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# Keynote Conversation: Advancing the Conversation on the Politics of Higher Education

*Brian Pusser and Imanol Ordorika*

## Abstract

This edited transcript of the keynote presentation at the 2017 Consortium of Higher Education Researchers (CHER) conference addresses the evolution of research on the politics of higher education, and the contemporary role of critical political theory in understanding post-secondary education in comparative perspective. It turns particular attention to the roles of the state and civil society in shaping higher education, understandings of power and governance, and the conceptualisation of the university as both a site of political action and an instrument in national and global political contest.

## Keywords

higher education – university – state – politics – power – governance – critical theory

*Jussi Välimaa (Chair):* I would like to introduce our keynote debaters, Professor Imanol Ordorika from Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México and also Visiting Professor in the University of Johannesburg, South Africa and Associate Professor Brian Pusser from the University of Virginia, United States (US). The format is that I will ask them a couple of questions. They will try to answer them, and then if you have any comments, please raise your hand and they will try to comment on the questions.

Okay, the first question is, you both have argued that the scholarly approach to understanding the politics of higher education is flawed. Can you discuss

why that is? If the field did better understand the politics of higher education, what would be different for scholars, practitioners and institutions?

*Brian Pusser:* Okay, thank you, Jussi. I'm going to go first on this one. Thank you for bringing us here, and, Taru, for your work in organising this, and to everyone for being here. Jussi has a whole series of cards here that say one minute, five minutes, three minutes. He's like a soccer referee. He has a yellow card and a red card. So, I'm going to tell you my conclusion before I work through this question with the time that I have. Then Imanol will tell me what I did wrong. Fundamentally, the answer to the question about why I feel the approach of politics of education is flawed is twofold, really. The first has to do with a historical story about the way in which the study of higher education developed as a scholarly field. The second is that for a very long time, there has been a lack in many parts of the world of a critical scholarship of higher education. Those two pieces together, I think, begin to explain the dearth of truly political approaches to higher education.

Higher education as a field, I think as we know it, and particularly the study of something like the politics of higher education goes back only to the late 1960s and early 1970s. The study of higher education grew out of other disciplines. Fundamentally from its origin, it drew on sociology, drawing upon people like Weber<sup>1</sup> and Blau, and then later, of course, Burton Clark and a whole school of sociologists. In a very prominent way, it also grew out of the study of organisations. You have people like Cohen and March, and Weick and Pfeffer and Salancik, who were very influential in the 70s and early 80s. We borrowed rational choice economics, from Adam Smith through Gary Becker.

Most importantly for what we'll talk about a little later in the questions, people like Hayek and later, Milton Friedman, who have been very, very influential in the development of the field, and there's also a scholarship of students and student affairs, which is very powerfully shaped by psychology and industrial organisational psychology.

In that evolution, there's not much political science. Many of the people who have practiced political science in higher education were not themselves political scientists. I don't mean this as a critique of economics or sociology or psychology or organisations. They're all very useful but they don't lead to the kind of fundamental model of politics that you find in the field of political

science and in some other areas scholarship. It's also the case that the political science that came to higher education was a particular form of political science. In the early 1960s in political science, there's a schism. As Terry Moe has noted, one area of the field goes into research on things like agency theory and models of the executive branch and political action and so forth, people like Skowronek and Kingdon, agenda control scholars, those who study interest groups and median voters, and that sort of thing.

The other branch of political science went into what we think of today as public administration. That's people like Selznik and Lindblom, who are really working more on institutional function and systemic institutional function. It's the latter group that influenced higher education the most, and in combination with organisation studies, we got something you might call the politics of functional institutions. We didn't get a politics of power and higher education, or interest groups or state political authority and institutions. We adopted isomorphism and iron cages. We adopted the sociology of organisations, but not really the political theory of either institutions of higher education, or systems of higher education. What we really lacked was state theory. When I talk about political theory, we're talking about state theoretical approaches to power. Thinking about contest in the Gramscian sense.

There are some exceptions to how this unfolds. There is some interesting critical work from people like John Meyer and Paulo Freire on marginalisation and the state. A very strong feminist and critical theory and theoretical approaches, Nancy Fraser and Foucault and Bourdieu and Derrida, all of who've had huge influence on critical scholarship in higher education, but not particularly political scholarship. It's really in the late 1970s and early 80s, in elementary and secondary education where people like Martin Carnoy and Hank Levin, and Bowles and Gintis, Giroux, Michael Apple. They really begin critical political studies of education. It's not really for another decade or so when people like Sheila Slaughter, Gary Rhoades, Cynthia Hardy, Imanol, others come and begin to bring the state back in, to borrow a phrase from Theda Skocpol.

