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How Anarchy Can Save the University



Tim Foley for The Chronicle Review

By David J. Siegel | MAY 07, 2017 ✓ PREMIUM

It is a simple truth that many of the good things in academic life can be had only informally, spontaneously, and serendipitously. These are practically fighting words in an academy increasingly in thrall to the ideology of managerialism, with its compulsion to direct and supervise everything from the minute particulars to the

overarching aims of our institutional endeavors.

The higher-education juggernaut, dutifully constructed to appeal to nearly every conceivable consumer taste, has, curiously, managed to make an anomaly of the one thing that ought to be entirely indispensable to its functioning: a culture and climate of support for unstructured idea play. The institution once considered "the place where the country does its thinking" now expects those within it to divert much of their intellectual energy to endless conversations about costs, completion rates, credit-hour production, and quality assurance.

Driven to distraction by accreditors, legislators, employers, "customers" of every persuasion, and even the academic community itself, we have become the very instantiation of "the administered university" described by Terry Lunsford in a prescient 1968 article — a place with precious little room for a robust life of the mind.

This, of course, is not how most of us imagined our lives in the groves of academe. More likely, we harbored a vague notion that our days would resemble something out of Raphael's School of Athens or Sarah Bakewell's existentialist cafe, in rapturous communion with fellow seekers of truths and lovers of ideas. Alas, as T.S. Eliot put it, "Between the idea / And the reality / ... Falls the shadow."

For some, the sense of disillusionment is so profound that the only recourse is to exit the academy altogether, with not a whimper but a bang. A whole genre known as "Quit Lit" chronicles the departures of alienated academics. One disaffected professor, writing pseudonymously in *Inside Higher Ed*, announced in a manner characteristic of these

accounts, "I am ready to move on — perhaps for a career where ... gimmicks and fads are routinely avoided because they distract from advancing the mission of gaining and sharing knowledge."

For the rest of us, the situation is less dire.

We find ourselves consumed by the busyness of institutional maintenance — the "shadow work" — that has converted the typical faculty member into a sort of adjunct administrator. A 2014 report of the National Science Board reveals that federally funded researchers in U.S. institutions allocate 42 percent of their time not to actual research but to associated administrative tasks.

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The default response to such conditions is to remark ruefully on the disappearance of traditional academic values while holding "the authorities" — policy makers, presidents, provosts, others with formal positional power — responsible for their loss and recovery. The big lacuna here is our own role in contributing to and improving the situation. If we want to restore the centrality of ideas to our everyday lives, it falls to us to uphold this priority through everyday choices and gestures, some of them imperceptible to the public and therefore all the more potent.

Engraving priorities in the mission statement or in budgetary provisions or even in marketing materials is inadequate to the task. Likewise, formal programs, policies, and procedures will never suffice to create the conditions of our flourishing and fulfillment, however critical they may be to the project of ordering our lives in institutions. A culture supportive of idea play cannot be mandated exclusively from above; it must also be created from below. To believe otherwise is to render unto the hierarchy yet more power than it already has in our affairs. In short, the academy needs a healthy dose of anarchy.

During the social and cultural upheaval of the 1960s, Yale's president, Kingman Brewster, explained that "the real trouble with attempting to devise a strategy, let alone a plan, for a university of any kind is that basically we are anarchists."

Indeed, the unique challenges of organization, administration, and governance in the community of scholars persist from time immemorial. The concept of "organized anarchy," introduced in 1972 by Michael Cohen, James March, and Johan Olsen, seems to capture perfectly the contradictory impulses embedded in the academic enterprise. For nearly 45 years, it has been the stock answer to the question, "Why is it so hard to get things done in higher education?" And yet our organized anarchies have become far more organized than anarchic.

Like virtually every other modern institution, the academy is succumbing to a virulent strain of "over-organization." You will recognize the malady — introduced by Aldous Huxley in 1958's *Brave New World Revisited* — if your first instinct in dealing with a troublesome colleague is to consult the faculty handbook instead of simply walking down the hall to

initiate a difficult conversation. The replacement of basic human interaction with mechanized protocols and procedures is just one indicator that the idiosyncratic rhythms of academic life are giving way to the algorithms of the institutionalized academy.

The profusion of administrative and staff positions "required" to manage the mounting regulatory and compliance burden has exacerbated the situation. (Just one example: That burden is apparently estimated to have cost Vanderbilt \$146 million during the 2013-14 fiscal year.) The ranks of nonacademic administrative and professional staff members more than doubled from 1987 to 2012, according to the New England Center for Investigative Reporting and the American Institutes for Research, while tenured and tenure-track faculty positions are rapidly yielding to a contingent work force. At Cornell, the bureaucracy has become so onerous and so inimical to the academic mission that a special committee, recently assigned to investigate the matter, recommended the creation of the position "anti-red-tape czar" to unwind the damage. As Huxley cautioned, "too much organization transforms men and women into automata, suffocates the creative spirit, and abolishes the very possibility of freedom."

