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The Politics of Academic Knowledge and Time in the Worlds of Higher Education

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US universities continue to loom large in the worlds of higher education today. They consistently top many global university rankings and attract international students and faculty from around the world. In *Making the World Global: US Universities and the Production of the Global Imaginary*, Isaac Kamola tells a compelling story about how US universities produced academic knowledge that became self-referential and embedded in the very language we use to articulate about our social, economic, and political environments. The implications are clear. How we engage and study the world is inherently political. In this intervention, I want to address two themes Kamola put forth in his opening statement. First, “whether one could write a similar book...about how universities participate in the reproduction of the world” through another perspective than globalization. I will show that this is indeed possible by situating the findings from *Seeing the World: How US Universities Make Knowledge in a Global Era*¹ in the context of *Making the World Global*. I argue that, when read together, *Seeing the World* and *Making the World Global* weave a revealing tapestry of the impressive role US universities played in shaping the worlds of higher education today. The second theme I want to engage with is the academics vs. politics divide that inspired Kamola to write *Making the World Global*. My intention is to support Kamola’s observation that academics/politics is very much a false dichotomy and the time is ripe to apply academic rigor to its unmasking; I will do so from the perspective of academic time.

Reading *Seeing the World and Making the World Global*

Rarely does one have the pleasure to read—by chance at the same time—two fantastic books that offered convincing accounts of how US universities profoundly configured the ways in which academic knowledge is produced *for* and *about* the world. In *Making the World Global*, Kamola detailed how interactions between different institutions and actors in the worlds of higher education over time, and across space, contributed to the imaginary of “the world as self-evidently ‘global’.” To what extent did disciplines in the social sciences—political science, sociology, economics, and others—play a role in these developments? Are the developments we see today the result of interdisciplinarity, or something else? In *Seeing the World*, Stevens, Miller-Idriss, and Shami demonstrated that how academic knowledge production is organized matters in determining *what* is of value—academically, politically. Both *Seeing the World* and *Making the World Global* thus make the same overarching argument, but from different perspectives: the former applied an organizational perspective to show how social science disciplines crowded out interdisciplinarity in the arts-and-sciences cores in US universities; the latter focused on globalization to show how academic knowledge produced in US universities crowded out those generated elsewhere (notably in Africa).

Seeing the World detailed the rise, fall, and contemporary existence of area studies, an interdisciplinary way of organizing knowledge production in the arts-and-sciences cores in US universities. To draw out this narrative, Stevens, Miller-Idriss, and Shami distilled three

¹ Stevens, Mitchell L., Miller-Idriss, Cynthia and Seteney Shami. *Seeing the World: How US Universities Make Knowledge in a Global Era*. Princeton University Press, 2018.

schemata that informed how academic leaders in US universities conceptualized the relationship between their institutions and the (rest of the) world. In the civilizational schema, universities are seen as knowledge depositories and the world as a collection of distinct and bounded cultural, linguistic, and ethno-religious units. The task for the Professor was to ‘go out’ and gather as much insights about, and objects of, these civilizations. The onset of World War II and the Cold War introduced and reinforced another schema—national service—that framed the new role of US universities as consultants to American governments. In our more current and marketized language, the Professor became the service provider to the US state. According to the national schema, the world was understood as an array of problems and opportunities for US geopolitical interests, broadly defined as seeking to create a “virtuous democratic modernity.” Throughout this period, area studies as a field thrived, as generous funding flowed to support student mobility, extended research stays for faculty, foreign language training, and more.

Stevens, Miller-Idriss, and Shami observed that the end of the Cold War, global integration of production, and chronic budget crises in the higher education sector marked the start of the decline of area studies as a field. Indeed, as “not-departments,” the centers and institutes that housed the field of area studies were not able to compete with departments structured by disciplines, populated by tenure-line faculty, and conferred doctoral degrees. For them, this period saw the ushering in of the now familiar global schema, which depicted the world as a web of complex flows—of people, capital, ideas, goods, and services—to be traversed and exploited. Institutionally, US universities became cosmopolitan entities built on numerous memoranda of understanding (for research; mobility of students, faculty, staff; credit transfer; and more), with a global reach as manifested in satellite campuses, joint degrees, and many other forms of deep collaboration. While remaining a service provider, the Professor now worked for clients around the world. Today, area studies as a field continues to face strong resistance from disciplinary departments due to the primacy of theoretical and quantitative modes of inquiry in social sciences, the huge cost associated with learning another language, and disciplinary departments’ need to retain status.

For me, both *Seeing the World* and *Making the World Global* told a story of institutionalization, particularly how structures adopted earlier, and the ideas they promoted, endured over time as core features or as sediments of the sector or organization. In the case of *Seeing*, despite experiencing strong de-funding, “not-departments” and the field of area studies continue to exist in US universities today. According to Stevens, Miller-Idriss, and Shami, “not-departments” survived by leveraging their resources through a complex system of co-sponsorship featuring a “stone soup” strategy: the addition of individual contributions (stone by stone) that would ultimately result in the needed resources being available for the objective (an event, mobility stay, or language training). In *Making*, the observation that globalization has transformed into a self-referential master trope confirms that “the global” has become a core feature in the worlds of higher education. My own reading and research into higher education policy developments in Europe and in Asia support Kamola’s conclusion—as I shall explain.

