

The Corporate University Killed the Intellectual Craft

Deron Boyles

Georgia State University

J. Todd Ormsbee ends his article with the stipulative qualification that he might be “overly pessimistic” regarding the possibility that students and professors can reclaim C. Wright Mills’ critical-craft view of intellectualism. On the contrary, Ormsbee is not pessimistic enough. He gets right the diagnosis, but fails at the prescription. In what follows, I wish to endorse much of what Ormsbee lays out for us, acknowledging the important use of Mills’ work as well as Ormsbee’s insightful illustrations from the California State University system. To do so, I take the six elements of craft that Ormsbee reinterprets for us and use these to illustrate the degree to which Ormsbee is correct, if far too timid, in his outlook. In taking each of the six ideas of craft in turn, I am attempting also to channel the later Mills and his work *The Power Elite*. I am, in short, intentionally and symbolically polemical.¹

1) “The hope of good intellectual work, and pleasure in that work.”² I agree with Ormsbee that there is ample evidence of good intellectual work. Look around at any PES conference and we’ll see excellent papers in abundance. Whether it was a pleasure for the scholars to craft their 4500 words, or not, remains a question. It might just be, foreshadowing another of Mills’ and Ormsbee’s ideas, that these papers are part of the larger push to be sure we have three publications a year at national or international levels. We may not need to focus too extensively on this point, but a philosopher is bound to ask exactly what counts as “good intellectual work” and what is “pleasure” in developing or producing it?

2) The scholar’s control over her own work. This may be more prevalent in the humanities, but in the social sciences, particularly in education research, there is enormous pressure placed on faculty to secure external money to fund their work. I argue that the degree to which one is strategically paid or funded to do x research is the same degree to which the research should be suspect. It

also is the degree to which one does *not* have control over her own work. At what point and given what criteria do we say the work is “ours?” If the Guggenheim, Ford, or Spencer Foundations fund us, are we deceiving ourselves into thinking that the object of our inquiry is “ours”? This might have been at least partially so years ago. It might also be true today, but I think it’s an exception rather than the rule. Faculty write proposals that fit the stated goals and expectations of funding agencies. But even if those stated goals coincide with my own scholarship, why do it for the money? I speak from experience here when I note that part of my research agenda has been to reveal the nefarious effects of corporate intrusion into public schools (and the general global discourse). I am continually approached by administrators who point out that the Spencer Foundation has money for research into corporations and education. Thus the tension: why is unfunded work apparently less important than work that is funded?

3) Control over time and method of one’s work. If I am even partially correct in point 2, then point 3 fails as well. There are external edicts, deadlines, and expectations for promotion and tenure, post-tenure review, and general expectations over something called “productivity” that strain the credibility of the idea that we have control over our time and method. Indeed, with the Institute of Education Sciences, National Research Council, and American Educational Research Association prattling on and on about what constitutes “research” in education (think replicability, generalizability, etc.), then we surely fail on this point, too. That philosophers sometimes “get away” with doing philosophy because their university presidents are too stupid to understand logic, conceptual analysis, and the importance of critical examination, all to the good. But make no mistake, philosophy departments are under threat, and a number of them have sold out to the marketization fetish of neuroscience and job-training.

4) “Developing one’s intellect as a means of developing one’s self.” A lovelier idea I cannot imagine, but the current industry called higher education does not care one whit about whether you are developing yourself. “Professional development” is neither professional nor developmental of anything beyond what is sanctioned by banal mission statements and corporate logic.

The markets that are colleges and universities are only interested in developing future workers who graduate in four years without debt and who make enormous sums of money. We might think of ourselves as exceptions to this, but when we fill out the forms “required” to show that our students are “making adequate progress” or have “demonstrated learning outcomes,” we are playing into the charade that what we are doing is, at root, intellectual. It isn’t. It is the bureaucratic and organizational surveillance of paper work that distracts from developing one’s self.

5) Connecting work and play. I submit to you that work *is* play, just not the sort imagined by Mills and Ormsbee. It’s a cat-and-mouse game and we’re the mice being pawed by administrators who only want us to do their dirty work ... and call it faculty governance for an ironic kicker. We are performing the very massification Ormsbee indicates in his article. We are, put differently, oppressing ourselves.

6) “Because one’s work is *meaningful* to the self (not because it is required or necessary) work is a fully integrated part of one’s whole life.” Yes, but that integration is characterized by strife, anxiety, and frustration in the corporate universities that are now the mainstay in higher education. It takes enormous energy to carve out the space and time necessary for meaningful work since much of what we are subjected to, in “research universities” anyway, is surveillance of one another, adding layer upon layer of extraneous review (of programs, of research agendas, of faculty reviews, of others’ teaching, etc.), committee reports that continually yield unfunded mandates, and on and on and on.

None of this is to say that we can’t have meaningful lives in which there is an interconnection between intellect, work-life balance, and fun. I simply want to underscore how horrendous university life has become for those of us unwilling to submit to corporatized logics and grant-writing. At my college, the dean met with female faculty members who are associate professors. The stated goal was to urge more women at that level to seek full professor status. To do so, the dean noted, meant that the attendees (all women, recall) would have to bring in at least \$5 million in external grants. *Quid pro quo?* Mills’ notion of “status panic” takes on new meaning. The issue here is not that female faculty members

do not have Dewey's end-in-view of Professor, it is that, to get there, they must conform to neoliberal expectations of a post-public, post-truth, post-intellectual world in which the work we do has been undermined and marginalized in ways that Mills foresaw and that we are doing nothing to confront.

We must be better at saying "no." We must to be better at saying "no" collectively, and at not allowing administrators to bribe us or threaten us or use us to move their neoliberal and reductively vocational vision of the university. For what it should be, instead, is a robust human interaction where being smart is not seen as a burden by undergraduates who would rather mangle the English language in text messages to friends than read a book. (These are, I suggest, the same students who would not understand Mills' notion of "robot" because they only know the dumbed-down reduction of the word: "bot").

I am, to be sure, committed to the craft Ormsbee and Mills outline so clearly and convincingly. I simply do not see universities, perhaps particularly my own, caring about such craft. Bloated university administrations are continually flooding us with overly-expensive demands for "infusing technology" into our classes, under-funding our travel, complicating everything from reporting grades to verifying student attendance, reducing the number of tenure-track lines, refusing to grant merit pay increases, and buying into reportage that values "efficiency and effectiveness" narratives over the difficult, messy, and time-consuming human interaction that is required of intellectualism. Let us be very clear: this state of affairs cannot be blamed on Republican neoliberals alone. The idiot Arne Duncan is no better than the idiot Betsy DeVos. Both are ignorant of what makes education different from training. Both stupidly advocate privatization and for-profit charter schools in the face of conflicting evidence. Both set business-influenced higher education policy expectations that university presidents then follow for fear of losing funding, and all the while faculty members attend their Senates and summarily pass the vast, vast majority of what the administration wants them to pass. This is what Mills understood as the techniques and technologies of manipulation. Perhaps a step in a better direction is to embrace Mills' notion of self-conscious thinking and act, yes *act*, in ways that disrupt and subvert manipulative structures of power.

1 C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959/1975). See also, Stanley Aronowitz, *Taking It Big: C. Wright Mills and the Making of Political Intellectuals* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), especially Chapter 6.

2 For each of the six points, I either quote Ormsbee (this volume) directly or paraphrase his claim.