



education review // reseñas educativas

editors: gene v glass gustavo e. fischman melissa cast-brede

a multi-lingual journal of book reviews

April 21, 2012

ISSN 1094-5296

Education Review/Reseñas Educativas is a project of the National Education Policy Center <http://nepc.colorado.edu>

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Woodhouse, Howard. (2009) *Selling Out: Academic Freedom and the Corporate Market*. Montreal, QC & Kingston, ON: McGill-Queen's University Press.

Pp. 360 ISBN 978-0-77353-580-0

Reviewed by Peter Chiaramonte
Ontario Institute for Studies in
Education/University of Toronto

We make trifles of terrors, ensconcing ourselves into seeming knowledge.

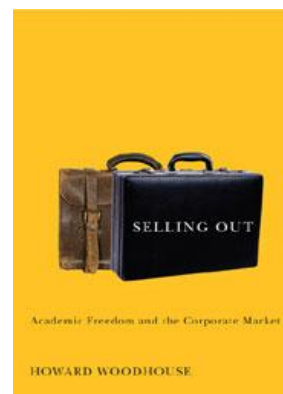
~William Shakespeare, *All's Well That Ends Well* II, iii

The learned and imaginative life is a way of living, and is not an article of commerce.

~ Alfred North Whitehead, *The Aims of Education and Other Essays*

If we can't trust the university, whom can we trust?

~ J.M. Coetzee, *Disgrace*



Citation: Chiaramonte, Peter. (2012 April 21) Review of *Selling Out: Academic Freedom and the Corporate Market* by Howard Woodhouse. *Education Review*, 15. Retrieved [Date] from <http://www.edrev.info/reviews/rev1163.pdf>

“In the mid-1980s I lost my job at the University of Western Ontario.” Right from the beginning of his Introduction to *Selling Out*, University of Saskatchewan professor of educational foundations Howard Woodhouse had my undivided attention. (I lost my job at UWO in the mid-1990s for similar reasons.) In Woodhouse’s case, he criticized a faculty member known for his support of apartheid in South Africa. Without the protection of tenure, professor Woodhouse was subsequently dismissed for a report about the future plans of the educational development office for which he was responsible. He sued the university for wrongful dismissal, and the Ontario Human Rights Commission finally settled the case in his favour.

Challenging the prevailing attitude that the market model is the only way for underfunded universities to move forward, Woodhouse contends that universities in Canada and the United States have undergone a paradigm shift from where the essential search for knowledge has become a mere extension of the corporate agenda. But before presenting his arguments against corporate intrusion in higher education, he explains just how close fitting the relationship between business and academia has become. Quoting Ontario’s deputy minister of colleges and universities Tom Brzustowski: “I contend that the one global object of education in Ontario must necessarily be a greater capability of the people of Ontario to create wealth” (p. 24); Woodhouse goes on to develop a far-reaching critique of the research-intensive university model as practiced in Canadian universities today as discouraging academic decision making and institutional autonomy.

Increased competition for scarce funding resources has led universities to adopt a corporate model that courts students like businesses court customers, writes Woodhouse. In a well-written and thoroughly referenced study, he is able to show how government research funds are increasingly tied to projects conducted in partnership with the private sector. This, he says, erodes the autonomy of academic researchers. For example, individual faculty are at risk, he says, when speaking out against institutional relations with big business. In case study after case study throughout the book, the author demonstrates how those who publicly object to reducing knowledge to mere commodities for

sale in the marketplace “will be shunned, persecuted, and possibly dismissed.” The universities’ ability to engage in “the critical pursuit of knowledge is being undermined” writes Woodhouse, “by the manner in which teaching, learning, scholarship, and research are being reduced to market activities” (p. 11).

In the author’s view, this displacement of values whereby corporate interests take priority over university teaching and the pursuit of knowledge need to be more fully recognized. That much is clear and convincing. But is that enough? Is that all we get for 360 pages? Is there any more to this than absorbing cases? I disagree with sociologist Mark Oromaner, who thinks, “A summary description should be sufficient to convey Woodhouse’s use of these cases to support his thesis” (Oromaner, 2010). I think there is plenty more to Woodhouse in the first 30 pages before he ever gets down to cases. But I did not get the sense of momentum or “building toward” something majestic or more revolutionary than that.

