

Léonard Moulin

Richard Münch. Academic Capitalism: Universities in the Global Struggle for Excellence. New York: Routledge, 2013. 314 pp. ISBN 978-0-415-84014-9.

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This book by Richard Münch, professor emeritus at the University of Bamberg, Germany, proposes a sociological analysis of academic capitalism and the rise of the “entrepreneurial university” that places the logic of business at the heart of its organization. Government policies, also known as New Public Management, that since the 1980s have imported ingredients from the private into the public sector in order to improve efficiency, produce an asymmetry between the increasing number of fund seekers and a smaller number of suppliers. They also lead to intense oligopolistic competition among universities, which overlays the competition among researchers for knowledge and their recognition by the scientific community. The intrusion of economic logic into the academic field leads researchers to compete for reputation and entrepreneurial universities to accumulate capital via competition for positions in the rankings (Slaughter and Leslie 1997; Slaughter and Rhoades 2004).

Münch’s objectives are to investigate how the field of science is penetrated by the economic logic of capital accumulation, how this penetration changes the path to recognition, and what the consequences for research diversity and the evolution of scientific knowledge are. Münch shows that the rise of academic capitalism leads to the inefficient stratification of universities. The main consequences of monopolistic competition are a strong tendency toward uniformity of research and a loss of autonomy.

The author’s empirical evidence draws on both qualitative and quantitative data from Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Especially in the last two chapters, he mobilizes econometrics (simple and multiple regressions) to show (1) the gap between the appropriation of research funds based on the allocation of symbolic capital and the production of knowledge in publications and (2) how much the availability of economic, social, and symbolic capital determines the allocation of reputation, total research grants, and research grants per scientist.

In chapters 1 and 2, the author describes the entrepreneurial changes that are currently taking place within research and teaching activities. Entrepreneurial universities are subject to management in which students and the users of research—the consumers—dictate the rules. In this new world of globalized competition, the goal of universities is to secure market shares and to maximize their profits (Bok 2000). The competition is possible only for universities that have a sufficient mass of material and symbolic capital, while other universities do not take part in the competition, based on the acquisition of research funds, the recruiting of “star” faculty

and talented students (Clark 1998). According to Münch, rankings create a stratification of the academic field into top, medium, and low-ranking universities. In top institutions, researchers have better chances of being cited and recognized for their work.

Chapter 3 details the process of constructing excellence through evaluation. The author shows that the procedures for evaluating research achievements do not simply measure differences but construct them. They create self-reproducing status hierarchies and therefore lead to the shutting out of competition, open knowledge evolution, and variety in research. Social mechanisms constructing and reproducing status hierarchies shape the results of the evaluation process and contribute to their further consolidation, punishing the losers and rewarding the winners.

In chapters 4 and 5, the author argues that universities are in competition for scientists, students, and research funds. To recruit the most promising scientists and talented students, the entrepreneurial university must accumulate material capital and transform it into symbolic capital. The main consequence of this competition is the emergence of a monopoly mechanism that produces the stratification of research. Münch focuses on the German case to show that this stratification does not improve efficiency. According to him, cartel-like structures characterize membership in committees and, therefore, the distribution of funds to research institutes on the basis of accumulated capital (reputation and prestige). In 2005, within the German Research Foundation (DFG), the 13 most represented universities (out of about 70) occupied 171 committee seats out of 334, the Max Planck Society accounted for more than half of the total academic members, and all these selected institutions received the majority of research funds. Entrepreneurial universities attract talented scientists with material capital and transform it into symbolic capital, allowing them to be visible in a globalized market. In other words, they can then use their privileged positions to climb ever higher in the rankings.

The sixth chapter of the book demonstrates how the rise of academic capitalism in allocating funds in Germany has contributed to a major change from federal pluralism to a more stratified system of universities and departments. It starts at the macro level with the unequal and uniform (as opposed to equal and pluralistic) distribution of social, economic, and cultural capital among universities leading to the cartel-like allocation of symbolic capital. At the mesolevel, this process leads to the unequal distribution of committee members by universities and, therefore, to inequalities in their material capital. Small departments that cannot take part in competition suffer from underinvestment, while large departments are overinvested. As a result, the oligopolistic appropriation of funds leads to a decline in scientific progress by limiting competition between researchers.

In the final chapter, the author focuses on the effect of economic, social, and symbolic capital on the publication performance of departments, on their reputations, and on the subsequent allocation of funds per department and per researcher. He performs a multiple regression analysis in which these forms of capital are considered as dependent variables and productivity factors as independent variables. The results show that the symbolic, social, and economic capital and productivity factors

exert a significant and positive effect on reputation. An interesting conclusion of this analysis is that performance factors, unlike capital variables, fail to explain the allocation of research grants per scientist (and the total sum of research grants per department). Indeed, New Public Management—and the accompanying rise of academic capitalism in German research policy—does not contribute to enhanced performance. An increased centralization in the allocation of funds leads to a more stratified system with greater inequality in the availability of capital.

The greatest merit of this book is the way the author analyzes the rise and consequences of academic capitalism. He provides a very useful reading—for the implementation of future public policies—of the effects of New Public Management on the academic world. Münch shows that there is a concentration of capital by a small portion of the market and reduced competition, leading to the formation of monopolies—in line with Marx's theory of capital concentration. A logical consequence is the increased merging of universities in order to benefit from scale effects and gain visibility. The author brilliantly questions the relevance of this model and stresses its dangers. He demonstrates that the rise of academic capitalism may have critical consequences for the future of open knowledge and diversity of research. If we aim to avoid this impoverishment of the academic world, we need to build an alternative economic conception of higher education and research—and then stop thinking of them as a regular market. A solution might be to recognize their social benefits and to offer an economic reading in terms of public good rather than personal investment, as does Gary S. Becker's human capital theory (Becker 1962; Moulin 2014).

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