

The Knowledge Factory: Dismantling the Corporate University and Creating True Higher Learning

By Stanley Aronowitz

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The role and purpose of American higher education has been in flux since the founding of the New England colleges in the 1600s. Colleges have historically prepared students for the workforce as doctors, teachers, scientists and ministers. Similarly, colleges have historically also fostered intellectual growth and curiosity, leading students to think critically.

Stanley Aronowitz is distinguished professor of Sociology at The Graduate Center, The City University of New York. In *The Knowledge Factory*, he vehemently dispels the myth that higher education is any longer a fertile ground for students to learn key knowledge domains (history, literature, science, philosophy) and critical thinking skills. Instead, he argued, colleges have now become factories represented with a shortsighted college-to-job credentialing mentality, which he labeled “vocationalization”.

Aronowitz shared his dislike for the evolutionary direction of America’s higher education and is very forthright in stating his objective in writing the book: “My intention in writing this book is not to reform the existing system, for I am not all persuaded that it is possible. For those who would do something different, perhaps the ideas presented in the text might inspire innovation.” (p. xviii)

Chapters one through four give a detailed, historical analysis of the political, social and economic factors that lead to contemporary higher education as a place of job training rather than genuine research, learning and critical thinking. The development of the land grant colleges of the 1860s to the GI Bill in 1944 and the National Defense Education Act of 1958 describe a few of the landmarks which changed the scope and purpose of higher education in America. Although more students from all socio-economic backgrounds were now going to college, they also brought with them the poor intellectual preparation of first year college students and the need for colleges and university to correct the literacy and skill deficiencies of their undergraduates. In short, the original design and purpose of an undergraduate education where intellectual thought and critique flourished had now been replaced with vocational training classes and writing classes.

The subtitle of Aronowitz book, “Dismantling the Corporate University and Creating True Learning” is further described by the author in chapters five and six as the subordination of American education to the utilitarian needs of corporate America. With great disdain and anger he quoted Clark Kerr, President of UC Berkeley, from his book *The Uses of University* (1963) in which Kerr laid out the essential premises for contemporary university reform:

The basic reality, for the university, is the wide spread recognition that new knowledge is the most important factor in economic and social growth. We are

just now perceiving that the University's invisible product, knowledge, may be the most powerful single element in our culture, affecting the rise and fall of professions and even of social classes, or regions and even nations. (p.30)

Kerr's new definition of the university to produce socially and economically useful knowledge within the context of a research institution can be both disenchanting yet a reality.

"By 1988, led by Harvard's sixty-nine corporate relationships, Stanford's forty, and MIT's thirty-five, research universities had entered into an average of twenty-two research and patent connections with private sector companies." (P.44)

So Aronowitz argued the nation's major universities have become training camps for big corporations and research factories for the federal government. Instead of teaching students how to think critically about social and economic issues, schools merely train students for the labor market. In short, universities have made their bottom line management and private partnerships with corporations a priority over teaching students, and merely approach students as customers who need credentials.

Chapter six of the book focused on the trends that have taken place as colleges and universities collaborate more closely with business and industry. For example, custom tailored degree and training programs are established; student enrollments in technical fields and business have soared; majors in the humanities and social sciences have plummeted. Further, because tuition rates have become unrealistic and very high, students are now unable to pursue learning for learning's sake. On the contrary, they must be guaranteed that their investment of time and money in higher education will bring a financial return. The focus, argued Aronowitz, is now on the credential in higher education and no longer on the joy of learning.

Although he bemoaned the vocational trend in higher education, he proposed in the last chapter of his book an outline for a traditional curriculum with a dream syllabus. With this alternative proposal of a core curriculum to "specific historical periods," Aronowitz contended that what society needed from the university is the contribution to a shared culture as well as practice in critical thinking. Only by making these changes, he concluded, will colleges and universities be able to cultivate leaders, thinkers, and individuals who can illuminate and make sense of the increasing chaotic world around us.

Aronowitz did an exemplary job of providing an historical portrayal of the nation's failure to maintain a vision for true higher learning at the center of the university's mission. His book tended to be undocumented, and more of a personal account skewed with his vociferous opinions. Although his focus on personal experiences tended to weaken the primary thesis, the historical overview of higher education in America was well written and enlightening. While Aronowitz's disdain and disgust for the "knowledge factory" is apparent throughout the book, his passion for genuine intellectual learning and thinking is equally impressive.