Now let me just say a couple things about what we would understand differently if from the beginning we had a stronger approach to politics. I think we would have been much better positioned to understand the rise of markets in higher education from a political perspective as opposed to the classic, rational choice, economic perspective. The critical scholarly approach to markets in higher education was very slow in building. Slaughter's work, Simon Marginson's early work on markets and education, doesn't come out really until the late 1990s, which is long after the rise of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher and broad neoliberal policies. We were seeing the effects of neoliberalism on

institutions long before as a field we had a strong scholarly understanding and response to that.

I think that it's also the case that we would have been alerted to what I would call today a kind of a growing crisis of human capital theory. The economic wing of the study of higher education, it's founded, essentially, in human capital theory. It's the foundation of policy arguments for higher education and for education everywhere and all the time, both for individual returns on social mobility, but the sort of collective community returns to human capital. Yet today we see a stagnation of wages for college-educated people in many parts of the world. We have an international crisis of student loan debt in which students are not accepting, going forward, the idea that this investment is worthy of the level of debt that they're carrying. The relationship between the state, students' debt, and their economic and educational futures are not accepted and understood within the classic models of human capital theory. We aren't doing enough to challenge the model and ways in which we teach students to think about different forms of capital. I think it's a big issue that, again, lacking that political, that strong political frame, we've been very, very slow in coming to that.

I also think we were slow to come to international and comparative political work. Had we earlier had a stronger sense, certainly in the US, had we had a stronger sense of state theory and the way to apply that, we would have had a better comparative approach to the politics of higher education. Particularly, so much of our focus has been on institutions, institutional function, institutional life, institutions in their national context. That's really that public administration history, that's the organisations history. It lacks the nuance of higher education institutions as sites of contest, as instruments in broader contest. It doesn't situate them as political institutions in the way that I think we would have if we had a stronger sense of the political narrative from the start of the field of higher education. Maybe I'll pause there and let Imanol take over.

*Imanol Ordorika:* Brian has just presented a great summary of political approaches to higher education. I recall that 12 years ago, there was a meeting here in Jyväskylä, a CHER meeting. I was invited as a keynote speaker to try to convince the audience that universities were among the most important political institutions in society. Maurice Kogan, by the way, was sitting two rows into the crowd. He was the 'owner' of the political perspective as you may recall. In 1987 he participated in the book, *Eight Perspectives on Higher Education*, edited by Burton Clark, with a chapter called the "Political

Perspective". Kogan's political perspective was nowhere close to politics, in my view. I was younger, dressed up in a Finnair t-shirt, because my luggage didn't arrive, as it didn't arrive this time. Now I have Jussi's shirt.

My argument then was that, especially in the context of what was called and is still called 'the knowledge society', universities that had historically been a site of political struggle for nation building and economic development, were so amazingly political and still were always depicted and described as non-political institutions. Instead of arguing it from a political, from a theoretical perspective, let us think a little bit about the presentation we just saw with the particularities and very interesting views about the University of Jyväskylä. This is the opening presentation of any administrator all over the world in their universities, in our universities.

This is a lovely city and a beautiful campus. I used to say that Jyväskylä is how the world used to look before we humans destroyed it. It must be great to be here. Still, we can't forget that our world, if we open the newspapers, is populated by poverty, inequality, violence, migrations and now the crisis of international and national political institutions. The previous presentation shows how many times we say nothing about all this in connection to our universities. We are geared toward knowledge development, and towards having good campus life, and to being very inclusive, and to bringing people from all over the place. We always seem to be so capable, in our institutions, to just shut out the real problems of the world, away from our auditoriums and our classrooms and our meeting places.

I think that's the original flaw, if we could call it that. Like, the original sin or the original accumulation of capital. We can use Marx or the Catholic Church, or the Christian view, whatever. There is something out there in the way in which we have internalised our understanding of universities and higher education, that we always keep the political components away. Only when we are faced with issues of access – in my country, something like 91% of the students that demand access to public higher education institutions are not admitted. They have to go to these horrible 'garage' privates, if they can make it. You know?

Sometimes we have to discuss the issue of financing. We have talked about the public funding becoming less and how governments have been privatising our institutions, but it has been in some ways a marginal debate, or discussion, in higher education. Instead of that, we talk about high tuition-high aid models or we talk about the ways in which businesses and universities can collaborate. The last time I came here, Nokia shared a building with the university

and really developed a lot of exchange. Even financial exchange; they bring a lot of funding for the institution. But we have discussed the uses of knowledge a lot less.

There are three aspects of political contestation, permanent aspects of political contestation. Not all of the projects, research projects that we pull forward are funded. Many times, you go out on a limb if you are trying to address issues of narco violence and higher education institutions in Latin America, or many other places. We have been very successful at criticising the ivory tower while maintaining ourselves within the ivory tower. This has impacted theory, of course.

