WE SCHOLARS

CHANGING THE CULTURE OF THE UNIVERSITY

DAVID DAMROSCH

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To my wife
Lori Fisler Damrosch
closest of colleagues

Acknowledgments

By its very nature, this book is the product of conversation with many of my students, colleagues, and teachers over the years. In particular, the manuscript has benefited from perceptive readings by my brother Leo Damrosch, my colleague Priscilla Wald, my editors Lindsay Waters and Ann Hawthorne, and two readers for Harvard University Press, Roger Abrahams and Theda Skocpol. Recalling valuable conversations with many people, I want to signal especially the impetus provided by discussions with Kenneth Bruffee, Caroline Bynum, Ann Douglas, Hal Freedman, Bruce Greenwald, Jean Howard, Constance Jordan, Dominique Jullien, Steven Marcus, Herb Marks, James Mirollo, and Laura Slatkin. Finally, I am grateful for the chance to observe the very different academic culture in which my wife and her colleagues work at the Columbia Law School. The dedication to this book is meant to suggest this and much, much more.

The extent and towering structure of the sciences have increased enormously, and therewith also the probability that the philosopher will grow tired even as a learner, or will attach himself somewhere and "specialise": so that he will no longer attain to his elevation, that is to say, to his superspection, his circumspection, and his *despection*. Or he gets aloft too late, when the best of his maturity and strength is past; or when he is impaired, coarsened, and deteriorated, so that his view, his general estimate of things, is no longer of much importance. It is perhaps just the refinement of his intellectual conscience that makes him hesitate and linger on the way; he dreads the temptation to become a dilettante, a millipede, a milleantenna . . . This is in the last instance a question of taste, if it has not really been a question of conscience.

—Friedrich Nietzsche, "We Scholars"

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Introduction

Readers of *Jude the Obscure* will remember a character they might prefer to forget: Jude's wizened, stunted son "Father Time," who hangs his siblings and himself late in the novel. Although Hardy presents Father Time as a type of the modern age, "the outcome of new views of life . . . the beginning of the coming universal wish not to live" (331), his readers have generally felt that he was going a bit too far in the creation of this melodramatic child. Yet Hardy erred in this only: his archetype of the modern *youth* has proved to be the type of the modern *scholar*. What academic today can read Father Time's suicide note without a shudder of recognition? "Done because we are too menny." Even as we stifle our impulse to correct the boy's spelling, must we not also repress a fleeting desire to follow his example?

Modern scholarship has been marked, above all, by its astonishing scale and scope; an immense volume of work has been produced, displaying close attention to masses of data and to nuances of texts, and, lately, an intensity of both theoretical and cultural concern. Yet along with this growth in scholarship, and indeed in part because of it, an insecurity of purpose pervades both the humanities and the social sciences, in a struggle for self-definition that reflects an uncertainty as to the larger social value of scholarly work. We must even question the usefulness of the vast accumulation of scholarship to other scholars: our academic fields are strewn with more books and articles than anyone can possibly read, many of them (worse yet)

actually worth reading. Are we scholars ourselves, in Father Time's incisive formulation, *too menny*?

The growth of the "towering structure" of scholarship has only accelerated since Nietzsche discussed its effects in 1886. In the essay from which I take my title, he noted the growing pressure toward an exhaustive and exhausting specialization, and he also emphasized the close connection between modern scholarship and modern politics, describing "the declaration of independence of the scientific man" as "one of the subtler after-effects of democratic organization and disorganization" (498). This linkage became especially close in the United States from the 1880s onward, as German scholarly methods took root in the American academic system.

Increasingly consulted—and funded—by government and by civic-minded individuals and foundations, academic experts began to play a prominent role in public policymaking at the turn of the century. As the academic system grew in the ensuing decades, an ever greater proportion of intellectuals of all sorts, from defense strategists to novelists, found a home on a college or university campus. This migration has had ambiguous results in American intellectual life. Extended analysis of public problems has come more and more to be conducted by academics, rather than by the independent intellectuals who had earlier supported themselves by private incomes or by their writing alone. In itself, the movement of intellectual work to a campus base need pose no problem, especially as one result has been a tremendous growth in the sheer numbers of researchers. We now have some 660,000 fulltime college and university faculty, and so we nominally have far more intellectual workers than ever before; and yet it is hard to feel that we have more real *intellectuals*. The shifting of so many resources onto our campuses has come at a price, for modern academic life, as Nietzsche argued, profoundly inhibits the broad consideration of general questions.

