

The End of the University?

Michael Schapira

Hofstra University

“Graduate education is the Detroit of higher learning.” So began a widely read and discussed 2009 op-ed in the *New York Times* by Mark Taylor, chair of the Department of Religion at Columbia University. Taylor’s op-ed, entitled “End the University as We Know It,”¹ set out to establish a parallel between the devastating social consequences that followed manufacturing’s late acceptance of its decline in our current, globalized knowledge economy, and the way in which an outmoded contemporary higher education system is structurally set up to fail both its students and the United States, particularly with regard to its economic and civic goals. Doubling down on investments in the current model of higher education, on both the individual and collective level, would amount to as much folly as building dozens of new factories in Detroit because (1) graduate programs “produce a product for which there is no market” (a reference to, for instance, the glut of PhDs facing the trend of declining noncontingent faculty positions); (2) departments “develop skills for which there is a diminishing demand” (a reference to the kind of hyperspecialization you find in largely unread, prohibitively expensive academic journals); and (3) rising costs are likely to eat up investments anyhow and saddle students with crushing debt burdens (student loan debts overtook private credit card debt in 2010²). “If American higher education is to thrive in the 21st century,” Taylor warns, it must be “competitively restructured” to be more “agile, adaptive, and imaginative,” three traits that one would never ascribe to U.S. manufacturing at the turn of this century.

Such concerns have not abated since Taylor’s controversial op-ed appeared, as evidenced by a recent, far more measured book by his Columbia colleague Andrew Delbanco. In *College: What it Was, Is, and Should Be*, Delbanco sets out a bold vision for higher education that recuperates the best aspects of its past, but this cannot proceed before contributing to Taylor’s list of the sources of disquiet: “globalization; economic instability; the ongoing revolution of information technology; the increasingly evident inadequacy of K-12 education; the elongation of adolescence; the breakdown of faculty tenure as an academic norm; and perhaps most important, the collapse of consensus of what students should know.”³ Functional challenges aside, this reinforces Taylor’s suspicion, captured in Delbanco’s decidedly normative book title, that there are few truths in the field of higher education that we can take as self-evident.

It is one thing for two tenured professors to look back at the changing nature of their profession and broader trends in education over the past thirty years, but quite another to feel the weight of these changes condensed into the contemporary student experience. In the fall of 2009, a series of student protests broke out in London, Chile, New York, California, and many other locales around the globe, calling attention to the short-term disinvestment in higher education and the long-term consequences of the issues that Delbanco and Taylor bring to our attention. While the specifics of

these protests differed in response to local exigencies, a good accounting of their overall focus came from a group of students occupying an administration building at the University of California, Santa Cruz. In a document entitled “Communiqué from an Absent Future,”⁴ the students enumerated the ways in which universities have entered a period of bankruptcy and drift. “No one knows what the university is for anymore,” they wrote. “We feel this intuitively. Gone is the old project of creating a cultured and educated citizenry; gone, too, the special advantage the degree-holder once held on the job market. These are now fantasies, spectral residues that cling to the poorly maintained halls.”

We are seemingly on the other side of this attenuated moment of crisis, but, taken together, these three perspectives speak powerfully to the situation in which I would argue we still find ourselves today: one in which the university can be axiomatically defined as being in a state of crisis, but where crisis can come to signify any number of topics from a diffuse and growing set of problems. Are we talking about a problem of administrative costs, the crushing burden of student debt, a betrayal of foundational ideals, the obsolescence of tenure, the causalization or “adjunctification” of the teaching force, the irrelevancy of many undergraduate requirements, the immaturity of the student body, sexual assault on campus, the disaggregation of research from the teaching function, the problematic status of certain truth claims, or the inability to respond to the new global and technological context of higher education? If the crisis label can come to designate so much, can this be the fault of universities alone, or is the blame spread across a whole range of economic, political, and social forces? Moreover, is the rhetoric of blame and dysfunction the proper way to speak about the university and its future, or are these discussions part of the identity of the university itself, a kind of organized argument? These are large questions that have gained prominence among both critics and defenders of higher education. I cannot claim to provide definitive answers, and we should be highly suspicious of those who claim to be able to do so. However, the purpose of this essay is to provide a methodology of sorts for how I believe the debates should be handled.

