

What Universities Owe Democracy, by Ronald J. Daniels, with Grant Shreve and Phillip Spector

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Concealing the Corporate University

I am the great-grandson of a landless Polish peasant whose living conditions were so dire and had plummeted to such an extent that she threatened suicide. In a letter to her brother who had migrated to the United States (US), she warned that if he did not find a way for her to join him there she would throw herself into a river to drown. Her brother devised a plan, and in 1912, she travelled by ship to the US before taking up work as a chambermaid in a hotel. My great-grandparents were among those approximately 1.5 million Poles who fled to the US to avoid starvation, abject poverty and cultural genocide under occupation following the Franco-Prussian War, which ended in 1870. US employers, including former slave owners, welcomed Poles to low-paying menial employment since they were deemed hard-working but less intelligent than other migrants and therefore “sub-human” labourers.

What Universities Owe Democracy by Ronald J. Daniels (with Grant Shreve and Phillip Spector) begins with a similar vignette. Daniels’s father was a European Jewish refugee who barely escaped Hitler. In March 1939, his father left Warsaw in Poland and set off for Canada, only to be informed by government officials there that “none [European Jews] is too many” (Daniels 2021, vii). A framed passport of his grandfather and father “stands as a powerful reminder of the terrifying nightmare [his] family left behind in a continent riven by despotism, violence, and organized hatred; of the blissful succor they eventually found in Canada” (viii). The story Daniels tells is a compelling one, but hopefully so is mine. The fundamental difference in our interpretations of US democracy and higher education, I suggest in this review, reflects not only each of our histories, but also our distinct ideological lenses.

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The point of departure in the book is that instead of focusing on the kind of democratic institutions that are conducive for the flourishing of higher education, it is necessary to look at how universities can enhance democracy. “Liberal democracy”, the book informs readers, “can never be taken for granted” (viii). Daniels tends to pitch liberal democracy in binary opposition to authoritarianism. His framing of *What Universities Owe Democracy* in terms of his family’s experience with authoritarian rule clouds his own ideological orientation and elides basic issues that must be addressed for democratic institutions to flourish as well as his stake in the existing political-economic arrangements, the status quo. Underappreciated in the presentation of the chapters is the impact of neoliberal capitalism on universities and the role this plays in hollowing out democracy. Daniels does not consider the fact that universities are increasingly run like corporations in a top-down way that commodifies teaching, learning and research and thereby undermines a genuine commitment to social justice. The approach adopted in the book largely ignores the generational debt perpetuated by histories of domination and dispossession as well as the central role of capitalism in (neo)liberal democracy, which has created vast inequalities leading to a situation where the richest 1% in the world own about 46% of its wealth (Credit Suisse 2021, 17).

Daniels consistently suggests that the US practice of liberal democracy is an ideal form: when the founding fathers, including George Washington, came together they believed, according to Daniels, that “higher education [was] to play a role in the formation of democratic citizens” (Daniels 2021, 24). University managers and scholars who lead higher education institutions must now strive towards “the [Thomas] Jeffersonian ideal of equal opportunity and merit” (30). Under the democratic governance of these presidents, it was mainly white, wealthy men who would shape and benefit from democratic citizenship, as we know from the instructive work of Howard Zinn. “We the People of the United States”, a phrase itself coined by a wealthy white man, “did not mean Indians or blacks or women or white servants” (Zinn 2005, 84). Washington and Jefferson owned hundreds of slaves throughout their lifetimes. Daniels certainly does not condone slavery, but he has something in common with the founding fathers: they sustain a form of social organisation in which a small number of mainly white men live in luxury, while the vast majority, “the people”, fall in line.

“Neoliberalism’s War on Democracy”, as Giroux cogently argued, has led to a situation in which “the rich now control the means of schooling and other cultural apparatuses in the United States” (Giroux 2014, 4). Corporate culture permeates higher education worldwide. Democratic practices are not only undermined by the interests of the wealthy outside the university, but within it too. This inherently ideological approach, according to Choudry and Vally, “divides the university community into a small group of highly paid managers and ‘the rest of the staff’ (academics and administrative)” (2020, 9). Moreover, there is “an increased work burden on faculty and staff while the new corporate and managerial executives receive exorbitant salaries” (9). Power and control over important decision-making processes including prioritisation of budgets are “increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few” (9). It is important to note, then,

that Daniels sits at the top of the ivory tower of one of the most prestigious research institutions in the United States.

