Foreword

Remaking the University

David John Frank and Jay Gabler, in *Reconstructing the University*, make an impressive contribution to the study of modern (or postmodern) culture and the analysis of the university that is central to the culture. They do this by tracing the rise and relative fall of academic fields and topics in universities around the whole world through most of the twentieth century. Creating the unique data sets involved is a major achievement. Analyzing them systematically is even more creative. And building an interpretive scheme that enables us to comprehend the real nature of the modern university is an extraordinary theoretical contribution.

An uninformed commentator might assume that all this knowledge is old hat – of course, everybody knows what universities teach and how it has changed over the modern period. It seems obvious that this is important information and is thus likely to be found in all central sources. This is dramatically not so, and in this Foreword I offer an explanation of why it is not so.

The reason, simply, is that we all tend to assume – and our postmodern or "knowledge" society is built on this assumption – that the university basically provides information and training relevant to the skills needed in the modern economy (or more broadly, workforce). The knowledge society needs the university, and the university services (according to some critics, at the loss of its own soul) this society. With all this assumed, the actual empirical exploration of the cultural contents of the university becomes a matter of secondary importance.

David Frank and Jay Gabler show in detail how wrong this conceptualization is. They see the university as a central location of the cultural constitution – not the technical skills – of the postmodern society. And they show

that the rise and fall of academic fields in the twentieth-century university is best comprehended in precisely this way. The university builds the cosmos and structure of society. It tames and "scientizes" and universalizes nature; it rationalizes models of society; and it celebrates the extraordinary capabilities for agentic action of the supreme modern individual. It thus creates the cultural conditions enabling the contemporary society, rather than providing a sort of storehouse for technical activity within this society.

In this Foreword, I review the story of the expansion of the modern university and the conventional interpretations of this expansion. Against this background, it becomes clear what an extraordinarily creative achievement *Reconstructing the University* is. And why it is such a unique study, with almost no parallels – whether competitors or supporters or alternatives. This book, in short, commands the attention of anyone interested in the modern university and its cultural role in society.

Background

University-level education has expanded enormously in the modern period. Most of the expansion has occurred in the last half-century. So almost 20 percent of a cohort of young people in the world is now found in an institution of higher education – fifty years ago, it might have been 2 percent, and fifty years before that it might have been a fraction of 1 percent.

Of course, in developed countries, it is common for more than half a cohort to be participating in higher education at any time. But the more striking phenomenon is the very rapid expansion of higher education in the developing world, where it is routine for countries to have higher rates of enrollment than Britain or Germany or France had a few decades ago. A country like Kazakhstan, for instance, might have as many higher education students as the whole world had in 1900.

For better or worse, this huge social change has come to seem obvious, even to those social scientists whose job it should be to provide analysis and explanation. It now seems to make sense that young people should normally aspire to higher education and that societies should normally provide it: Education is now seen as "human capital" and as benefiting both individuals and societies in the great races to achieve success and progress. The ideas that

there could be too much higher education, that there would be great inefficiencies from "overeducation," and that anomic social disorder would result from unemployed youth with unrealistic expectations have receded into the woodwork of conservative muttering. A recent report from the World Bank – by no means a center of radical thought and action – simply celebrates the virtues of higher education for the developing world's progress and worries only that the quality and character of it might not be adequate to meet all the social needs.

Our limited understanding of the great expansionary change in higher education is concealed in descriptive words that do not really analyze what is going on. It is said that we now live in a knowledge society or information society. Globalization is thought to demand a highly schooled labor force, as if the Honduran banana worker must go to college if the banana is to go all the way to Canada.

The underlying aim of the descriptive words that try to routinize or normalize the great educational expansion is quite clear. The very traditional idea is that schooling in general – and higher education in particular – is about giving people skills to do "jobs" and that as the jobs change with economic growth, technical professionalization, and globalization, the schooling has to change too. Thus, the knowledge society requires expanded higher education.

This idea is not entirely unreasonable. But it leaves unexplained why higher education should expand so rapidly in economically very peripheral Third World countries. And it leaves unexplained why higher education should expand in the developed world so much more rapidly than economic or occupational change.

And importantly, a more subtle matter is left unexplained by notions that so much higher education is necessary for substantial proportions of required job performance in the modern system. It is generally understood that training people for jobs goes on most successfully if the training is linked closely to the job. It can be on the same site, involve working with the same experienced people, employ the same tools and models, and so on.

Expansive higher education around the world systematically violates these obvious requirements of job training efficiency. It occurs in socially (and physically) bounded and separated places. It involves working with teachers who are rarely real practitioners and who are instructing under very artificial

conditions. And it generally involves all sorts of abstract models and tools, far removed from the tasks of daily practice. We live in a world, for instance, in which people being trained to be physicians are required to spend long years – far removed from the human ills they are to deal with later – learning things like organic chemistry and calculus. And maybe sociology.