Suddenly, some crazy wacko from somewhere else comes and says, "Oh, no, no, no. This is an absolutely political institution. Decisions are being made all the time that are essentially political. We are connected to some economic development models, not even projects. Broader models. We are connected to a discourse of economisation of societal life at every level". We do cost benefit analysis for buying novels, no? Should I really benefit from buying this or this other one? We have bought into this new public philosophy that philosophers were talking about in the late 1980s with the coming of Thatcher and Reagan that Brian was mentioning. We have totally bought into the idea that we can think about the world in economic terms and that economics is really the most serious and formal of the social sciences. We can do positive political theory based on economic models, and rational models and all of this stuff.

We have essentially left out of the picture the fact that the universities are defined by power. That they are established with a mission and that this was probably much more in the open in earlier days. It was either the church or the crown putting together universities, at least in my part of the world. They fulfilled two purposes. One was to expand the Catholic religion in the Americas. (By the way, just to clarify, America is not only the *United States*. America is a whole continent.) The second was to build local elites in order to fulfil colonial projects. That was the purpose of the university. What are the purposes of universities now? Are they really geared to the idea of giving people fine campus experiences? Is this the motive why so many states in the world provide funding, maybe less than before, but still a vast amount of funding to institutions?

The core argument here is that universities, like other levels of education, are sites of political struggle, where there are tensions between the idea of expanding access versus the meritocratic idea of selection of students. There are competitions or contests or political battles for what should be studied and debated, and what should be kept away from universities. There are discussions about resources, not only if we get them from the government or not. If we have to increase tuition: that's a big political debate almost everywhere

in the world and, obviously, of political mobilisation. Also, of resource allocation within institutions. Maybe there are some political struggles within the bureaucracy, within the collegial organisations, until maybe a presidential election comes about in Spain or in South America or some of the universities where there actually are elections. (Not in the US universities or most of the Anglo-Saxon world.)

I will try to close this first round. I think that, politics is all about relations of forces, political forces. Forces for what? What are we going to try to build coalitions for? I think, to generate a coalition of forces in order to provide a theoretical understanding of how universities really work, but also in order to build an alternative political agenda, vis-à-vis, the established political agenda that we sometimes cannot even figure out. It has to be discussed in terms of these issues of access, the uses of knowledge and resource allocation. Coalition building and political force building, which defines politics in the end, has to be built with ideas, programmes, and a very strong awareness about constituencies and social groups that might be willing to be connected to the university. In that sense, we have also made a lot of headway in isolating ourselves from the public, from the rest of the world outside of our universities. A lot of people don't give a damn about what we do here. There's kind of a schizophrenic discourse where people value our universities and still do not have any connection to our universities. I think this is, in a very broad sense, the scenario in which we try to build up theory and a political understanding of an institution that, most of the time, appears as non-political. In many, many cases, even government authorities, or university authorities, or even faculty, argue in favour of the university not being a political institution and saying that politics is something pathological within higher education. Thank you.

*Jussi Välimaa:* Thank you very much. Do you (directed to the audience) have any comments or some debate?

*Georg Krücken:* Yes. Many thanks Jussi, and I have a comment on Brian's take on the role of political science in higher education. First of all, I fully agree with what you say with role of disciplines as a necessity to link higher education research to disciplinary research and that maybe political science did not play the role that it should have played. I'm wondering, though, about your broader claim that the discussion about state and market is simply not there. I think maybe you answered this in the states but I think in Europe, it is not the case. In Europe, it's about two decades we have a

very vivid comparative, theoretically oriented, empirical, methodological and fast debate on government. Government mechanisms, obviously includes the state and the market. It has a strong comparative aspect. We will have an entire session on that in the afternoon. I was wondering, obviously it's the state and the market but publicly also the community. Its competition for me is analytically distinct from the market as governance mechanisms.

My question is, rather, because I do that kind of research too. Here I see a huge cleavage between Europe and the US because here with all my kind of US orientation, I don't find a US American counterpart. My question is why is this the case? Why is, and my guess is maybe it has become so institutionalised, so much taken for granted, that maybe the US is no longer discussed. I think in Europe we have a long current vivid discussion on market creation, higher education and so on. Maybe you can reflect on this difference between US American debate and European debate. Thank you.

*Brian Pusser:* It's a really good point. I don't disagree with you. It's also the case, there's a much stronger theory of the state in higher education developed in the US over the last couple of decades. Sheila Slaughter wrote *Academic Capitalism* with Larry Leslie in 1997. It's having its twentieth anniversary now. I think if we go back to the origin of the field, 50 years ago, I don't think it's so different in Europe than it is in the US.

The other point I would make, too, is it is not abundantly clear to me and you all can help me in the audience that the study of governance of higher education globally is the study of the state. It may be in some cases, but it is not uniformly the study of states, theories, power, politics and context. The study of governance globally is leadership, organisations, systems, network theory, you know, some political sociology. We can discuss in some more detail. I'll just say one other quick thing if I can about one of the problems with the origin I think certainly in the US and maybe to a lesser degree in Latin America and in Europe, one reason the politics of higher education has been so under developed in the US is that we can't even account for the political support that higher education had originally. The support for higher education in the political sense, certainly in the US, is beyond the ken of most scholars and people in the institutions. The political dynamics, that special space that the university has occupied historically is politically, it has a political origin and politically

mediated. We have been so, so separate from that political scholarship and contest that we don't even know our own political power is eroding and don't know the origin of those powers.