Since 2009, when he became the 14th President of Johns Hopkins University, the lead author of *What Universities Owe Democracy* has consistently been among the highest-paid university presidents in the United States. According to the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, he earned nearly \$1,800,000 in 2018, which was the sixth highest base salary among university presidents (quoted in DeVille 2021). Daniels took home nearly three times the amount a US family would and fell within the top 1% of wage earners in the country (Lodewick 2022). He appears to legitimise his own upward mobility when he suggests that genuine democracies reflect an “implicit covenant that anyone with enough grit and talent can move beyond the confines of the circumstances into which they were born” (Daniels 2021, 84–85). Daniels explicitly promotes the Horatio Alger myth, which Motala and Vally (2014, 13) point out “falsely generalises from an individual example”.¹ Work hard and then, like him, you can become whatever you want to be. This is the “American Dream”, the title of the first of four substantive chapters in *What Universities Owe Democracy*. We are led to believe that we might *all* make it with a bit of tinkering with university policies. This dream, we are told, is “for all based on merit and not on inherited privilege” (Daniels 2021, 31).

In November 2018, Michael Bloomberg made the largest single donation in the history of higher education to his alma mater, Johns Hopkins University. His 1.8 billion dollars dwarfs earlier single contributions and makes the university “need-blind” for the foreseeable future. His donation means that low and middle-income families now pay a much less significant percentage of their income to tuition and are now loan-free. Importantly, Daniels also opposes “legacy admissions”, which by definition have made it easier for applicants who have parents or ancestors who are alumni to get admitted to a university, thereby reinforcing historical privilege. In a line that could have been copied directly into the text of *What Universities Owe Democracy*, billionaire Bloomberg announced that “America is at its best when we reward people based on the quality of their work, not the size of their pocketbook. Denying students entry to a college based on their ability to pay undermines equal opportunity. It perpetuates intergenerational poverty. And it strikes at the heart of the American Dream: the idea that every person, from every community, has the chance to rise based on merit” (quoted in Jaschik 2018). Johns Hopkins appears at face value to be at the forefront of radical policy changes in higher education that go against the grain of generations of financial exclusion for those from working-class backgrounds and poverty-stricken inner cities.

And yet we know that Americans’ opportunities, especially in education, are shaped at a much earlier age. They are profoundly cemented by the socio-economic status that children are born into. Jonathan Kozol (1991), arguably the most influential US

¹ This refers to the “rags-to-riches” storyline popularised by Horatio Alger Jr.’s novels of the 1860s. The myth ignores the history of dispossession and is rooted in the moralistic idea that the poor and destitute should simply “pull themselves up by their bootstraps”.

education reform scholar and writer, has argued that “savage inequalities” make equal opportunity and the American Dream a hoax. In a recent conversation with Noam Chomsky at the University of Arizona College of Education, he pointed out that “inequality in education is not some kind of accident, or technical mistake, it is the obvious and intended result of a school funding system that relies upon local property wealth. If you live in a place with homes that are worth five million dollars, you’re going to have essentially five-million-dollar schools” (Chomsky and Kozol 2021). If you come from a poor background you are not likely to have the merit to get into Johns Hopkins University, because then you most likely went to a poorly funded school and received a subpar education.

The chapter “Purposeful Pluralism” seeks to combat a situation in which liberals (democrats) and conservatives (republicans) are unable to find common ground. Daniels pays careful lip service to racial inequality and the chapter is grounded in a liberal democratic suggestion that people’s voices are of equal value. In the months following the brutal police killing of Freddie Gray in Baltimore,² Maryland (where Johns Hopkins University is located), black students at the university held a peaceful demonstration. They were understandably concerned about safety, but also the lack of representation by minorities. The School of Arts and Social Sciences, for example, included slightly over 1.5% black faculty members (Daniels 2021, 188). “Racial progress in the United States had stalled” (188), Daniels admits.