Shadows on the Corporate Media Cave Wall

This book supplements John McMurtry’s work (*Unequal Freedoms: The Global Market as an Ethical System*, 1998), Michael Horn (*Academic Freedom in Canada*, 1999), Pocklington and Tupper (*No Place to Learn: Why Universities Aren’t Working*, 2002), Paul Axelrod (*Values in Conflict: The University, the Marketplace and the Trials of Liberal Education*, 2003), Slaughter and Rhoades (*Academic Capitalism and the New Economy*, 2004), and more recently George Fallis (*Multiversities, Ideas and Democracy*, 2007). In keeping with these notable antecedents, Woodhouse’s thesis is that corporate values are basically adverse to educative values. Many past and current university administrators and government officials, he says, are in the throes of the market model as a value program. In other words, when applied to the present state of Canadian research universities, administrators and government regulators have “sold out” the academic values of enhancing and distributing shared knowledge—to a corporate program which values the maximization of private profits. Or, as he puts it in the Introduction:

Unfortunately, governments and private corporations are united in their belief that the

goal of university education and research is to increase corporate profit margins. There is a kind of pincer movement at work in which these two powerful external sources of funding have combined in order to change universities into instruments to enhance private wealth. And university administrations have done little to resist this move (p. 5).

From Woodhouse's perspective, there is a pressing need for universities in Canada to make sure of their independence from the marketplace so that they remain capable of sustaining academic freedom and the critical search for knowledge. His recommendation is for universities to move beyond these "narrow assumptions" and renew their own distinctive goals. The goal of university education and research is, in the author's opinion, to "advance and disseminate knowledge by sharing it with others," whereas the corporate model "is based on the principle of self-maximization, of consistently seeking to gain as much for oneself as possible" (p. 227). His view is that unless these opposing value systems are entirely recognized and challenged, the distinctive features of education will be subjugated to the demands of the market (Woodhouse, "Corporatized Universities Devalue Education," *Toronto Star*, November 15, 2009).

As Woodhouse contends, there is an apparent disconnect between the goals of companies and those of the universities. Companies generate wealth by *owning* ideas. And although the prevailing idea in many places today is that the market model is the way of the future, the author offers an alternative model that refocuses on the pursuit of truth rather than profit. Although he makes a convincing case, he repeats his thesis so often throughout the text that the "dominant narrative" of the book sometimes reads like a classroom lecture. But readers should not let this get in the way of his ideas. As he says, the corporate model is based on a system of values "that is proclaimed and adopted as though it were true a priori" and this is what he seeks to challenge (p. 228). A value system becomes a *value program* at the point at which its own assumptions about what constitutes worth rule out any thought that goes beyond it. The value program of the market is unreceptive, says Woodhouse, to the university's goals of

advancing and distributing shared knowledge and is therefore unable to recognize anything beyond its own structure of worth; ruling out any knowledge that lies beyond the closed patterns of thought that serve corporate interests (p. 242).

Convincing though this may be for many of us substantively engaged in higher education, *Selling Out* is not without its critics as you might well imagine. For example, professor of public policy and governance at the University of Toronto, Ian D. Clark provides a fair-minded “reality check” by pointing out how—given the fiscal situation facing all governments in Canada—it would be *prudent* for university administrators to look for non-government funding to demonstrate the university’s significance to external providers of financial support (Clark, 2010). Clark believes Woodhouse’s political philosophy may seem strange to administrators who have to manage our universities under current circumstances. “His naming and blaming may seem unhelpful to those expected to persuade governments to spend more on universities,” says Clark. Similarly, University of Saskatchewan provost and vice-president for academic affairs, Brett Fairbairn takes umbrage at the notion that his institution has completely adopted a market model (Maclean, 2010). To Fairbairn, when we talk about corporate behaviour in terms of profit maximization, that is really not what universities do. The university, he says, is a business only in the sense that every organization needs resources to accomplish its tasks.

