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Alexander M. Stoner

Northern Michigan University, alstoner@nmu.edu

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**Climate Change and American Higher Education:
Inculcating the Self-Deception of Capitalist Society***

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Alexander M. Stoner
Northern Michigan University

*DO NOT CITE.

Introduction

The Boyer Commission (2022) recently published a report titled *The Equity-Excellence Imperative*.¹ The report aims to provide a blueprint for advancing equity, student success, and excellence in undergraduate education at U.S. research universities, and is structured around eleven provocations.

My paper explores the report's first provocation on *world-readiness*,² which challenges students and educators to think differently by moving beyond workforce skills and training to better understand the complexity of the world we live in. Focusing on the problem of climate change, I argue that *commodity-determined education*³ is inconsistent with education for world-readiness. My argument proceeds in three steps:

1. I first provide a brief ecology of economic growth.
2. I then explain how contemporary higher education reproduces the growth imperative through human capital development, economization of science, and increasing corporatization.
3. Third, I engage Sally Weintrobe's recent work on the psychology of climate change to outline how commodity-determined education entails and creates a culture within the university and a shaping of self that is antithetical to ecological care.

1. Brief Ecology of Economic Growth

To begin, I want to briefly summarize the economic growth imperative, which is the single-most significant driver of climate change.⁴ I define the growth imperative in temporal terms by the tendency to produce as many commodities as possible as rapidly as possible (more stuff in less time). This dynamic entails increasing ecological additions (pollution) and ecological withdrawals (resource extraction) faster than Earth's biocapacity (to replenish resources and absorb our waste). Hence, increasing resource extraction and pollution are among the most salient components of post-WWII globalization. There's a fundamental contradiction between the form economic growth must take in advanced capitalism, on the one hand, and ecological sustainability, on the other hand.

The growth imperative is not only an economic imperative but also a broad cultural value that has penetrated other social spheres, including education. In fact, the system of higher education is an integral part of the run-away growth that is propelling society towards its predictable ecological collapse. This is because of the form contemporary higher education takes, which expresses the basic social relations of capitalist society, namely, the commodity.

Commodity-determined education⁵ entails a process of "real abstraction," through which individuals are alienated from dimensions of learning and education that cannot be quantified for exchange on the market (e.g., critical thinking, introspection, creativity). Yet, it is precisely these qualitative dimensions of education that will increase the likelihood of confronting climate change more meaningfully and effectively in the future.

2. Reproducing the Growth Imperative through Contemporary Higher Education

Next, I will discuss three ways universities reproduce the growth imperative.

¹ The Boyer Commission is sponsored by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching,

² The report employs Kathy Davidson's notion of world-readiness to "articulate a vision of undergraduate education that includes and goes beyond the essential goal of near-term workforce readiness to empower students for citizenship, life, and work throughout their lifetimes" (Boyer Commission 2022:11).

³ Education mediated by the commodity form of social relations (see Adorno 1995 [1959]).

⁴ The "driver of the driver" is the global accumulation logic of capital (see Pineault 2023).

⁵ Sohn-Rethel (2021 [1978]). Cf. Renn (2022).

2.1 Human capital development

The first is human capital development. With the rapid economization of society following WWII, higher education shifted away from the aim of cultivating critical self-awareness to human capital development, which is sought solely to maximize economic competitiveness. According to Wendy Brown, students are shaped in the image of human capital, and as such, are “constrained to self-invest in ways that contribute to its appreciation or at least prevent its depreciation.”⁶ As Brown emphasizes, “human capital is distinctly not concerned with acquiring the knowledge and experience needed for intelligent democratic citizenship.”⁷

Data suggest that designing higher education around the goal of employment is a losing battle that ends up reproducing inequality in the formal labor market.⁸ Free higher education decoupled from the burden of formal employment is a necessary precondition for educators and students to pursue learning and education as a process of self-actualization. Of course, this presupposes that students, government, and taxpayers understand the benefit of a liberal (i.e., open-ended) undergraduate education. But as we know, support for higher education is waning, as right-wing attacks on colleges and universities gain steam.⁹

2.2 Economization of Science

Another way higher education reproduces the growth imperative is through the economization of science. Since the 1970s, the economization of all societal dimensions has produced an image of science as an activity to be organized and conceptualized solely in economic terms. The Bayh-Dole Act of 1980 enabled universities and non-profits to register for patents for inventions made in federally funded research projects. The commercialization of science has been reinforced in the U.S. by diminishing public funds,¹⁰ forcing universities to raise tuition, and forcing faculty to seek external funding (which comes with expectations about profitable outcomes). The increasing dependence of higher education on the private market has resulted in research that is less “curiosity-driven” and more market-driven. While private firms have an incentive to cut costs and promote efficiencies, that same incentive leads them to focus on short-term profits at the expense of basic research that is needed to make profound advancements in scientific knowledge.