*Jussi Välimaa:* Any other comments? Questions? Imanol, would you like to comment on that?

*Imanol Ordorika:* Yeah, I'd like to say that I agree with Brian that talking about governance, and nowadays governability, is a way of depriving theoretical understandings of university organisation and ruling of all their political content. It becomes very technical. In the 1970s, we were debating about the state: Was it a pluralistic state? Was it a common interest state? We were debating Poulantzas and Althusser, and the notion of state apparatuses and institutions. Are universities state apparatuses? Are they state institutions? Have we abandoned all the discussion about what is a connection between the university and the state? The emphasis on globalisation brought a trend of thought around the notion that the state was withering. It was disappearing, virtually and none of that has happened.

The state has strengthened itself. It has become leaner, but it has become much more incisive in terms of establishing a lot of policies, economic policies, amongst them. Still, now we don't connect our universities with the state, except for arguments about steering at a distance and stuff like that. No, what is the ideological and political purpose of an institution in a class society? We have even abandoned these concepts. Should we use some different ones in this heavily stratified socio-economic state, in our contemporary societies, so that we don't use 'bad words', because people become uncomfortable when we talk about class?

Higher education specialists are not talking about the state and the university anymore. We're talking about government and the university. We're talking about government *in* the university. When we talk about governability – this has become one of the major topics today – in the allegedly more or less political understanding of higher education institutions, we're talking about government techniques in order to become legitimate, more or less participative and to have stable governments within institutions.

To show how disconnected we are as universities all over the world, from state and international issues, is the fact that last year a lot of things happened

all over the world of which we were almost totally unaware. The vote about Brexit came by and all the polls said that it was not going to pass. Our universities were very comfortable arguing, “No, this is not a major issue. It’s not going to pass”. It passed. Then everybody was saying, and the universities were not deeply committed to preventing Trump from getting the nomination of the Republican Party. It was not going to happen. Then it happened. He was not going to become a president. He became the president. The day after the elections we had the opening meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) Conference in the US, and people were in awe. At nine in the morning, I had to deliver the opening speech. I changed it completely. What had happened here? We never thought this could happen. We were going to talk about public goods, but the world had changed. As it changed so intensively in Colombia: there was a negotiation between a 50-year-old guerrilla group called the FARC<sup>2</sup> and the government. They established a peace agreement, and it was put out on a referendum and everybody thought it was going to pass, and it didn’t pass. The universities were totally out of it. They didn’t play a role in campaigning in favour of it. There was no debate about it in the universities. Totally unaware, totally uncommitted, totally separated from the political process.

In Brazil, the universities were challenged by the government in the midst of a ‘legal’ coup d’état against elected president, Dilma Rousseff. And the incoming government issued a statement saying that public universities were not allowed to debate about the removal of the president. The federal universities had to go to the Supreme Court in order to open a debate that had not happened. It was only when they were told that they couldn’t debate, that the universities started saying, “Oh we have something to say about this. At least we should be able to debate about it”.

Are there more issues? What about Barcelona and the struggle for independence from Spain? What about 30,000 missing people in Mexico? Lots of clandestine burial sites full of missing people. Killings all over the place. What about the expanding conflict between the Arab world and the rest of the world, in spite of a sixteen-year-old occupation in Afghanistan? That is, we should have been debating about the connections between the state and the university at the broad international, the national and at the local level. From the university we should try to clarify an understanding of what the world really looks like. How it is expressed through institutions, and how universities connect to that. That is what universities used to do in the 70s. But we seem to have forgotten all about it.

I’m not saying that we have to recycle the same arguments and theories that we used in the 70s, but we have to develop something of that magnitude in

order to understand where we are sitting now. Otherwise we can discuss a lot about financing, about how much of the private sector comes into the university. I have even criticised Brian, and Sheila Slaughter (although it is very difficult to criticise Sheila because we love her so much) but I think some of the analytical frames we have suggested are still limited in our understanding of the state, because you really don't go very far with path dependency theories to really challenge state theory, but we're not there. At least we have to be clear on what we're lacking in order to fill a void that needs to be filled today.

*Jussi Välimaa:* Hugo?

*Hugo Horta:* My name is Hugo Horta. I might have very naive perspectives on this, but I would like to have your input on two things. To what extent, and I have to say I totally agree with what you're saying, but I wonder to what extent this relates to the training that we're receiving, and that we're giving to our own graduate students? We have policy, we have politics, and I wonder if our training has led us to simply stay in our comfort zone and choose the policy side?