Reformers confronting this situation historically propose small correctives. (The large corrective, getting rid of the schooling complex, was proposed some years ago by Ivan Illich in *Deschooling Society*, but his proposal was not really taken seriously.) For instance, one can partially correct the insulation of training from work with the field trip, or the internship, or the laboratory experience, or with temporary workshops and in these fashions have the segregated trainee glimpse normal reality from a kind of catwalk. But the more fundamental problems are to understand why the institutional segregation occurs in the first place, why it replicates itself so regularly, and why it has expanded to become a worldwide norm.

One solution to this whole nest of explanatory problems is to imagine that higher education and, in good part, modern education in general are not mainly about training people for extant jobs. They are about training people for a progressive and expansionist future – for activities that may not exist, or may be transformed in great new ways, or could and should be so changed. Education, unlike the apprenticeship, is about progress.

This line of thought helps explain the otherwise odd phenomena noted above – the extreme expansion of education in the Third World, its apparently over-rapid expansion in the First World, and its peculiar separation from the life it is nominally to enhance. But this argument also raises new questions and ones that are much more interesting and fruitful than all the traditional ones in this field that are based on the utterly unconvincing assumption that higher education is tightly interdependent with society as it exists.

If we are training people to live in a world that does not exist – a world that will be created by progress as carried along by the people we are training – how do we know what to teach them? Obviously, we *do* have confidence that we know, because the university expands apace on a worldwide scale. An analysis of this confidence seems core to understanding higher education in the modern world.

David Frank and Jay Gabler's extraordinary research in *Reconstructing the University* analyzes changes in the world's knowledge system through the

greatest part of the twentieth century. But their core insight characterizes the university – a unique Western institution now gone global – throughout most or all of its history of almost one thousand years. It is that the university is more about establishing the cultural or religious map of the cosmos and of human action and structure in this cosmos than about facilitating particular activities within this system. The university is more about creating and installing the frame for the demonic powers of "man" than about technically enabling the powers themselves.

This was true in the expansionist medieval world that created the model of a university, which understood the cosmos in a way that would give power and authority (not really job training) to the emerging state and church and economic actors of the world. The cultural scheme worked out a distinct religious version of theology and law (two of the four core agenda items of the period) and a sanctified secular version from ancient philosophy (for medicine and philosophy, the other agenda topics). It is a customary conceit of interpreters to imagine that some real skills were transmitted in this process (e.g., the reinforcement of Latin as the language of civilization), but the whole argument is not strong.

Frank and Gabler do not provide data on the early modern period, but their argument is strong there too. The great battles over university secularization and over religious versus statist ties were not principally about any occupational or functional skills at all. They were about fundamental cultural assumptions, carried in different ways by different versions of the university and empowering different models of emerging modern society. (The most famous of these battles, actually carried out outside the domain of the university, has everything to do with cosmology and nothing to do with the immediate functioning of any social role. Galileo got into trouble, not by advocating usury, but by observing some moons around Jupiter. It should go without saying that this issue was not at the forefront of the concerns of the capitalists of the period. Nor was it a policy concern of the murderously mobilizing nation-state elites.)

The nineteenth century, too, can provide much fodder for the argument of *Reconstructing the University*. It is striking how much the actual cultural expanding university of the period is irrelevant to the direct social functioning of society and its roles, and how close the connections are with the cultural base of the system in its specification of a changed cosmos and a grossly

altered place of humans and social organization in that cosmos. Modern analysts try to ignore this close connection and try to fit the university into the functioning technical role they envision for it – this effort involves the absurd celebration of the creation of an occasional engineering school or the successes of a few German chemistry professors, but is at gross odds with the actual cultural content of the universities in question. (The German university, on its secular side, was excavating philology more than the periodic table.)

Decoding the Knowledge Society

The extraordinary data and analyses that David Frank and Jay Gabler provide in this book achieve their full force not in abstract theory about the nature of the university or in analyses of its past, but in an aggressive and historically situated analysis of our own knowledge system. They see this university-based knowledge system as carrying a whole modern cosmology and framework for human action and structure, not a job training scheme for an elaborate and technical modern social machine. They see it, in other words, as culturally supporting the assumptions and mythology of the machine, not principally the particular skills of the human components involved. And their arguments make it quite clear why the great expansion of education in the modern period occurs in a rather unified university (serving as a kind of church for postmodernity), rather than in differentiated technical training institutions linked closely to workplaces and job sites.

