosperity for America." Note the language: it is the *individual* at stake here, clearly living in an always competitive environment, in which prosperity must necessarily come at the expense of others.

The Chancellor of Syracuse University says, "The Syracuse Campus-Community Entrepreneurship Initiative will allow us to embed an entrepreneurial mindset across our campus and throughout the region and leverage the educational, business and cultural capital in Central New York in ways that will truly transform our communities." Perhaps, but the whole language of entrepreneurialism, to the degree that it is specified, actually works against exactly these goals. It is a language of narrow "accountability," of "personal responsibility," and, crucially, of exploitation. It is not a language of solidarity, or justice, or even remotely of welfare.

Indeed, it is the language of commonsense, which is to say the language of domination. As Syracuse University's ROTC program says, if you become a cadet, "you'll combine classroom time with hands-on experience and learning skills that are sure to give an edge over your peers when it comes time to look for a job." You will be trained for "Leadership, Excellence." While there is, apparently, a course in "Military Skills," both the SU and the National Army ROTC websites neglect to mention that what these programs train people to do, at root ... is to kill: to be the very agents of the so-called legitimate use of violence around the world. According to the Army's national ROTC website, students are trained to be Officers, and "Being an Officer in the U.S. Army means you're a leader, a counselor, a strategist and a motivator. It's similar to being a vital manager in a corporation. As an Officer, you will lead other Soldiers in all situations and adjust in environments that are always changing. They are driven to achieve

<sup>3</sup>For two analyses of the rise of the entrepreneurial university in the context of economic globalization, see: Sheila Slaughter and Larry L. Leslie, *Academic Capitalism: Politics, Policies, and the Entrepreneurial University*; and Sheila

Slaughter and Gary Rhoades, *Academic Capitalism and the New Economy: Markets, State and Higher Education* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004).

success with their team on every mission." Or, in the words of Syracuse University's Whitman School of Management program on "Entrepreneurship and Emerging Enterprises," being an entrepreneurial leader "is about bringing a spirit of innovativeness, calculated risk-taking, and proactive behavior to everything you do. For us, entrepreneurs are people who pursue their dreams with conviction and passion, and persevere regardless of the obstacles or resource limitations." The parallel language, I think, is hardly accidental.

That is because at a global scale "entrepreneurialism" is a code word for the implementation of a certain kind of neoliberal capitalism in which, as David Harvey has argued forcefully, accumulation – that is the chasing of money – is *always* a function of dispossession.<sup>4</sup> Such exploitation requires both the "calculated risk-taking" of the civilian entrepreneur, and military officers who are driven-to-success and who are mission-oriented; one is impossible without the other.

We rarely think of entrepreneurialism that way of course. Rather, those in the university salivate at the announcement of various "e-professor" grants, the winning of which will further prove our excellence and further cement our place in the academy. Those in the community see a pot of money that might keep an important project ticking over just a little longer. We figure that whatever exploitation might be necessary in our gaining and use of the grant, on our becoming truly entrepreneurial, will be slight and worth it.

But we miss in that calculation the transformative effect of the cult of entrepreneurship on what a university *is* and what it *could be*. When all are entrepreneurs, all "excellent" in this narrow and neoliberal way, there is little room for alternative visions of justice.

There is also – still – little basis for contesting the further entanglement of universities and imperial militaries, since they too are merely being entrepreneurial in their actions (for what institution is there that is better than the military at "organizing available resources in new and valuable ways" as entrepreneurship is often defined). The growing cult of entrepreneurship is an increasingly important means by which US hegemony is projected, internally and around the world. The link between military power and entrepreneurship is

neither new nor slight – a Google search on "military entrepreneurship" returns some 1,850,000 pages – but what is important here is the way in which the language of entrepreneurship becomes a *neutralizing* language, and the way it becomes the means by which imperial militaries are welcomed back into the university: Syracuse University's ROTC, National Security Studies, Institute for National Security and Counter Terrorism, and the like, are, in their public presentations, all grandly *intellectual*, and grandly *entrepreneurial* – that is, grandly *American*. Each presents itself as a forum, if not of learning for its own sake, then in training in the most reasonable things: learning to negotiate unfamiliar environments, becoming a better manager who cares about the "team," adding value to the mission of money making or national security, becoming, as the Whitman School puts it, people who understand entrepreneurship as a "philosophy of life" (or as the National Security Studies program puts it, people who want to "grow [their] skills and competence"). The cult of entrepreneurialism, which changes *us* as social subjects, also changes the university: it gives the university a new *raison d'être*: building skills and inculcating a highly constricted "philosophy of life." The university as a nation-building institution returns, but this time as an even more hideous, imperialist monster: it sets out to remake the world – and us – in the image of exploitative, *American* – entrepreneurial – capitalism, the needs and desires of all those not interested in this "philosophy of life" be damned.

The business of the university is chasing money. The business of the university, that is, is now to be entrepreneurial. Universities are not now incubators of the kind of citizenship and nationhood that marked the modern era; they are not now mere engines of an undefined excellence; now they are training grounds for entrepreneurs: social entrepreneurs, arts entrepreneurs, business entrepreneurs, student entrepreneurs, cultural entrepreneurs, and, of course, military entrepreneurs. As universities take on the role of making all of us *better* entrepreneurs, who can deny the importance of universities also taking on the role of better training the bureaucrats of empire to be efficient and creative imperial entrepreneurs and of training the soldiers to be more entrepreneurial – more creative, more reactive, more focused on the bottom-line – killers?

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<sup>4</sup>David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) and *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).