Because we have become very good at analysing what's going on, but we have become really terrible at proposing something else. In my university, what was it, three months ago, we had quite a prominent scholar come to present to us. He did a wonderful keynote, but at the end we were like, okay, so what? What is the alternative to this? The presenter's answer was, "it's not up to me to really propose alternatives". So what are we doing then? Do we already know the answers? We're saying the same thing over and over. Some things are bad, some other things are happening. What is the alternative? This I think relates back to the training that we had, and that we're providing to our students.

A second question on this point is, how does this relate to careers? Because it may be we are doing this because we are in a comfort zone, or because we are already hugely stretched in terms of time constraints and the things our careers demand of us. We do research, we do teaching, we do service. If now we engage in this more political component, what about our family life? What about our personal time? We can't do everything. So either this somehow becomes part of our careers, and our careers change at the universities, or some of the things we have been doing are not going to happen.

I'm from a territory where the government presents the new leadership. The first thing the new leader of the council said was, "You guys at the faculty of Hong Kong are all a bunch of lazy people. Stop writing articles for newspapers

and start doing your job. And your job is not giving opinions that can influence public opinion. It's to do research, it's to do teaching. That is what you're there for". So how do we deal with this? That is what I'd really like to hear from you. Thank you so much.

*Jussi Välimaa:* I think that Don has a question about that. Then I think we will need to go forward here.

*Don Westerheijden:* Thanks. I'd like to give the green light also to our discussants. It's a great way of opening a conference.

Two remarks and a question, if I may. First about higher education and its role in the state. We shouldn't over estimate ourselves. We talk about political debates about education, usually it's about what the Americans call K-12. Primary and secondary education. Universities are not politically interesting. Perhaps because parliamentarians or politicians don't think that you can get many votes there. Which is strange, because students are the ones who can start voting, and primary and secondary school children can't.

At the same time, higher education has become very much instrumentalised in the governmental debates. The ivory tower could be allowed to exist in the times when higher education was an elite thing, and it was really small enough to benefit from benign neglect. Nowadays it's instrumentalised for, let's say workforce planning, good old communism in effect gaining all over the world, even though we call it neoliberalism. What do you think about that? This type of paradoxical development?

And then your reaction to what Imanol was saying about our role as universities as a critical element in the society. Is that a role for a university as a whole? Should we ask our presidents, our rectors to do this or is this an individual task? As Hugo was just saying, I mean what are we doing with our time? How are we teaching our own students? What are we doing with our own pieces for the newspapers? Which we're not allowed to write anymore, at least not there in Hong Kong. So is it individual role of the intellectual or is it really an institutional role?

*Jussi Välimaa:* Excellent questions. Could you give short comments?

*Imanol Ordorika:* Yeah.

*Brian Pusser:* You're looking at him when you say that, right?

*Imanol Ordorika:* I've never made a short comment in my life.

*Brian Pusser:* Just so we're clear. Just so we're clear on that. Let me make a very short reply to Hugo, and then Imanol maybe can tie some of this in. So, I'm very sympathetic to what you have laid out. I think it mirrors the experience that many of us have in universities around the world.

With regard to graduate training and so forth, you can't train people with tools that you don't use yourself. And I think one of the things we probably should've said at the outset also is, we're doing what we always do here. Which we're talking about higher education like it's one thing, and we're talking about the faculty like it's one thing. Frankly, there is a lot of action research, a lot of research translating into practice. I would say right now much more effectively, if you will, politically on the right than on the left.

So Imanol and I were at Stanford together. There's a very powerful Hoover Institution. I'm close to Washington DC today. You have things like Brookings, and Cato and American Enterprise Institute and they work closely with faculty. They have people moving in and out of academe, and into the policy arena, and many of the things we have talked about, the rise of neoliberalism, the shrinking of the state. Some were very powerfully driven by academics and academic ideas. There's funding there for that and so forth. So people are getting it done, and there's very, very good critical and action research coming from different perspectives, different models. Political action particularly driven by students. Again, a lot of the energy there is coming from there.

Just quickly on Don's point. The universities are moving much more to the centre, I think, of some of these political debates now. I think the competition globally around economic development, tech transfer innovation and so forth. You're absolutely right, traditionally the political battle has been about elementary and secondary, certainly in the US, but I think clearly the attention to the university as a site of high value-added education is pushing the political debate further and further to even professional education, higher education and so forth.

*Imanol Ordorika:* Well, I think that we have historical evidence in the 1960s of how universities changed the world. There can be no argument against the idea that students from within the universities, but not only the students, the universities themselves challenged the state of things and they brought, or they

strengthened, an alternative culture. And they strengthened ideas about gender equality, and about the environment, and about democracy and about the war in Vietnam or Algeria. So the universities have been there before.

I'm not saying that we have to be there in the same fashion, and I'm not saying that this is a matter of volunteerism, Hugo. But this is where agency comes about, where we can try to bring something onto the table that may be different.

