
This study is grounded on “sociological neo-institutionalism,”—a theoretical paradigm that the authors and others, particularly John Meyer, have elaborated over the past three decades. It seeks to explain the nature of Global World Society, or here, the Global Knowledge Society. This perspective, presented in highly theoretical writings, is not easily comprehended, but it provides insights into the contemporary world. Here the authors seek to explain how the university plays the key role. Not the “technical-functional” university that readers are familiar with. Universities may be useful for producing “skilled labor and specialized information,” (8) but for neo-institutionalists they play a more exalted role. “The university as an institution [is] a cultural entity rather than an organizational one [and] has a universalized quality.” (8) The Global Knowledge Society is in fact built upon this university universalism.

This contention begs for clarification. The authors’ neo-institutionalism emphasizes the universal quality of university knowledge, meaning that it is objective and theoretical. It posits a society informed by rational understanding. The university presides over this ‘universalistic rationalism,’ which gives it a quasi-religious status—a ‘sacred canopy’ over the knowledge society. Individuals are shaped by this environing culture. Mass education creates what is called ‘personhood,’ meaning autonomous participation in this rational world. By exposing persons to universal truths, university education also confers ‘actorhood’ or ‘human agency,’ meaning the capacity for purposeful choice: “Thus, university-educated people the world over can now be seen as empowered social ‘actors.’” (7) More education, and especially more universities, are consequently held to be an unalloyed good. This belief constitutes a cultural frame that transcends the mundane functions that these organizations perform. Rather, the university defines society and progress “in grand schemes of rationalism and universalism.” (17) The authors then proceed to explicate this grand scheme.

The most cogent indicator has been the accelerating expansion of higher education, particularly universities. The authors chart this progression from the modern period after 1800, to “high modern” since 1945, to “hyper-modern” since 1990. The number of universities grew exponentially until 1960, and about 500 new entrants have been added each decade since. Specialized institutions (for agriculture, technology, etc.) grew even more rapidly. Many were elevated to university status, but most all were essentially based upon delimited areas of university knowledge. All these institutions have grown in size, so that enrollments have risen even more steeply—from c. 30 million in 1970 to 230 million in 2015. Since 2000, almost all growth (100+ million) has occurred in developing nations, which underlines its global character.
Organizational isomorphism—the fact that universities everywhere look very much alike—is another salient factor. The authors demonstrate that one cannot discern meaningful differences in departments, degrees, or curricula in universities of widely divergent nations. They all are organized to assimilate and transmit the same bodies of academic knowledge. University knowledge and curricula have grown most rapidly in the social sciences and socio-sciences (business, engineering, or medicine). These “universalized and rationalized analyses of society spawn[ed] new academic divisions focused squarely on everyday human activity and social organization.” (95) Such curricula have particularly enlarged areas involving human actions (“empowered actorhood”). For example, extensive curricula have elaborated all facets of making money, legitimated numerous types of human identities, formulated research methods for generating more knowledge, and furthered personhood and actorhood by teaching subjects like life skills or feminism.

The result has been a greatly expanded interface between the university and the knowledge society. At a personal level, university credentials certify the familiarity with university knowledge and determine access to careers and status. Society acquires direct access to university knowledge through myriad research centers and institutes. Apparent tensions in the university-society relationship are actually superseded by a kind of reciprocal interpenetration. “Essentially every institution in contemporary society is subject to the authority of university training and knowledge. And, in the same way, essentially every institution in society now penetrates the university, presenting issues and agendas for resolution. When a problem or need is perceived, demands and resources flow to the university to deal with it.” (125) The result is the knowledge society, now globalized, based on rationalized human activity and firmly anchored in the university.