A substantial number of people engaged with intellectual issues still work in other locations, in politics and in the media, in think tanks, religious organizations, professional and trade associations, and the research departments of lobbying groups. Yet even these organizations often show a quasi-academic specialization of focus, of expertise, and of perspective. A prime reason for this mimicking of academic habits of thought is the fact that the lobbyists and think-

tankers themselves are now likely to be the products of extended academic training. A generation or two ago, committed intellectuals would often have gone to work in journalism or in the public sector immediately upon graduation from college, if they had even bothered to finish college at all. This is no longer the case. More and more intellectuals of all sorts now begin by earning graduate degrees in fields like economics, political science, or history, even if they then make their careers outside academia. Undergraduate curricula as well have become increasingly specialized in the postwar era, and so even before they enter graduate school intellectuals' training is characterized more by specialized inquiry than by the broad perspectives of general education.

To an unprecedented degree, then, American intellectual life today is shaped by the values and habits of mind inculcated during years of specialized undergraduate and graduate training. In his book *The Last Intellectuals* (1987), Russell Jacoby saw this development as signaling the eclipse of genuine intellectual life. Jacoby argued that the basis for public debate has eroded as the contentious, independent, wide-ranging "last intellectuals" of the past generation have been replaced by jargon-writing academic specialists. At the same time, as several other writers have emphasized, the shift of intellectuals into academia set the stage for a new politicization of teaching and scholarship, a development that can be seen positively as fostering an overdue engagement with the real world, or negatively as exposing the current generation of undergraduates to "illiberal education" at the hands of a new corps of "tenured radicals," to recall the titles of widely read books by Dinesh D'Souza and Roger Kimball.

Yet academic specialization is as much a fact of life as the complexity of modern society, and it can hardly just be wished away. For better or for worse, our colleges and universities are the primary locales in which the present generation of intellectuals now works and in which the next generation will be trained. If public debate needs to be revitalized, as many feel, we ought to begin by reconsidering the ways in which we train our future debaters. I propose to examine the structuring of academic work, looking at its history and its present political economy, and to outline a series of fundamental reforms, both in our teaching of students and in the ways we develop and circulate ideas. These reforms are needed not only if we are to gain

a better purchase on general public problems, but also if we are to do better in scholarly communication across the lines of differing bodies of knowledge and divergent methods of analysis.

Our present perplexities stem as much from the wealth of specialized inquiry as from the poverty of general discussion. There are still some disciplines in which scholars complain that there are too few workers and too few outlets for publication—Egyptology comes to mind, for instance—but in most fields scholars find themselves increasingly unable to "keep up with," or bear up under, the drifting accumulation of masses of specialized scholarship, across whose surface there play the shifting lights of a vertiginous succession of competing theoretical models. Information theorists sometimes use the analogy of a pot of boiling water: increasing the information coming into a system is like increasing the heat applied to the pot. As the water begins to boil, it circulates in patterns of growing complexity, so as to dissipate the excess energy it is receiving. But a system can multiply its patterns only up to a point: then the patterning breaks down, and the material itself is transformed into some very different form, as when the water turns to steam. The state of fields and subfields in many disciplines seems to be reaching a boiling point; how are we to manage their transformation?

Underlying both scholarly uncertainty and public debate on the current state of academia, and often unseen by the debaters themselves, are deep structural tensions in the modern university. These tensions are the subject of this book.

Too often, in an extension of academic specialization, both the proponents and the critics of academic change have addressed these matters in piecemeal fashion, picking one issue as the essential one that needs to be got right. The core curriculum should, or shouldn't, be revised to include writing by women and ethnic minorities; the methods and perspectives of antihumanist philosophers like Michel Foucault or Jacques Derrida should, or shouldn't, be the basis of teaching and scholarship in general; professors should teach more and write less; then again, competition from abroad dictates that we redouble funds for basic research.

These issues are approached in largely separate ways by people who work from one or another single perspective. Administrators

discuss administrative problems, people in literature departments reconstruct the canon, journalists conduct interviews with some of the more newsworthy administrators and professors, and sociologists do statistical analyses of attitudes and trends, but each group of inquirers pays little attention to what the other groups are writing even on the same issues. We need to engage these disparate perspectives more fully with one another, if we are to get beyond the endless rehashing of the latest polemics. Particularly when discussion focuses on questions of the construction and uses of scholarship, the history of ideas has been the usual framework within which the perennial "crisis in the academy" is addressed. Yet equally important are the *institutional* history, and the institutional structures, within which ideas about scholarship have been played out. This is so not only because scholarly ideas necessarily take shape within scholarly institutions, but equally because ideas about scholarly method generally prove to be closely dependent upon ideas about scholarly *community*.

A central theme in the following chapters is that every argument about the material scholars should study, and every argument about the methods to be used, is at the same time an argument about the nature of the community that is to do the studying. If genuine academic reform is to occur, this community needs to be more fully understood, and then creatively reconceived. In bringing together insights from the sociology of education, organizational behavior, and critical theory, I wish to propose a new model of the scholarly community and of its relation to society at large.