I will begin with a brief etymology of the term “crisis,” the many valences of which I argue clarify the ways in which the university is rendered in contemporary debates. My goal here is to demonstrate what is at stake when that particular term plays such a prominent role in our discussions. I will then move on to compare the current “crisis” with two prior instances of crisis: the student movements of the 1960s and the turmoil in German universities in the early twentieth century (Germany serving an important example because the modern research university as we know it begins with the founding of the University of Berlin in 1809, the post-War U.S. university being important for making research universities mass institutions). By looking back into the history of the modern university, I will demonstrate how the current “crisis,” as with the two prior historical examples under consideration, results from a significant historical shift in which many of the guiding ideals and institutional features of universities no longer seem viable. What I mean by this is that particular state-economy-university-culture constellations produce limitations and inflection points in the semantic field as to what one might say about universities.

I will argue that the phenomenon that the “crisis” designation marks is when ideals that gained currency in one constellation lose their value and legitimacy in another, especially when coupled with a significant increase in the scope and complexity of higher education. Such a situation makes accounts that are not conscious of the historically situated nature of ideas and institutional arrangements misleading or only partial in character; thus, the need for a focus on methodology before boldly venturing answers to the questions posed above.

My most emphatic claim, in an essay that cautions against such things, is to pay very close attention to how universities operate in a wider context than we normally do. If nothing else, this will temper our enthusiasm to embrace one popular, and I would argue extremely limited, way of speaking of the university today, which is to measure it by an absent ideal, one that is often located somewhere in the institution’s past.

I will conclude by suggesting, in a way that I cannot further develop in this essay, that the current state-economy-university-culture constellation renders many of the resources of the university’s past unavailable and puts one aspect of its identity front and center — namely its public dimension. Following the upheavals of the 1960s and the culture wars that played out on campuses throughout the 1980s and 1990s, universities largely jettisoned the cultural concerns and critiques of the state that the student protests raised. Instead, there was a marked shift towards forms of scholarship and organization that reckoned with the near complete ascendancy of global capitalism.⁵ The effect of this shift was the reframing of university study as an individual good, linked primarily to one’s economic fortunes, and a concurrent decline in state expenditures that continues apace to this day.⁶ I will thus conclude that many of the debates surrounding the university will profit from thinking dialectically, for lack of a better term, with concurrent debates about the nature of “the public” within the state, economy, and cultural sphere, and looking more deeply at things like bureaucracy, or the conjunction of information technology and finance capitalism.

CRISIS: WHAT’S IN A WORD?

The intellectual historian Reinhart Koselleck provides a useful starting point for understanding the many uses of “crisis” throughout Western history.⁷ Koselleck begins his account with the Greeks, for whom *κρίσις* — *krisis*, from the verb *krinein*, “to separate,” “to choose,” “to decide” — took on different meanings in legal/political, theological, and medical contexts. Taking these in turn, the legal/political sense of the term foregrounded the act of judgment and reaching a decision, which Koselleck links to the modern use of “criticism.” By attaching the term to a point of decision that entailed arguments for and against a judgment, “crisis was a central concept by which justice and the political order could be harmonized through appropriate legal decisions” (Crisis, 359). The theological sense of crisis linked the term to the Last Judgment in the *Septuaginta* and thus bound crisis to the moment when justice would be revealed in a more ultimate sense. The medical context provided the final sense of crisis for the Greeks, and here it again signified a point of judgment, but in the diagnostic sense where “crisis refers both to the observable condition and to the judgment about the course of the illness. At such a time, it will be determined whether the patient will live or die” (Crisis, 360). One can see aspects of these in the

perspectives that opened up in the essay, for example, in the millenarian sentiment of students linking universities with the ultimate crisis of capitalism.

For Koselleck, the three senses converge when “the concept is applied to life-deciding alternatives meant to answer the question about what is just or unjust, what contributes to salvation or damnation, and what furthers health or brings death” (Crisis, 361). Such linkages were carried into national languages in Europe, again finding moments of convergence — for example, when the medical sense of an organism in peril was applied to the “body politic” in England. Moreover, the term began to be applied more explicitly to politics, economics, and the philosophy of history (for example, Leibniz describing Europe in an unprecedented state of “change and crisis”), though its application to these domains proceeded unevenly.