In the interdisciplinary field of higher education studies, internationalization has replaced globalization as the preferred concept to use since the early 2000s for describing changes introduced in the higher education sector. In the main, internationalization is used to refer to orchestrated responses from universities and governments (at the local-, state-, national-, or regional-levels) around the world towards external pressures for change. So what explains this development? The debate remains inconclusive. For instance, the shift could be driven by the

usual academic search for a new term to capture nuances in policy developments, or it could be the result of new actors emerging in this sector (notably European Union member states, the European Commission, and other transnational actors). What is generally agreed is that higher education institutions and states around the world are now engaged in a global competition—for prestige, talent, funding, or simply relevance. Moving forward to and beyond the mid-2010s, other concepts such as higher education regionalism² and knowledge diplomacy are being increasingly used to describe particular forms of internationalization: macro-regional coordination, or bilateral and multilateral cooperation between different entities.

What is important for our discussion here is that the starting point for these concepts and the policy developments they intend to capture is essentially “the global.” There is generally an implicit acceptance or assumption among academics and policymakers alike that universities and states today inhabit a deeply connected, interdependent world. The policy framing thus becomes one in which “flow management” dominates and is assessed: the removing of barriers, reducing friction, and ensuring the “free” movement of knowledge, people, ideas, resources, and more. As Kamola rightly pointed out, if the academic rigor and policy focus are placed on analyzing and ensuring “the global,” it is hardly surprising that insights and developments outside the global imaginary are considered, well, less essential or completely irrelevant. The global imaginary, put very simply, is the modality through which we see the past, understand the present, and envision the future.

The continual institutionalization of “the global” in the higher education sector did not take place in a vacuum: it benefitted from the growth in indicator development, which serviced the rankings industry³. By reducing complexities to numbers, metrics and embedded algorithms allow for comparisons that were previously not made. This development has had a profound impact on the higher education sector around the world. For instance, at the institutional-level, indicators enabled the comparison of universities with distinct missions, founded in very different historical contexts to serve diverse social, political, and economic needs, as if the comparison made was based on a “most similar” research design and the results “scientific.” In the same way, at the individual-level, aggregated citation indexes are supposed to tell us about the research “value” of an academic, regardless of disciplines or field. These developments have real-life implications, ranging from resource allocation (or withdrawal) to the fundamental valuing/devaluing of academic labor, and more. Indeed, if the basic definition of politics is “who gets what, when,” then developments within the higher education sector are highly political; they point to the false dichotomy of academics vs. politics.

In the same way that Kamola recognized the false divide between academics and politics, I too believe academic rigor could be applied to analyze, make sense, recognize, and explain the trends, exclusions, and growing imbalances in the worlds of higher education. Below, I use the example of academic time to show how we may begin to do this.

² Chou, Meng-Hsuan and Pauline Ravinet. “The Rise of ‘Higher Education Regionalism’: An Agenda for Higher Education Research.” *Handbook of Higher Education Policy and Governance*, Jeroen Husiman, Harry de Boer, David D Dill and Manuel Souto-Otero, eds. Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

³ Colleagues have examined this phenomenon in great details than I could ever do justice to in this very limited space. For example, see Erkkilä, Tero and Ossi Piironen. *Rankings and Global Knowledge Governance: Higher Education, Innovation and Competitiveness*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

Academic Time in the Worlds of Higher Education Today

These days I have been thinking about time. Specifically, time in the academe and how it is increasingly seen and discussed as a “problem.”⁴ So how did time become problematic for academics? And what does it mean for those who want time to be a continual supportive resource for academic work rather than a weapon used against academic creativity? My starting point is that academic time today is frequently acknowledged as the manifestation of shifting power dynamics between, on the one hand, the Professor (the knowledge creator and disseminator) and, on the other hand, Management, Students, Society and Others (different knowledge users and exploiters). In the main, time in the academy has been measured by tasks the Professor performs (i.e. research, teaching, and service), but its allocation has become increasingly complex as requests for today’s academic labor grow from within and beyond the university and known core academic activities.

For scholars of politics, these requests can range from what appears to be routine and associated with university corporatization to field-specific expertise with potentially powerful implications. The complexity of the many requests we receive raises the question: Who determines which task is done first? The Professor intrigued by new research directions or enduring puzzling social phenomena? The Managers responding to market trends, student and parental demands, or the administrative pursuit of “Academic Excellence?” The Ministry approving degree programmes and curriculum reforms based on diverse national and regional priorities? Or Others (and who are they)? Time order is very much a value order: the task done first is more important than those that are done later. How decisions are made in, across, or against time in the academy thus point to the ways that power is generated, experienced, or used. Certainly, academic time as a “problem” has been brought into sharper relief during the coronavirus pandemic when tasks multiplied exponentially, professional lives wrapped around private ones as physical space compressed, but it has long existed before COVID was coined.

One way to address the problematic nature of time in the academe is to give voice to academics. Objectively, our lived experiences will reveal the profound temporal reordering of university life and how the changes introduced enabling this transformation are very political. According to existing concepts about academic time, our lived experiences may point to the bounded nature of time (*timeframes*) and its irreversible passage (*temporality*) in the academe; the *timing* (synchronization), *sequence* (order of time) and *duration* (extent of time) of career stages (securing contracts and their extensions), and potential exit from the profession; the multiple *tempos* (speed, pace, and intensity) structuring all activities; and the distinct *temporal modalities* (our understanding about past, present, and future time) that guide our narratives of professional lives and how these intersect with private ones. More importantly, our lived experiences will make visible the ways in which temporal orderings have quantitatively and qualitatively alter everyday lives in the academe. Indeed, subjectively, the ways in which academics have experienced the de-valuation of knowledge labor and how we have sought to reclaim our value would show how radical the higher education sector has very much transformed.

⁴ Interestingly, when I last had time was when I read *Making the World Global and Seeing the World*, and thought about the state of higher education today.