We work within departments as well as within disciplines, and our departments in turn are anchored in the large and complex institutions that are our modern colleges and universities. The role of scholarship in the creation or stifling of community is most pronounced in universities, but colleges too share these problems, both because their own faculty are largely university trained and because academic work in colleges too is increasingly being modeled on university-style patterns. In fact the growing dominance of specialization in modern times has contributed to a process of homogenization on college and university campuses alike, where support for certain modes of scholarship too often leads to the devaluation of most other kinds of academic work.

If we wish to combat this homogenization, we need to focus on the deep institutional structures that sustain but also constrain our work. As Mary Douglas has said,

> Institutions systematically direct individual memory and channel our perceptions into forms compatible with the relations they authorize. They fix processes that are essentially dynamic, they hide their influence, and they rouse our emotions to a standardized pitch on standardized issues . . . The solutions they proffer only come from the limited range of their experience. If the institution is one that depends on participation, it will reply to our frantic question: "More participation!" If it is one that depends on authority, it will only reply: "More authority!" Institutions have the pathetic megalomania of the computer whose whole vision of the world is its own program. For us, the hope of intellectual independence is to resist, and the necessary first step in resistance is to discover how the institutional grip is laid upon our mind. (*How Institutions Think*, 92)

Academic work is institutionally arranged in a patterned isolation of disciplines, and then of specialized fields within disciplines. This patterning is not something inherent in the material; it stems from decisions made a century ago when the American university assumed its modern form. Those decisions reflected political and economic assumptions then current, and although conditions have changed in society at large, our academic structures have remained relatively constant, and the old assumptions built into our institutions continue to have largely unseen but pervasive effects. The result to this day is a heady mix of scholarly alienation and disciplinary nationalism that shape the questions we ask and the ways in which we ask them. These scholarly values in turn foster—and reward—alienation and aggression at all levels of academic life. Little meaningful reform can be achieved until this situation is changed.

On many campuses, and in much of the scholarship produced on them, we see a growing concern to find ways to transcend both the disciplinary isolation and the social disjointedness that pervade academic life. In scholarship, interdisciplinary work is meant to bridge the disciplines, and even specialized work these days often

focuses on crosscutting issues like race, class, and gender, seeking to make sense of the relations among the varied social groups now increasingly visible on campus and in the world at large. Too often, though, these efforts are hampered by the archaic hyperindividualism of our prevailing academic ethos. The humanities are particularly wedded to the model of individual scholarly work, but even the social sciences display a pervasive individualism, both in the way work is carried on and in the way society itself is represented. Social science articles that are written by multiple authors are certainly collaborative, but often this collaboration is of a circumscribed sort. The authors are frequently based within a single field, each doing part of the interviewing or statistical analysis for what is fundamentally a project developed from a single perspective by one or two primary authors. As a result, often in the social sciences and almost always in the humanities, interdisciplinary work ends up being folded within the values of individual production. Either it is limited to the relatively modest crossdisciplinary work that a single scholar can do well, or else it degenerates into the shallow globalizations to which individuals are forced if they go beyond their real areas of expertise.

The important issues of race, class, and gender all too readily face this difficulty, or else they are restored to specificity at the substantial price of a renarrowing into one or another identity politics. Identity politics is in fact a sort of social corollary of academic specialization, which is why it has become so popular in our colleges and universities: it readily becomes just a new form of business as usual. As early as 1916, John Dewey observed that the increasing fragmentation of the curriculum reflected "the isolation of social groups and classes" in modern society (*Democracy and Education,* 249). By now we have reached the point at which a sort of biofeedback loop comes into play: a small-group identity literally becomes a scholarly specialty, if one is, say, a Jewish feminist whose field is modern Jewish women's writing. The new emphasis on particular identities can be a great opportunity, at once socially and intellectually, as the academy is no longer closed to all Jews except those like Franz Boas and Lionel Trilling who had forsworn any direct connection to Judaism. But this opportunity also carries with it the danger of a new kind of conformity, as when many programs in women's studies foster a rather strongly (and often similarly) defined political outlook, or when

black literary scholars run against the assumption that "of course" their scholarly field is African-American studies.

Neither specialization nor identity politics should be faulted for their convergence, and neither should simply be wished away—an undesirable reaction even if it were possible. There are good reasons why most scholars today are committed specialists, just as there are good reasons why many people now find the old generalizing image of the melting pot to be inadequate. Indeed, these good reasons are often the same reasons, seen respectively in their intellectual and social manifestations. We do specialization and individualism very well in this country, and there is a cultural logic to our fondness for building group identity on the basis of shared individual interests or background. One consequence of our talent for specialization is that we enjoy the best system of higher education in the world. Compared to the centralized, bureaucratic university systems of most other countries, the American academy is in a real sense "the home of the free," and this freedom offers exceptional choices and opportunities for students and faculty alike. At the same time, it must be said that we do *freedom* rather better than we do *home*, and indeed the persistent weakness of community in our country leads to pronounced limitations on the freedom of the less powerful members of our society and its institutions.