Frank and Meyer portray this powerful model of a university-inspired knowledge society, but then assert that it does not really exist. That is, the university as a cultural institution has conjured a knowledge society that does not conform with actual reality. This duality appears perplexing. On one hand, they liken this university culture to a religion in which global populations have come to believe and which has shaped the expanding scale and scope of higher education along with its impact on society. But they state that all this projects an “envisioned social world” (11); an “imagined world society.” (92) The university culture’s articles of faith are often described as “decoupled”, which is a sociological euphemism for being at variance with actual conditions. The authors conclude that the two cultural pillars upholding the global knowledge society are substantially decoupled: “a picture of a global human society of empowered and equal persons [is] at great odds with the actualities of extreme inequality and asymmetry…. [And] a progressive picture of social and economic development rooted in scientific analysis [is] at great odds with an ecosystem posing dramatic limitations on continued human social expansion, and a world polity of arbitrary and maldistributed power.” (146) How the university and the global knowledge society relate to these “actualities” should be the most intriguing insight of this study, but the authors offer only allusive hints.
Globalization and liberalization are dominant features of the hyper-modern period. Globalization invokes “unified and integrated models of nature and human society” that transcend nation states—in other words, the knowledge society writ large. Liberalization is based upon the “individuated human actors” who are emphasized throughout this study. (91) Globalization and liberalization are then described as facilitating the expanded scale, scope, and influence of universities. For example, the universal standing of individual human actors has promoted an “expansive global human rights regime,” (93) which is notoriously decoupled from actual conditions. The resulting discrepancy, the authors cryptically remark, invokes “governmentality,” or a regulatory frame based on knowledge claims rooted in the university and university-educated elites.

The authors allude to a “cosmopolitan or global elite” that fulfills a wide range of roles in society and in fact implements and operates the knowledge society. (105, 138) The implicit contradiction of elite dominance and a society of empowered social actors, supposedly exercising individual choice, is not explored here. However, John Meyer was more explicit elsewhere:

[T]he expanded ... actorhood that spreads around the world vastly transcends the realistic capabilities of the participating actors. It creates a greatly expanded set of persons and groups at the top of the world stratification systems.... They are ‘others,’ schooled in university knowledge of natural and rational law, and in their understanding of the rights and obligations of actors.... They make their living telling actors what to do, analyzing the failures of actors, and creating expanded new models of what actors should be like.³

Since education in the knowledge society is “the central and dominating component of stratification,” (141) elites imbued with university culture are destined to occupy positions of power and influence, even if their beliefs and values are decoupled from the societies they dominate. The authors’ only comment on the consequence: “populist critics arising around the world ... organize their resistance against the authority of the schooled elite operating at global levels.” (141) However, populism is at bottom a crude reaction motivated by cultural alienation from university culture.⁴ It reflects discontent with the hegemony of liberal elites.⁵

In the United States, the liberal/progressive elites now dominate the media, high tech and entertainment industries, most of the nonprofit sector, the Democratic Party, and of course universities. Their culture and goals in such loci have been criticized as myopic, self-serving, and decoupled from reality. Frank and Meyer conclude, “the postwar dominance of the liberal order as an imagined image of a global society rooted in shared knowledge and massive schooling [had] some properties of a binge—an expansion far beyond what might reasonably be seen as realistic or functional.” (144) Today, that liberal order is wedded to specific social action themes that have generated widespread criticism, often directed against “liberal elites.”
The crusade against global warming is a matter of faith among the global elite, upholding science (universal rationality) to save the earth.\textsuperscript{6} Mitigation of inequality is an elite concern in ways that ignore economics and economic reality, and perhaps for that reason has not been systematically pursued. Similarly, the hypertrophy of human rights by liberal elites has suffused the legal system and promoted leftist political agendas. These objectives are in some respects well-intentioned and desirable in university-based knowledge societies, but they have been expanded, as Frank and Meyer said, “far beyond what might reasonably be seen as realistic or functional.”

While these postures are anathema to populists, conservatives, and/or Republicans, critics to the left of center have posed arguments that are more germane for the global knowledge society. After the earthquake of Donald Trump’s 2016 election, most liberal elites embraced the Resistance, but a few looked inward. Mark Lilla blamed the rot of identity politics that emanated from the nation’s colleges and universities. Academic liberalism pursued identities into “self-righteous narcissism” and “radical Individualism”: “The more obsessed with personal identity campus liberals became, the less willing … to engage in reasoned political debate.”\textsuperscript{7}

Thomas Piketty documented the emergence throughout the developed world of a “Brahmin Left”—the transformation of formerly working-class parties into representatives of the most educated groups in society—the schooled elite. In the United States by 1990, “the Democratic Party became the party of the educated in a country where the university system is highly stratified and inequalitarian.”\textsuperscript{8}