“Voices from all sides of the ideological perspective were [then] heard”, and so for Daniels this was “the best of a pluralistic academic community” (189). What is required is “tolerance” and “to avoid a descent into endless strife and perpetual gridlock” (190). Daniels conveniently trumpets democracy and consensus building on campus, but completely ignores the controversy surrounding the imposition of a private police force on campus. In 2018, Maryland passed a bill stating that universities such as Johns Hopkins University would be permitted to have their own private police equipped with guns and with the power to arrest. Notably, less than two months after making his historic contribution, Bloomberg also made public announcements in support of policing (see Wood and Broadwater 2019).

In addition to the incident with Freddie Gray, the city has developed a notorious record of racial profiling and malpractice. For example, in 2013, Baltimore police at Morgan State University chased down Tyrone West and then proceeded to beat and taser him until he eventually passed away in police custody. On 3 April 2019, students occupied the administrative hall of Johns Hopkins University demanding that the private police force not be deployed on campus in part because of the disproportionate effect it would have on brown, black and queer bodies. According to reporter Brandon Soderberg (2019), “Daniels met with two students on day one of the sit-in, told them that the private police force was a done deal, and said they could consult on the specifics of

² Freddie Gray had been handcuffed inside a police van and his spine was 80% broken at his neck before he died (BBC News 2016).

what the police force would look like if they liked, in exchange for stopping the protest”. Students refused to budge, and 100 officers were sent to the building where multiple arrests took place.

After the police killing of George Floyd, which led about 25 million African Americans to join in protest action across the country, plans were paused again, presumably to avoid further unrest on campus, but in mid-2021 the university went ahead with its initial plans. This aptly demonstrates the separation between the ivory tower corporate university and ordinary folk: the university is increasingly shielded from the public, literally with its own private police, rather than embedded within it. The “University Owes Democracy”, but the students themselves are denied the right to the kind of “self-governance” that Daniels eloquently defends and advocates (Daniels 2021, x). The paradox is that while Johns Hopkins University is presented as a supposedly open forum for a diverse range of views on various subject matter, university administrators can use armed men and women to enforce their own set of (liberal democratic) values.

The chapter “Free Minds” demonstrates the need to shift from “community” and “civic” service and studies to “the democratic systems through which they [students] self-govern” (116). These should not be isolated from the broader purpose of the university, Daniels argues, but instead embedded within it systematically. To rectify this, colleges and universities “need to institute a Democracy Requirement into their curricula” (122). This is part of a series of recommendations to explore reforms that will lead to “true democratic citizenship” (87). Referring to the ancient Greek idea of *Paideia*, it is suggested that the goal of education should be to educate the “whole person for goodness” (89). Obscured here is the great extent to which “goodness”, as much as the meaning of democracy, is highly contested (arguably today as much as during Washington’s time). The question for Daniels is not, for example, how to end war or break the chains of oppression, but instead: “what must citizens learn to be effective participants in *liberal democracy*?” (93; my emphasis).

The chapter “Hard Truths” correctly defends the pursuit of science against the far right. Daniels calls for us to “embrace open science with guardrails” (243) so that scholarly research is more accessible to the public. This claim to “openness”, however, casts a shadow over universities’ location within a corporatised research framework that contributes to “vaccine apartheid”, and what appears to be a disproportionate amount of funds given to military weapons rather than, for example, research on social justice, including the ways in which people’s “race”,³ class and gender undermine the liberal democratic so-called meritocracy. Daniels refers to the 1960s anti-war and social justice movement that critiqued universities’ “amoral leadership, corporatization, and a

³ While “race” may be useful to explain social phenomena including systems of oppression such as slavery, it can also reinforce white supremacy, and I therefore put “race” in inverted commas. I agree with Vally and Motala (2017, 26) that the concept “race” has “been used in a cavalier way in political, social and educational studies to ‘explain’ matters in ways that are reminiscent of apartheid ‘science’”.

cosiness with the military-industrial complex” (113), but avoids following this through to his own university’s role in providing research to produce weapons of mass destruction.