Within academia, we need to do better at talking across the lines of specialties and identities, lest the rifts between them deepen and proliferate. The great strength of specialization, as of all kinds of small-group identity, is that those in the group can communicate on the basis of shared understandings and a shared language, whether it be a professional jargon or a social slang. The great difficulty comes when in-groups find that they need to coexist with, and really understand, groups very different from themselves. We should give renewed attention to the ways in which we can bring together differing perspectives and the people who hold them, even as we continue to develop further the strengths of specialized work and individual identity.

In academia as in society at large, our increasing stress on personal and small-group identity has not yet been matched by a commitment to attending to other points of view and learning from them, particularly when those viewpoints differ markedly from our own. Even

within a single department we now regularly find not only more and more divergences in positions and approaches but also differences concerning what should count as scholarship at all. In a sense, such disagreement is nothing new, and yet the old academic tensions now seem more problematic than ever, since there genuinely is greater diversity in our departments than there has ever been before, both in terms of the makeup of the student and faculty populations and in terms of the questions being presented for consideration.

When campuses were more socially homogeneous than they now are, scholars could assume a certain collegiality of debate, or at least a certain peaceful coexistence, even given disciplinary rifts such as those between cultural and physical anthropologists or between philologists and New Critics. Equally, the philologists and the New Critics would at least all be studying *texts*, and would not have to contemplate tenure decisions concerning people whose research involves analyzing pornographic films and interviewing sex workers. To date, we have responded poorly to these changes, and the result has been an increase in factionality and coterie behavior. This is as much an intellectual as a social problem, as we thereby lose the real opportunity offered today, to broaden our discussions in a new way.

The increasingly personal character of contemporary debate tends to obscure the degree to which the basic responsibility for our difficulties in communication lies with the institutional structures within which we work, and with the organizational culture that our institutions foster. When campus and public debate alike degenerate into brawls with gloves off, the natural temptation is to start swinging ourselves, or at best to step in with a referee's whistle. Soon, though, the sluggers are at it again, and it may be more to the point to ask ourselves why we have turned the campus into a boxing ring to begin with. In such a setting, it makes only a small difference whether our charges go on to fight with gloves on or off.

For this reason, in the following chapters I emphasize both the ways we train students and the personalities of the professors who do the training. For the better part of a century, we have been selecting for certain kinds of alienation and aggression on campus. We need to reconsider the sorts of academic personality we encourage—and even create—through our extended rituals of training and acculturation. The progressive isolation we enforce on graduate students

favors personalities who have relatively little need for extended intellectual exchange; over time, as such norms have taken hold, people have self-selected in or out of academia accordingly. "Oh, yes," a colleague once remarked when I raised this point, "I went to graduate school because I flunked sandbox."

Over the years, we have built up a system that gives high marks to people who flunk sandbox; professors who are themselves most comfortable when working alone have come to assume that their students should adopt a similar mode of work. The very structuring of our graduate training emphasizes an increasing isolation, as students go from working in courses to working with a few professors for their doctoral orals, and then working alone in the library to complete a dissertation, often under the guidance of a single sponsor. So natural does this progression seem that we rarely take note of the cultural adjustment we require students to make in the process. We make no direct effort to assist them in this change; still less, in many fields, do we provide for more collaborative modes of advanced work that might better suit our more intellectually sociable students.

Some students thrive under our essentially medieval model of apprenticeship, whereby the advanced student earns the guidance, and ideally takes on the perspective, of an honored mentor. Yet all too often this process fails to work as it should, to judge from the fact that a surprisingly high number of people never complete their doctorate at all, a problem we will examine in detail in the fifth chapter. Often as many as two-thirds of those who begin a Ph.D. program fail to complete it, and yet few people seem to feel any responsibility to improve the situation.

Alarming as they are, high dropout rates are not the only problem. Equally serious is the situation of someone for whom the mentor-apprentice system works poorly. All too often, students struggle to an unhappy conclusion with an unworkable topic—or with an adviser who gives poor advice or no advice at all. Yet the general isolation of graduate training makes this situation seem inevitable, even if years of people's lives are wasted in the process. While I was in graduate school, I had a friend who spent five years writing a dissertation on what had at first seemed to be a good idea, one that I believe was suggested by her sponsor. It was a study of a single particle in a long-dead language. Somehow this topic began to pale after a couple