But I am also sensing...And this was going to be my closing argument. I don't know if I should put it in there now.

*Brian Pusser:* You could do it twice.

*Imanol Ordorika:* We are living in the context of the collapse of political institutions in many countries in the world, as has been seen by some of the examples that I put forward. I could put many more of them forward. This collapse of political institutions is putting universities in very uncomfortable positions.

Trump is putting the universities in the US in a very uncomfortable situation. So, either you can have university administrations trying to float around and not commit in any direction, or we can start pushing for stronger political stances. When the white supremacists come to campus, you have to position the university in one direction or another, and it's starting to happen. I just think that we – I'm going to talk more about it if there's a chance – that we should be ready for that and thinking about that in order to make it happen from within. Not wait until we're in a very, very anguished and difficult situation.

*Jussi Välimaa:* Pedro, did you have a comment?

*Pedro Teixeira:* Good morning. Thank you so much for the very stimulating start of our conference. Just a few quick comments, or questions, or provocations! The first one refers to the fact that I think, at a certain point, we were starting to have what I thought was very much a macro discussion of the political dimension of universities. However, I appreciated very much some of the subsequent comments, because they focused our attention more into the micro political dimension of

universities. This appreciation may be biased because of the fact in recent years I have had institutional responsibilities and am more sensitive to them.

One of the first lessons that I draw from that experience was how much of the personal issues explains institutional decisions. (Other people here that have that kind of responsibility may also share this view.) The moment you start questioning why were things organised this way you realise that the reasons refer to difficulties between some persons and the degree of power and institutional influence of some of them.

In a more sophisticated way, Imanol, you raised the issue about competition and power battles inside institutions. Being an economist, I tend to regard a lot of what is an institution as a space for competition for resources between individuals, between groups, between disciplines. I think that this has been to a large extent disregarded by our research. I think we tend to focus very much in terms of the grand discussion about the political dimension of universities, but much less about the internal politics in universities.

This competitive battle within universities has in some ways a more noble dimension about different views of what an institution is about, but some fewer noble ones. I think that those battles also explain a lot of institutional and organisational dynamics.

Just as an example. We talk very much about the public mission of universities, but we talk far less about the public mission of individual academics. I think very often what we have is a *ex post* reconstruction of what we've done *vis-à-vis* certain principles, or certain missions where we try to make some cogent argument about what people have been doing. Though, in fact, it's actually the sum of largely individual or group strategies.

The other aspect that I think would be interesting to discuss is that we focus quite often in terms of system-level policies, for example, regarding the impact of funding changes, quality assessment, internationalisation and so on. However, we don't discuss so much how uneven the impact of these changes can be inside institutions. As you said in terms of the broader social level, internationalisation, globalisation may be an opportunity for some people, but it's certainly a challenge for others. This is also the case within universities. You can have age gaps where for some people it's too late to catch up with some of those trends. You can have disciplinary differences as well, but the same could be applied to research and research assessment, to the way quality assessment is perceived, implemented, so on and so forth.

Regarding the issue in terms of careers. A lot of the issues that we've been having in higher education in recent years, tend to promote what Hugo was

highlighting, that is, safe careers, effective careers. I don't think much of that relates to a lot of what we've been discussing in terms of the mission of university. It tends to place an enormous stress in terms of individual returns, and not so much in terms of the social returns of academics' contributions. I think that also links to the complacency that Imanol was alluding to.

*Brian Pusser:* So let me just say something quickly. That's a wonderful comment, but to the competition for resources and the mission of the university, those are driven by external forces. The competition for resources, at least in elite research universities, is state funding. In the US the National Institutes for Health, National Science Foundation and foundations are driving the research agenda in universities. Not the other way around.

So that competition for resources that we're seeing is directly linked to the political legitimacy of various forms of research and funding. To your point, I don't disagree at all that the mission is increasingly, that people are looking for safe careers, but that's because foundations and national funders are pushing them in safe directions, and that's where the resources come from. And this is only going to accelerate. This is going to get worse before it gets better.

So I think all the instincts are right, but essentially this is always, I think, an intermingling of external political pressures, internal alignment structures and political pressures. It's not one or the other, but certainly in the US, increasingly the institutional life is driven by external funding. Universities generate very little funding. There isn't any funding in the university, other than philanthropy, we can argue that, in a public university in the US that doesn't come from some kind of external mandate or charter for the rate of tuition, or the sources of research funding. That is essentially inherently a political process.

*Jussi Välimaa:* Amy, did you have a comment?

*Amy Metcalfe:* I'm Amy Metcalfe from the University of British Columbia. Friends, I do not think you are pushing yourself far enough. I think you aren't being critical. I think you're being criticalist. You're being like critical, meta-critical. I know both of you have a lot more in you.