The knowledge society is based on extreme cultural assumptions. It takes an enormous amount of university research and teaching to make them make sense. Thus, the twentieth century experienced an extraordinary expansion of public (often state) authority in social life, with the spread of the nation-state system around the world and its penetration down into the details of social life. The huge expansion of the rationalistic social sciences, emphasized by Frank and Gabler, provides the needed supports for this explosion of what Foucault called governmentality. And the relative decline in the humanities helps weaken the alternatives – the senses of the power of tradition, of local particularities, of the gods and spirits, or of natural human desires and needs. And the dominance of the sciences continuously expands the frame in

which empowered humans can walk the earth as rational actors – small gods, empowered with legitimate purpose and comprehension.

The fact that all this cultural formation goes on, not in specialized research institutions and oracles, but in educational institutions, is crucial to understanding the contemporary world. This world is filled not only with a knowledge system authorizing enormous control over humans, society, and nature but also with persons authorized to undertake this control. Agentic humans, full of degrees and esteem, can take rational action and assemble rationalized social structures across an incredible array of social domains.

Beyond the rough classification of fields into natural sciences, humanities, and social sciences, Frank and Gabler are able to go into great detail. Field by academic field, they spell out the qualities that make a subject especially relevant for the postmodern knowledge society. So fields that celebrate tradition (classics), that leave human action in the distance (astronomy), or that limit the centrality of natural and social structures and agents (religion) do not do so well. And within the special academic field of history, Frank and Gabler show the rise of universalized versions (world history) and the relative decline of particularistic traditions (nation-state history, ancient history).

In all this extraordinary work, Frank and Gabler almost never find any reason to stress the technical utility (or lack of it) in any field for particular job activities. In the same way that the great religious traditions do not provide much instruction on how to make bricks, the modern university rarely places emphasis on teaching people how to make the widgets of the information highway.

Dialectics

The medieval and early modern university was a cultural-constitution locale, like the modern one. It was probably even worse at training people for actual job performances than the modern one is. But in a perverse way, it did link up to the limited professional job "markets" of the period – in the church, in the central mysteries of the state, in medicine, and in the schools. In each case, the university did this not by serving some sort of needs of society, but by *defining those needs in the first place*. Thus, the university pulled down out of ancient culture some knowledge, which we now know to be useless and

counterproductive of human health, called medicine and gave it authority. And much law. And theology. And very odd sorts of cultural material we might loosely call philosophy (learning an ancient language, useless unless the university said so).

In the modern world that Frank and Gabler analyze, the same phenomenon has gone wild. Enormous numbers of "professional" jobs in the modern world exist and gain authority principally because they carry university-based "knowledge." Consider all the consultants and professionals and therapists and teachers that make up our modern labor force. For many of these positions, there would be no market were it not for the special knowledge certified by the university and carried by degrees.

An enormous number of other jobs might exist, without educational certification, under a variety of cultural conditions. But in the contemporary world, schooled knowledge can be made a requirement by legal or social definition. Thus, in developed countries, primary-school teachers are required to have university training; increasingly, so are day care workers; it goes without saying that all sorts of counselors must have certificates.

Even when certificates may not be required, gratuitous tasks can be attached to any job, making it practically necessary that a good deal of formal education be attained. Thus, a small plumbing contractor must not only have some skill at working with pipes but must also have the knowledge to deal with laws and agents of multiple regulatory agencies, suppliers, technical manuals, and the arcane worlds regulating financial transactions and legal liabilities. In job after job, the modern world has a preference, rooted in a faith in educational knowledge, for the gratuitous schooling of work tasks.

So it turns out that education is the most important component of essentially every modern stratification system. Sociologists write as if jobs are the important thing. But jobs gain status inasmuch as they require educational training – empirically, this is by far the most important component (transcending, for instance, income). And people gain jobs and other dimensions of social standing inasmuch as they have education.

Of course, the central point of this book remains intact. The schooled plumber, primary-school teacher, or clerk does not really acquire the relevant skills in typical schooling programs. What the education does is prepare the person, and the whole modern society, for life and activity under general

principles, subject to abstract analysis, and amenable to disciplined linguistic performances.

Thus, postmodern society is indeed a knowledge society. But the point stressed over and over in the analyses of Frank and Gabler is that this is centrally a cultural matter, not a technical or functional one. That is, the knowledge generated and transmitted in the university is mainly cultural framing, not technical skill. It is knowledge taming the cosmos and rendering it suitable for and comprehensible by the extraordinary numbers of young people receiving its blessings. Understanding the power of this core point is central to our comprehension of the nature of the modern university and of the reasons this formerly narrow institution has broadened to cover virtually every substantive domain in practically every country in the world, with huge populations of participants.

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