

book REVIEWS

Academic Capitalism: Politics, Policies and the Entrepreneurial University

by **Sheila Slaughter** and **Larry L. Leslie**

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Elizabeth Mazzolini

1. Slaughter and Leslie's book presents formidable sets of statistics and policy research that demonstrate the decreasing degree to which higher education is beholden to the public good, and the increasing degree to which higher education is obligated to the extra-academic market. As universities are forced by

diminishing public funds to raise tuition, faculty likewise are forced by diminishing support from their universities to seek outside funding. This places faculty in the position of having to anticipate and answer to the vagaries of the market. Research,

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according to Slaughter and Leslie, has become less "curiosity-driven" and more market-driven. Faculty's enslavement to market whims is further ensured by not only less public money, but also less control over what little money there is. Unlike the unconditional love that characterizes undesignated public funds, money from external sources is doled out conditionally, as from a stingy aunt who demands that you perform "I'm a Little Teapot" for your birthday money. Market money comes with the expectation that there will be returns from the investment in the form of profitable products or processes. The period that Slaughter and Leslie write about, approximately 1970-1990, has been marked by dramatic declines in block grants – unconditional love funds from the federal government granted to universities to use as they see fit – and a concomitant increase in academic capitalism, Slaughter and Leslie's titular neologism.

2. Academic capitalism is as sweeping as the globalization to which it has been a compulsory response. The term describes the phenomenon of universities' and faculty's increasing attention to market potential as research impetus. According to Slaughter and Leslie, globalization has efficiently linked prestige to research funding to marketability. Slaughter and Leslie point out that federal research and development policies have, especially since World War II, emphasized the technological as being key for global competitiveness, so that academic capitalism is most visible in applied science and technology departments. There is a trickle-down effect for the humanities, in an increasing reliance on communication training, valuable in corporate settings. In other words, the humanities are useful only insofar as they support the most marketable research coming out of the university.

3. *Academic Capitalism's* geographic scope, encompassing four English-speaking countries (the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia), supports its global-scale argument, and moreover reinforces arguments about governmental policies from a non-Americo-centric point of view. This combined with its broad temporal scope makes the book's argument about globalization dauntingly convincing. Oddly, much of the support for its case comes in the extremely local form of faculty interviews at Australian universities. Using these individual perceptions as evidence perhaps costs Slaughter and Leslie something in terms of prescriptive foothold, and relegates them to a rage-or-resignation logic that belies what they gain in documenting a policy trend.

4. The history of the present that Slaughter and Leslie illustrate in *Academic Capitalism* is a compelling picture of a less-than-ideal form for higher education. Without detracting from the force of that illustration, Slaughter and Leslie rely heavily on the idealistic model of research assumed by their study before it even began. If the global economy brought a flood of new and more intense kinds of investments in competition between nations, Slaughter and Leslie's antediluvian university was one characterized by scholars whose work was animated by pure love for knowledge, unfettered by the cynicizing bonds of market application. On this view, the university was a bastion of pure inquiry, independent and protected from the nasty outside world where people do things in order to make money. Certainly, the book seems to assume, there would be no such self-interest in an academy if left to its own devices, supported by the plenitude of unconditional public support, without the dynamic introduced by the encroaching global economy and its governmental responses. In order to compete in the global marketplace, *Academic Capitalism* points out that governments must ensure that their countries develop applicable and marketable goods. Universities have become the less expensive surrogates of corporate R & D departments for those goods.

5. The book's assumption that commercial competitiveness sullies academic research indicates not only an idealized past, but also an idealized separation of academy from market. However, even the universities of yore that were not

dancing for the dollars of the stingy aunt were deeply structured by class and economic forces. My own university started as one of several land grant

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institutions that were set aside for agricultural research in the nineteenth century. Currently this same university has high-profile contracts with Nike, Pepsi, Barnes and Noble, and the U.S. Defense

Department. Contemporary sources of funding seem quite different in kind from early federal subsidies for agriculture, but to suggest, as I take Slaughter and Leslie to do, that it is only after World War II that knowledge production had economic impetus is strikingly inaccurate. On a smaller scale, market forces circulate within departments, and moreover cannot be separated from curiosity. For example, in an English department, my research interests and those of my colleagues emerge from previous scholarship that got published and contributed toward jobs and tenure because of its particularized market value. Along with Slaughter and Leslie, it seems obvious that marketable technology has cultural pride of place. However, market forces are locally *as well as* globally constitutive, not, as *Academic Capitalism* maintains, instrumental and external to what they operate on. As such, they work not only visibly and sometimes hamhandedly but also subtly and more importantly, axiomatically. Attending and objecting to federal-level policy stakes out grounds of righteousness that threaten to cripple structural responses, such as local academic labor unions.

6. Slaughter and Leslie's argument shares its logic with a lot of other and other kinds of arguments, both quantitative and polemical, that themselves occupy a niche market in academic publishing and hiring. The logic that warrants these arguments pitches the possible responses as the rage-or-resignation to which I alluded. Liberal rage at unconscionable conditions is too often content to stop at politicizing people's thoughts, which, as Slaughter and Leslie amply demonstrate in their faculty interviews, matters approximately not at all. Resignation at worst bears the mark of conservatism, compelling us to bow down before the market, and at best remains a reduction to the ontology of "the system just is what it is," while we tiptoe around it. Slaughter and Leslie's book does valuable work for people interested in large-scale movements in higher education. It provides a quantitative partner to polemics, though I greet its logic with a great deal of skepticism.



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