One of the things that Imanol very casually, quietly slipped in there was the concept of colonialism, and the history of our institutions, but as historical

object and not as a conditional presence that we are continuously being colonial in our activities, and in many ways that is a political act. It's a political act of a particular type. We may not see it within a state framework. It's a super-national framework of imperialism, new imperialisms. So, I think we can continue to speak about that as a politics.

Imanol, also when speaking about the conditions of 1968, students were protesting the university itself for those very same histories and complicities. So, it's not so much to say that in the 60s the institutions themselves were critical. It's that people within in the institutions, not all of them, some of them, were calling into question and calling those institutions to host a different set of conversations with different bodies and different peoples with different outcomes.

Brian, in working with you on the book *Critical Approaches to the Study of Higher Education*, I don't know if you remember this but, you asked me do you really want to use a particular word in my chapter? And that word was "genocide". I said, "Yes. We need to speak these words". Your concern was very collegial, and trying to protect me as a researcher from people's perception of what I'm saying about my use of that word, but we need to do that. We need to use these words. We need to say we are supporting, in this field to many extents, a colonial, imperialist, genocidal, organisational and institutional space. So please continue.

*Brian Pusser:* Thank you.

*Imanol Ordorika:* Well, let me tackle several of the things that have been said. I'll start with you, Amy. I do think there's a new colonialism, and it's the colonialism of a dominant university model. The notion of the elite research university model from the US is a new colonial project that, amongst others, is imposed upon all of our universities. We all have to be measured with a sort of Harvard-ometer. That is a ranking, of any type, that says how much a university is fulfilling the role of highly-ranked (RU-1) private research university in the US. That's a new colonial project and we have adopted it fully, and we adopt it, for example, in our own research journals. We adopt it everywhere in the ways in which we are performing our individual careers everywhere, and we're not challenging that at all.

We're not even arguing how our university might want to develop – not even if they can fulfil that role or not, if we want them to do that or should they focus

on a totally different project. I don't think that the 60s were about essentially challenging the institutions. It was the Vietnam War, it was civil rights in the US, it was against the authoritarian political regime in Mexico, and Czechoslovakia and Hungary. It was against the dictatorship in Spain. It was maybe in a few places, or some of the issues were local, maybe free speech, but what about the loyalty oath that the faculty stopped adopting in the US in the 1960s? And challenging McCarthyism as a whole.

Faculty have done that, and they didn't stop publishing, or writing sociology or biochemistry papers. They came out in the open and challenged a state of things that was unacceptable at the time. If we look elsewhere, we can see the streets in Buenos Aires full of hard science researchers, and teachers and faculty in the streets challenging the government, because there is no funding for science. The people are out there, and at the same time they are demanding that marijuana be legalised. This is a really strange coalition, and it makes sense. These are people that are well informed.

So, I do think that the times they are changing, I would say and not necessarily in our favour. Somebody mentioned, I think it was Jussi, that once there are alternative facts, and that the most powerful government on earth can argue that everything that we do in our institutions is a biased fact that they can challenge just by political discourse. We have been thoroughly challenged, and the politically correct discourse that stemmed essentially from universities and university thinkers and intellectuals within universities, like gender equality, and anti-racism, and human and civil rights, and stuff like that, has been challenged from the topmost level of power.

It's happening in other countries too. Well, the Le Pen party in France came relatively close to winning the national election. So, that's a very strong racist political discourse. Are we going to say anything about that? Do we have anything to do? That's the way in which colonialism is expressed in each country. There is no colonial layer that is exactly the same everywhere. In South Africa students were bringing down the last Rhodes statues within campuses last year, or the year before that. University authorities were not sure how to react. In some places they were in favour of the students, in others they were like, "What do we do now?" The ANC,<sup>3</sup> well they had disappointed everybody around, so we didn't know exactly what the position was.

Basically, we are seeing a lot of local and international political processes that are putting the universities in the cross hairs, really. It's gone way beyond funding. It's challenging the nature of higher education itself. In the vast majority of the world, it's not like this nice campus in Finland. When Jussi went to Puerto Rico a few years ago and put forward the problems of higher education in Finland, everybody from Latin America said, "We want Finland's problems. Can we have them here?"

Well, most of the students never get to higher education in Latin America, and that exclusion is increasing. Not the reverse. We are on the verge of big political and social outbreaks – and I'm doing a little bit of what may be looking at the crystal ball or something. I do think that we are facing strong political battles in society, and that universities are necessarily in the centre of that. Independent of our careers and our willingness to be a participant of that, but we, in some ways, those who became the strongest part or who promoted the movements in other times, because it was not only the 60s, where the people that were prepared for that were discussing the issues that had to be brought to the front, and were able to generate the alternative ideas that we had to put forward.

Yes. Well, very simple alternative ideas like universal enrolments and others like that can be brought to the fore, but we are still lacking clarity and commitment in that direction. I agree with you, Pedro.

*Jussi Välimaa:* I think I want to give a Brian a chance this time.

*Imanol Ordorika:* He spoke in all of them.