Edward Luce castigated global elites for being out of touch (decoupled) with the conditions affecting most people, for being distrustful of the populace and democracy. The free movement of trade and capital, accompanied by democracy, exacerbated inequality and spawned a near-hereditary meritocratic elite.\textsuperscript{9}

Branko Milanovic also asserts that an open but largely self-perpetuating elite dominate what he calls “liberal meritocratic capitalism.” In his view, the knowledge society faith in expanding government has been transcended: educational expansion has reached a ceiling, so that “most people … have learned as much as they care or are able to”; and similarly, “people are skeptical about gains to be achieved from additional increases in taxes” and social spending. Instead, the elite perpetuates itself through the privatization of social benefits like elite education and “investments in political control.”\textsuperscript{10}

This last point was emphasized by Francis Fukuyama. The political elites are far more polarized than the American people and far better organized and funded. Hence, they dominate political narratives. Their support comes from self-interested parties whose liberal rhetoric may be decoupled from reality but whose actions are tightly coupled with their economic interests.\textsuperscript{11}
But this phenomenon extends well beyond politics and government. There exists an enormous and growing empire of elites in foundations and non-profit organizations who are wholly committed to the culture of the knowledge society and who actively employ their wealth and power to advance it. These efforts complement liberal elite dominance of media, the Democratic Party, and universities by promoting identity politics, sustainability, economic equalization, and expanded human rights. However, liberal elites (other than professional advocates) and especially their supporters lack vested interests in these causes. Their investment is cultural: Devotion to these causes may spring from moral concern, but also provides personal gratification—self-righteousness and virtue signaling—rather than pecuniary advantage. This situation, even with blatant decoupling, validates the neo-institutionalist case propounded by Frank and Meyer. University-grounded culture takes precedence over functional realities, at least in the non-profit sector. Precisely here the decoupling of these commitments has given rise to the criticism of liberal elites by otherwise devoted liberals.

These contradictions have not in other respects hindered the knowledge society. The progressive ideology emanating from universities has never had wider acceptance. Billionaires donate to its dedicated NGOs, and corporations advertise their support for ESG. These apparent anomalies can exist because identity and other social issues pose no threat to the tangible interests of political and economic elites. Sustainability, for example, translates to funnelling taxpayer money to private firms. Some degree of taxation and social redistribution, once resisted by free-marketeers, is now accepted as necessary to “liberal meritocratic capitalism,” which largely operates to the advantage of political and economic elites. Hence, the knowledge society is an omnipresent reality—not an imagined one—despite being decoupled from significant features of the polity and economy.

In the final analysis, The University and the Global Knowledge Society provides a deeper understanding of the cultural ocean in which we swim. It illuminates the effect of university culture in everyday life. The quasi-religious nature is evident in articles of faith like ‘higher education for all’ or education as the engine of social progress. The abstract notions of personhood and actorhood can be recognized as pervading contemporary culture, just as academic formulations of society pervade the knowledge society. The global nature of university culture can be appreciated along with the insights this brings to the kinds of decoupling existing under different national circumstances. Finally, but not exhaustively, one can recognize the parochial beliefs on policy and problem solving of global and national elites, shaped by university culture and the knowledge society. However, this study raises but fails to address the tantalizing issues of the decoupling of knowledge-society ideology from reality, and the challenges to its ascendancy that have mounted since 2010.

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Notes


5 The university-based knowledge society is also under siege by the ‘progressive left,’ which rejects science, reason, and universalism in favor of social constructivism, and rejects individualism in favor of collectively defined identities: Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay, *Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything about Race, Gender, and Identity—and Why This Harms Everybody* (Durham, NC: Pitchstone Publishing, 2020). This phenomenon will be discussed in a forthcoming *Note*.

6 In fact, climate science discounts alarmist forecasts, and their elitist remedies would have the most negative impact on the non-wealthy: Björn Lomberg, *False Alarm* (New York: Basic Books, 2020).


12 Environmental, social, and corporate governance.

13 Milanovic, *Capitalism Alone*.

14 See Baker, *The Schooled Society*. 