In the chapter “Going Beyond the Market,” Woodhouse (a philosopher fond of Alfred North Whitehead’s *The Aims of Education and Other Essays*) explains his view of education as a process of growth in which three “interweaving” cycles have an “alternating” rhythm of freedom-discipline-freedom (Whitehead, 1957: 27-28). From a Whiteheadian perspective, a “growing together” occurs when teachers and learners engage in a self-creative process, transforming their experience by uniting their sense of purpose.

In order for their aim(s) to become objectified in a project and “clothe the dry bones with the flesh of a real being, emotional, purposive, appreciative,” there is a need for what Whitehead calls “the lure

for feeling” as “the germ of the mind”...The following open-ended schema is one that allows for this to take place (p. 224).

Here Woodhouse gives us the following example: when students begin a course, the professor can ask them to answer a pre-test questionnaire about their knowledge of what is to be studied and what they expect from the course. During the course, professors can continue to use ongoing evaluations through essays and class assignments to help all parties to understand how students are progressing. At the end of the course, a final examination—or its equivalent—enables faculty to comprehend and evaluate what students have actually *learned*. These answers can be compared with what they knew at the beginning of the course and in this way teaching can be evaluated in terms of what students have learned, how they learned it, and how well they have learned it—“knowledge that is useful for life and/or that encourages further study and action rather than being seen as the end point in learning” (p. 225).

The case is also made that academic freedom and institutional autonomy are inextricably linked, so that threats to either one affect the other. Consequently, faculty, students, and the public in general should remind governments of their responsibility to limit corporate demands by making certain that knowledge remains a “public good” where the critical search for knowledge takes precedence over the “private good.” In essence, Woodhouse’s *Selling Out* serves to remind us that if the knowledge disseminated by universities is not impartial, how will citizens learn to distinguish between reality and “the shadows on the corporate media cave” (McMurtry, 1998: 188).

Getting Down to Cases

The case studies that make up the lion's share of *Selling Out* demonstrate the potential for administrators within the academy to misappropriate adjudicative processes to harass anyone they do not approve of. The best-known case is that of Dr. Nancy Olivieri at the University of Toronto (Chapter 3) “Taking on Big Pharma.” According to Woodhouse, recent studies of academic freedom violations were caused by the deeply opposed values of the

academic world and our prevailing corporate culture. Each of the cases of campus disputes he cites give us a sense of the kinds of grievances that may lie ahead as governments and universities attempt to come to grips with budget shortfalls. These stories illustrate the audacity needed to resist the market model of education and warn of the personal costs that such resistance can exact.

In the final chapter of the book, "The People's Free University as an Alternative Model," Woodhouse discusses the People's Free University of Saskatchewan (PFU) as an open and community-based model of education in which anyone could participate free of charge (p. 247). Here we have come full circle. For it was this initiative in 2002 involving Woodhouse and colleagues in the Department of Educational Foundations that sought to offer free classes in a low-income Saskatoon neighbourhood where "everyone can learn; everyone can teach." This, he says, would free universities from the overriding demands of the market's dominant value program. Personally I'm not so sure. But I do admire professor Woodhouse's refusal to accept what he sees as an assault on academic freedom and autonomy. As long as citizens recognize this contradiction between the public nature of knowledge and the private accumulation of wealth, he reflects, we might stem the tide of the corporate juggernaut attempting to take over our universities.

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About the Reviewer

Peter Chiaramonte, PhD, is an independent scholar and “special student” in doctoral studies in the higher education group at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education/University of Toronto. His articles, essays, and interviews on higher education, leadership, and communications have appeared in *Workplace Review*, *Journal of Management Systems*, *Business Quarterly*, *British Journal of Guidance and Counseling*, *Canadian Journal of Communication*, *Aurora Magazine*, and the *International Educational Travel Planner*. Peter’s books and book chapters have been published with Prentice Hall/Pearson and Broadview/Garamond Press.

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Education Review/Reseñas Educativas is a project of the National Education Policy Center <http://nepc.colorado.edu>



Editors

Gene V Glass

glass@edrev.info

Gustavo Fischman

fischman@edrev.info

Melissa Cast-Brede

cast-brede@edrev.info