These shifts in emphasis are significant and illuminating for the present topic. The specific emphasis attached to the word reveals a great deal about the most sweeping changes occurring at the time — those which require an urgent diagnosis, decision, or judgment of ultimate value. In a period of war, expansion, and changes in the order of governance across Europe, “the diagnosis of crisis became a formula legitimating action” (Crisis, 368) in domestic and international affairs. However, because the concept still had not achieved a sufficient level of “integration,” its use varied widely between description (a normal change in parliament being described as a “crisis” in France) and these judgments legitimating action. It was only when the concept became imbued with ideas from the philosophy of history that it took on a more definite shape, lending itself to two options (with gradations in between): either crisis marked “a possible structural recurrence” (for example, an illness that might recur after we have treated it, or, to take a more modern example, the crisis prone character of capitalism), or an “absolutely unique event” whose consequences marked a point of no return. For Koselleck, this marks the point when “crisis” becomes “the supreme concept of modernity,” for, in either case, “it now provides the possibility of envisioning, and hence planning for the foreseeable future” (Crisis, 377).

Koselleck argues that the Young Hegelians were the first to embrace this and link it to philosophical critique. He writes, “Because [critique] is able to see the direction of history, this critique is propelling the crisis” (Crisis, 377). Thus, we can later see Nietzsche proclaiming, “One day my name will be connected with the recollection of something enormous — with a crisis such as never before existed on Earth, with the deepest clash of conscience, with a decision solely invoked against all that had until then been believed, demanded, hallowed” (Crisis, 388). The capacity of such pronouncements of thought or criticism to shed the limitations of the old world and bring into being the new marks one side of “crisis” as a feature of modern thought.

The other side, that which looks at the recurring character of crisis, emerged with the effects of modern capitalism on everyday life in Europe. Koselleck notes that from the 1840s on, “‘crisis’ was well suited to conceptualize both the emergencies resulting from contemporary constitutional or class specific upheavals, as well as the distress caused by industry, technology, and the capitalist market economy” (Crisis, 391). The development of a specifically economic understanding of crisis allowed it

to assume a less radical, reformist significance, with the job of economists and social scientists now being to understand the causes of disturbances and propose reforms.

This compressed history of the term “crisis” does not end in consensus. In fact, aside from the predominance of historically inflected understandings of the term, its uses have proliferated in modern times, partially as a consequence of specialized academic discourses (Crisis, 399). The purpose of this review is to put on the table the range of associations that can help locate the “crisis of the university” designations that we will consider in what follows.

There is one further point I would like to make about “crisis,” and this emerges out of the work of the financial anthropologist Janet Roitman. In demonstrating how “crisis” became primarily the province of the philosophy of history, Koselleck also gives us a clue about the stakes of the claim in contemporary debates. “For critical historical consciousness — or the specific, historical way of knowing that the world has ‘history,’” Roitman writes, “historical significance is discerned in terms of epistemological or ethical failure.”⁸ By this, Roitman means that crisis generates a set of questions — for example, what went wrong? — by imposing a narrative context on historical events. Such a narrative of ethical or epistemological failure produces an absent ideal from which this judgment of failure can be made, and, in an environment where the transcendental measure of God, Reason, or teleological readings of history no longer obtain for many, excavating this absent ideal is tremendously helpful for discerning the political priorities and possibilities of the present. Roitman writes, “The point is to observe crisis as a blind spot, and hence to apprehend the ways in which it regulates narrative constructions, the ways in which it allows certain questions to be asked while others are foreclosed.”⁹

THREE CRISES OF THE UNIVERSITY

Following Koselleck’s twin poles of crisis marking a potentially recurring problem or a singular event of epochal change, I will hew towards the former understanding and take a highly critical stance towards accounts that call for a radical reimagining of the university, as advocated for by figures like Mark Taylor. However, I believe that Taylor is correct in one respect, which is that the current “crisis,” as with the two prior historical examples under consideration, results from a significant historical shift in which many of the guiding ideals and institutional features of universities no longer seem viable and would require significant reworking to again assume a prominent role in our understanding as well as in the organization of universities.

A compressed account of three important “crises” can make this clearer. The first example spans roughly a century, beginning with the intellectual and cultural ferment that gave birth to the modern research university in Berlin in 1809. In books such as Immanuel Kant’s *Conflict of the Faculties* and the political efforts of Wilhelm Von Humboldt, Friedrich Schleiermacher, and Gotlieb Fichte, a set of key concepts about the modern university emerged. These included the principle of academic freedom, the division of the faculties, the course of development imagined for students, a commitment to advanced scholarship, and the seminar model linking teaching with the fruits of research (a template for our current system of graduate

and professional schools). These ideals grew out of Romanticism, Pietism, and the German Enlightenment, all of which placed a heavy emphasis on culture and, in Kant's case, critique.