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Everyday anarchism, by contrast, restores human agency and calls us to do more than submissively await and execute the commands of machine programmers. This is not about tossing Molotov cocktails down the corridors of the ivory tower; rather, it is about what James C. Scott, in *Two Cheers for Anarchism*, describes as the crux of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's original conception of anarchism: "*Cooperation without hierarchy or state rule.*" It has

to do with the care and feeding of cultural values through autonomous organizing based on principles of mutuality, sociality, and solidarity. The idea is to embrace the inverse of what ails us.

After all, one of the competencies squandered in our citadels of teaching and learning is the capacity to self-organize to solve the problems that vex us. The spread of specialized administrative duties has promoted a learned helplessness among the rank and file, an overdependence on formal structures and schemes to accomplish the work that many of us in small groups know — or knew before we were systematically devitalized and deskilled — perfectly well how to perform. We have become habituated to infrastructure and incentives that encourage interdisciplinary projects, for instance, but that support is not necessary. Bottom-up initiatives of similarly inclined scholars forging ties across departmental lines to advance the cause of interdisciplinary inquiry can be just as, if not more, effective.

As higher education has become institutionalized, so have many of us in it. It's gotten to the point that we experience a kind of "institutional neurosis," defined in *A Dictionary of Public Health* as the psychiatric condition in which "a person

confined for a long period in a hospital, mental hospital, or prison ... passively accepts the paternalist approach of those in charge, and often develops symptoms and signs associated with restricted horizons." Seen in this light, the real threat to academic values isn't so much a resource deficit as a resourcefulness deficit — our ability to imagine and enact alternatives having been dulled from disuse.

Those who grieve the marginalization of the arts and humanities, for example, typically point to the markers of academic good health that are missing — generous funding, growing enrollments, the respect of decision makers — and that are largely beyond their direct control. But there are plenty of nontraditional means of cultivating support for poetry or philosophy or painting.

Consider the emergence of MOOCs, underground universities, anti-universities, pop-up schools, and other informal learning communities. When the Board of Regents of the University System of Georgia banned undocumented students from enrolling at the state's top five public universities, professors from the University of Georgia established an underground institution — Freedom University — where those students could take courses with a cadre of volunteer faculty members at no cost. In London, a radical experiment known as Antiuniversity Now "challenges academic and class hierarchy through an open invitation to teach and learn *any subject, in any form, anywhere*." Edinburgh's Ragged University, following in the tradition of the 19th-century Ragged Schools, which provided free education for the poor, holds learning events in social spaces such as pubs and cafes.

The same creative thinking that conceives and sustains these ventures can be applied within traditional structures to build and support the existentially threatened culture of ideas.

Voluntary associations, networks, and initiatives of this sort are, of course, neither novel nor rare; as James C. Scott notes, "the experience of anarchistic mutuality is ubiquitous." And despite the creeping concentration of power in higher education, the academy still runs on numerous informal cooperative acts. Stimulating discussions materialize unbidden around copy machines; a colleague supplies an article or a book recommendation at precisely the right time; co-conspirators fashion their own makeshift version of a Freedom University or a Ragged University. These experiences never make an appearance in accountability reporting, but they do count.

The trick, it seems, is to elevate their significance and harness them as a vital part of our culture-building repertoire. It is the small but meaningful act of appreciation that can change an impromptu meeting with a colleague from a casual interaction into something approximating institutional transformation.

This may sound too Pollyannaish to be taken seriously. Yet perhaps the unwillingness to suspend disbelief is among the casualties of our technocratic age, which has conditioned us to cast doubt on the world of ideas as merely fanciful. The hard-boiled rhetoric of reform in higher education bends always in the direction of official measures — institutions are enjoined to adopt new policies and programs, improve processes, submit to the latest

management techniques, and otherwise bring the unruly bits of the enterprise into conformity. Sometimes, though, the most innovative practice of all is to embrace simplicity and self-reliance over scalability and systemization.

This is how the academy is supposed to work: with its denizens laboring cooperatively behind the scenes to create a culture more conducive to unstructured idea play or other intellectual pursuits even as the rest of the world appears to care less about such matters. Maybe the so-called casualization of academic labor is due for an additional — more positive — interpretation, one that signifies the considerable power to be found in informal organizing, as against a posture of waiting for the machine bureaucracy to whirl benevolently in our direction.

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