2.3 Increasing Corporatization

Higher education also reproduces the growth imperative through increasing corporatization. Private capital dominates the physical space of universities, which increasingly resembles corporations. While academics often lament the profit orientation of contemporary higher education, the war over the corporatization of the university was never fought and is generally accepted as the way things are. Perhaps because of this, moves within higher education towards appreciation of, and focus on, climate change and sustainability are highly compatible with the neoliberalization of the university.

Probably the most salient ideological feature of contemporary higher education is the uncritical celebration of technology as the solution to complex social problems such as climate change.

⁶ Brown (2015: 177).

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Increasingly, colleges are using labor market data to analyze graduates’ employment outcomes, recruit students and create new programs (Blake 2023).

⁹ See, e.g., Trump’s promise to reform regional higher education accreditors (Brint 2024).

¹⁰ During the 1980s, in response to the economic downturn, government (both federally and at the state level) began a progressive divestment in public universities. Universities responded by seeking income streams from the private sector (Aidnik and Sharma 2023). This, in turn, changed how people thought of the university: higher education was recast “as a private and positional investment rather than a public good” (*ibid.*: 6).

What is uncritical about this celebration of technology is the bracketing of time and space;¹¹ specifically, the ways in which social context shapes technology development, design, and implementation. While universities may champion LEED certified buildings or celebrate solar canopy parking lots as ecologically conscious investments, green building certifications (e.g., LEED) do not take into consideration energy use; and most renewable energy firms are linked to or outright owned by major fossil fuel conglomerates that continue pumping oil. By mistakenly identifying these university endeavors with actual sustainability, we bracket the contradiction between adopting technology to reduce GHG emissions, on the one hand, and the institutionalized social relations that inhibits this technical potential, on the other hand.¹² An important task for students and educators, therefore, is to recognize social contradictions as such and not interpret them as “natural.”

3. On the Prospects for Ecological Care

However, gleaning insight from Weintrobe, I contend that under conditions of neoliberalism, commodity-determined education creates a culture within the university and a shaping of self that is antithetical to ecological care. According to Weintrobe, most of us have caring and uncaring parts of the self. Weintrobe describes the uncaring self in terms of an inner exception that sees the self in idealized terms, feels entitled to have whatever we want, and freely dispenses with moral and practical limits by omnipotently “rearranging reality.” For Weintrobe, the uncaring self can be contained, provided sufficient *frameworks of care* that allow and encourage the caring self to look after the uncaring self.¹³ Weintrobe’s research charts the progressive deregulation of mind away from care and toward uncare during the neoliberal period.

When faced with a disturbing reality, one way neoliberal culture colludes with the uncaring self is through a particular form of psychological denial in which reality is simultaneously accepted and denied.¹⁴ The reality of climate change is acknowledged on condition that so-called “business as usual” is not challenged.¹⁵ Such denial functions to alleviate mental discomfort, since the broader culture of neoliberalism resists facing loss (of earth, money, entitlement, self-esteem, infallibility, etc.).¹⁶ With the problem normalized, attention is more easily directed toward how to continue as usual despite the inconvenience of climate change.

Conclusion

The Boyer Report’s call for *world-readiness* is a laudable provocation. At the same time, however, we must recognize that, under current conditions, the relationship between education for productive economic actors (i.e., alienated labor) and education for democratic citizens is contradictory. The resolution of this conflict will not be found through educational reform alone. The struggle for ecological education must be a struggle against the commodity form and its shaping of the self, and therefore, for the decommodification of higher education as a public good.

¹¹ Cf. Dahms (2008).

¹² See Stuart, Gunderson, and Petersen (2020: 20) on the “technical potential-production relations contradiction.”

¹³ For Weintrobe (2021: 89), frameworks of care exist at all levels, “from international, national and local laws to social mores, to parental understanding and restraint, to our inner moral code.” Frameworks of care also strengthen the caring self by promoting recognition of each other’s states of mind, desires, needs and sufferings (*ibid.*: 283).

¹⁴ Weintrobe (*ibid.*: 184) calls this form of denial *disavowal*.

¹⁵ See Weintrobe (*ibid.*: 184). Cf. Blumenfeld (2022); Klein (2019).

¹⁶ See Weintrobe (*ibid.*: 185).

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