Throughout the middle of the nineteenth century, these ideals fused to give this new model of the university a stable place in society and for academics to emerge into a formidable class of their own. However, the university came under great pressure as German society underwent a series of sweeping changes, beginning with national unification in 1871 and followed by Bismarck's bureaucratic reforms, which strengthened both the nation-state and German industry. As a result of these changes, many of the ideals that had served as organizing principles for the university and guaranteed its role in society were contested, eventuating in many claims that the university was in "crisis" in the opening decades of the twentieth century. A crucial component of this shift was the emergence of a powerful nation-state and modern capitalist class, both of which rendered references to culture or critique less compelling or comprehensible given the emerging features of everyday life, to say nothing of the new demands placed on universities to train bureaucrats, managers, and industrial leaders. Or, from the other side, ideals of culture attached themselves to these new forces like the modern nation-state and thus changed their character in often devastating ways (for instance, in the appropriations of Romanticism for racist variants of nationalism). The German historian Fritz Ringer talks about the "semantic disease" that spread throughout the German academic community in the 1920s, where every reasonable disagreement (on the implications of technology and modernity, on pedagogical approaches, on questions of philosophical anthropology) became a "crisis."

This thumbnail sketch provides the first example where the university-culture-economy-state constellation changed tremendously, and many academics either clung to ideals that emerged from a very different context, or were quick to abandon these ideals completely.

To turn to a more proximate example we can look at the post-World War II period, with a particular eye towards the American expansion of higher education. This period was marked by a democratizing mission that contributed to a time of unprecedented growth — often referred to as "the Golden Age" of the American university. Not only were enrollments increased through policies like the GI bill, but states and the federal government evinced a commitment to funding research and teaching at unprecedented levels.¹⁰ The key focus in this period was to broaden the access to and distribution of the goods universities produced (for example, widespread economic growth and opportunity, the broad diffusion of technological and scientific discoveries, or the inclusion of new groups in the American power structure). All of this occurred against the backdrop of a strong alliance between state and economic interests, referred to as "the social compact."

The student protest movements of the 1960s brought this epoch to a very immediate and visible sense of crisis. Whereas the German crisis of the early twentieth century reckoned with the new demands placed on educational institutions by expanding state and economic interests, the student protests drew attention to the limitations of the

postwar social compact and the model of state and economic cooperation which it entailed. Foremost amongst their concerns were structural injustices that remained unaddressed by current educational priorities and more holistic concerns about the stultifying features of mass society. In this context, references to the democratic ideals of higher education rang hollow to students, or at least required significant elaboration to gain a fair hearing in public settings. This is in part explained by a renewed emphasis on political and cultural concerns that marked a concomitant decline in the economic, scientific, and democratic justifications that reigned during the 1950s and early 1960s for higher education policy.

If we return to the present crisis with these two examples in mind, a similar account can be given. In brief, this is the story of neoliberalism and its effects on our shared assumptions, wherein universities are imagined as being able to bypass the cumbersome demands of political or cultural issues (which marked the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s) to link up directly and efficiently with economic imperatives.

As has already been mentioned, the current crisis can be viewed as a significant challenge to this neoliberal consensus, and again this is explained in part by a change in the relationship between the state-economy-university-culture components. In a rough and ready way, we can characterize the crisis of the German universities as occurring during a shift in German society from Romantic, pre-nation-state, pre-modern capitalist roots to a modern industrial nation. This put pressure on the animating ideals of the university like cultural ennoblement, disinterested scientific research, and critical distance from economic and political concerns. In the case of American universities in the 1960s, we could say that the transformation involved the implication of universities in building a mass society and manufacturing-based economy, with the heavy state involvement this entailed, to a service economy with enlarged room for the private sector. This put pressure on the democratic ideals underwriting the expansion of U.S. higher education and the role of state and national investment.