According to the Johns Hopkins Applied Physics Laboratory (which is completely omitted from the book), they produce “[r]evolutionizing research that unlocks the power of biology and chemistry for military operations” (Johns Hopkins University Applied Physics Laboratory 2022). As one researcher at the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), which won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2017, points out, this laboratory is affiliated with the US Defense Department and has a strategic partnership with the Air Force Nuclear Weapons Center. Alongside Johns Hopkins University more generally, the Applied Physics Laboratory obtained “\$828 million in research and development grants from the Defense Department for Fiscal Year 2017—more than twice as much as any other American university” (Sanders-Zakre 2019).

While Johns Hopkins University boasts about its contribution to scientific knowledge and funding grants, many faculty and students on campus are not impressed. Jeremy Berger, then a junior, said it is “important to examine the morality” of the contracts the university has with powerful institutions, including government and corporations. He summed it up best when he urged us to consider that “[t]hese weapons are primarily being used to oppress poor nations and hurt innocent people, and it’s disgusting that Hopkins is using its research capabilities for such harm, when it could be doing so much good with research” (quoted in Wadsten 2019).

Let me now return to the beginning of the book that I highlighted earlier. My own view of the United States is shaped mainly by two factors: my own great-grandparents coming to the United States to avoid poverty and starvation in the early 20th century and my extended visit and now permanent residence in South Africa from about 2004. These have led me to conclude that structural change in the system of capitalism is imperative. When Nelson Mandela, the first democratically elected President of South Africa, was elected under the banner of the African National Congress (ANC) in 1994, there was understandably immense hope that the lives of the black majority would change for the better. But neoliberal ideology, which relies on privatisation and financialisation, has in fact intensified inequality and arguably deepened levels of poverty. Liberal democracy is absolutely a step in the right direction from authoritarian and apartheid rule, but its reliance upon the system of capitalism (a system that was itself born in the cauldron of racism—see Robinson 1983) means it is inherently flawed.

We must look for solutions and a way of life elsewhere. Socialism means that society (and aspects of it including universities) must be geared towards ending all forms of oppression, including against women, non-white people, and minorities. It is centred around meeting people’s needs and protecting our environment, rather than producing profits and weapons. Whereas Daniels bases his argument on the implicit assumption that he came to be President of Johns Hopkins University mainly by merit, a Marxist

interpretation suggests that other systemic factors were at play. For example, while Daniels now openly opposes “legacy admissions”, his own aunt, uncle and father earned degrees at the University of Toronto, where he was also admitted. I too was raised in North America. In my case, I have a PhD, as do my brother and sister. This is not coincidental, nor was our climbing the social and education ladder based mainly upon our own abilities and merit. It was made possible by my parents’ own scholarly achievements and the stable family structure and white middle-class schooling system that we each were privileged to be part of. Coming to study in Johannesburg, South Africa, I came to see the elitist nature of the US higher education system through the lens of people living on the margins in the global South, in shack settlements such as Alexandra township. Armed with a worldview rooted in the experience of dispossessed people, one may comprehend how liberal democracy or “rule by the people” is paradoxically designed as a means of control or domination. In other words, liberal democracy arguably exists mainly as a means to reinforce the presence of capitalism.

It is difficult to argue against the conclusions drawn by Daniels unless one carries an alternative, I suggest Marxist, ideological lens. Education for democracy cannot be separated from the ideological framework within which it functions either to maintain systems of oppression or to challenge them (Freire 1970; see also Sinwell 2022). Marxists are determined to understand not what universities owe (neoliberal) democracy, but what universities owe to the dispossessed in their ongoing struggle for liberation. During the eruption of #FeesMustFall, which witnessed the shutting down of universities across South Africa in 2015 and 2016, progressive staff and students called for a public African university that would serve the interests of the broader public rather than an elite few. To do this means, among others, that we must challenge the centrality of quantity over quality, bean counting, egotistical promotions and “rankings”. Without a class-conscious and intersectional framework that draws attention to the historical legacy of “race” and gender oppression, we are likely to develop piecemeal solutions that appear more radical than they are. To many administrators and students at Johns Hopkins University, this may seem like a distant dream or an impossible future, but that is even more reason why we should place our energy in fulfilling this mission.

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