The current transformation involves the transition from a service economy to a knowledge economy, and the declining power of the state in general in our globalized, networked society. As with the previous periods this shift leads to certain pressures on universities, many of which are drawn out by the various uses of the “crisis” designation. The main argument of this essay, which can only be propaedeutic in nature given the complexity of the topic, is that treatments of the “crisis of the university” must be attentive to this wider context of historical transformation and to the embeddedness of the university in these wider constellations. Moreover, attention needs to be given to the uses of the “crisis” designation itself, for example, whether one is speaking in a critical, diagnostic, or normative mode, and whether the issues being investigated mark an epochal change or a structural reoccurrence in the history of the modern university.

A THEME FOR FUTURE STUDY: THE PUBLIC

I will conclude with one direction that I think is particularly fruitful for getting a handle on these proliferating topics that constitute the “crisis of the university” discourse. In our current constellation, raising the status of the university as a *public* institution, no matter its source of funding, provides a point of leverage for under-

standing how people think the state-economy-university-culture constellation *can* relate (that is, descriptive accounts) and how they *should* relate to one another in a healthy or unhealthy manner (that is, normative arguments). Following my understanding of the “crisis” designation, focusing on the public character of the university speaks to both these ends — that of using the university to reveal the nature of the relationship between these component parts, and then using that diagnosis to make a normative claim about universities. This is the case because many of the concepts we use were developed during a period in which “public” signified something that it no longer does in the current setting, and an understanding of this process will yield subtler insights about the present reality of higher education.

We can ask what workable conception of the public nature and function of the university remains available in the eclipse of the nation-state and structural transformations in the economy — and resources from within the history of the university, which may have had an important force in establishing our horizon of expectations for universities, cannot be unproblematically applied to the present, though reworking them may be an attractive option. If, for example, the proposed remedy to our ailment is a massive reinjection of state support (which had demonstrably beneficial effects on higher education and American democracy in the postwar period), this requires a broader argument for how that project can function given the current structures of state and economic involvement in higher education, perhaps something to the effect of an argument for a particular version of a strong interventionist state. If one were to adopt this direction they would also have to investigate bureaucracies, or what is called New Public Management in the United Kingdom.

Or, to take the inquiry in another direction, if the remedy is to retrieve the humanistic, universal ideas of self-cultivation and scientific inquiry¹¹ that set the modern university on a particular course after Berlin, a broader argument is needed to demonstrate how these ideals can marshal widespread support when universities have become so deeply implicated in modern economic forms. Are there different spaces for public education that are better suited to achieve these ends?

By embedding such accounts of the crisis of the university in this broader context, something about the status of the public and its relationship to universities can be revealed, if we understand this as the absent placeholder of value from which failure or illness is being measured. This involves an enriched understanding of the history of the university, for example, where the ideals and expectations that we now attach to universities developed, as well as attentiveness to what a proliferation of the “crisis of the university” claim might be signaling. It also requires more resources than we might normally admit, such as understanding how finance capitalism has absorbed the direction of information technology. In either case, there is much work to be done at the individual and collective levels, and my hope is that this essay can initiate such expansive and diverse conversations.

1. Mark Taylor, “End the University as We Know It,” *New York Times*, April 26, 2009.

2. For a comparison of private credit card debt and student loan debt see William Bowen, *Higher Education in the Digital Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 21.

3. Andrew Delbanco, *College: What it Was, Is, and Should Be* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 4–5.
4. “Communiqué from an Absent Future,” We Want Everything (blog), September 24, 2009, 10:06 pm, <http://wewanteverything.wordpress.com/2009/09/24/communique-from-an-absent-future/>, accessed September 25, 2014.
5. This story is told well by Richard Sennett in *The Culture of the New Capitalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).
6. For a projection of what this disinvestment means for tuition growth, see Mark Taylor, *Crisis on Campus* (New York: Knopf, 2010), 101–103.
7. Reinhart Koselleck and Michaela Richter, “Crisis,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 67, no. 2 (2006), 357–400. This work will be cited as “Crisis” in the text for all subsequent references.
8. Janet Roitman, *Anti-Crisis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 9.
9. *Ibid.*, 94.
10. The *California Master Plan* (1960) is the most eloquent and systematic description of this investment at the state level and Vannevar Bush’s *Science – The Endless Frontier* (1945) is the most important on the federal level.
11. These twin ideals went under the heading of *Bildung* and *Wissenschaft*. For an account of their importance in the development of German universities see Fritz Ringer, *The Decline of the German Mandarins: The German Academic Community, 1890–1933* (Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press, 1990), 83–87.