*Brian Pusser:* There's a new question?

*Jussi:* I'm exercising power now.

*Brian Pusser:* Good.

*Jussi Välimaa:* I think what we have been discussing so far is somehow related to the role of higher education in civil society. Also to the ways, the social role of higher education in societies and in states. I would like to change the focus to what actually Imanol was speaking to in his last note. On the inequalities, and inequalities of and around higher education. My question to you would be, from the political and theoretical perspective, is higher education part of the problem of social and economic inequality in national and global context, or the solution for reducing inequality? Brian?

*Brian Pusser:* In the time-honoured tradition, I would say both. And I say both *because* this is really where we confront that problem of talking about higher education in monolithic terms. This is very contextual, depending on whether we're talking about an emerging higher education system, or we're

talking about a very old and established system, or an old system with a few very powerful institutions, like Chile. The degree to which people are able to access higher education and the degree to which higher education in different contexts is linked to reducing inequality is very different in different places. So let me just talk a little bit conceptually by using the US as an example, and clearly I would say the US is not doing nearly enough to reduce inequality, and this is happening on two levels. It's happening very distinctly in the ways in which income distributions track levels of educational success. I think also it's happening in the ways in which we're training people in higher education to think about inequality and to go back out into the broader society to address, in the civil society and in other ways, the problem of inequality.

As many people know, the higher education system in the US is probably the best funded system overall in the world, very powerful and diverse system of higher education, but let's look a little bit at what's happening with inequality in the US and with higher education. So between 1975 and 2010, if you think about that, that's some 35 years, maybe you can think of that almost as two generations, family income in the US increased by an average of about 40% over those 35 years and, in that same period, family income for the poorest American families and children actually declined, over a 35-year period the average income of those families declined. Children who were in the top five percent of families in terms of income saw their family's income double over the same 35 years from 1975 to 2010. A child in the US born to parents in the lowest income quintile has about a 43% of chance of becoming an adult with income in the lowest income quintile. If you're born in the lowest income quintile in the US, there's a significant likelihood that you're going to stay in that lowest income quintile throughout your life. The chances of you starting in the lowest income quintile in the US and reaching the highest income quintile over your lifetime are very low.

This is not social mobility in the sense that we like to talk about it and think about it, but a child born into a family in the highest quintile has about a 40% chance, has about double the chance that you would predict of staying in that highest quintile. So if you're born in the highest income quintile in the US your chances of landing in the bottom quintile over your lifetime are somewhere around six or seven percent, it's not likely to happen. It's a highly stratified

system, which is not entirely due to higher education, of course, but higher education is a big part of that story.

Let's just take a minute and think about graduation rates. If we think about college graduation rates for people who were born between 1961 and 1964, and then compare them to people born between 1979 and 1982, so you have two different cohorts, again roughly two generations, the graduation rate for those in the lowest income quintile increased four percent from one generation to the next. So it hardly changed at all. For those born in the highest income quintile the graduation rate increased by 20%. So over those 20 years we did a much better job of graduating wealthy people than of increasing the graduation rates of people who were in that lowest income quintile. But when children from the lowest income quintiles or young people from the lowest income groups in the US do get college degrees they tend to advance pretty quickly in the income quintiles.<sup>4</sup> So there's an effect in higher education but we haven't done a very good job of getting people access and success in college. The degree to which people graduate and complete higher education is distinctly related to income and wealth, to a rather astonishing degree. Around the world, high income inequality is associated with low social mobility and the US, Brazil, Chile, Peru, they're places with low social mobility. Denmark, Finland, Canada, they have low income inequality and they have higher social mobility.

So, although institutions of higher education don't fully control the preparation of people who try to access higher education, we could do a lot more than we're doing now, I think, to prepare people for college education and moving into the higher ranks of the society, professions and income. This is really shaped by what happens within the institutions around curriculum, around mentoring, around civic engagement, around a sense of collective action, but not enough apparently in higher education or in our education system to change the approach to inequality in the US. We're not teaching people to address the problem and make changes through the civil society or the political system, and the system itself in place is credentialing and educating people in ways that are increasing inequality, moving the best prepared and best educated away from the least prepared and least educated, and it's actually accelerating as we speak.

We should talk more about what it would look like around the globe if we had a more strongly enforced right to a good education, what it would mean if there was something like a right to a good education that could be enforced globally. There's no such right in the US, incidentally. You don't have a right to a higher education, and I think that it gets into a conversation we might have a little bit later about the public interest or the public good, but fundamentally,

without some kind of rights-based claim, this is going to require action in the civil society and political society that right now just isn't there. So, as we speak, in the US the higher education system is part of a system that is increasing inequality; it's not reducing inequality.

*Imanol Ordorika:* Well, I agree that it is both, but I would approach it differently. I don't disagree with Brian. I would approach it from a different perspective. It has been argued strongly from different perspectives – Bourdieu, and Althusser – that education at every level is always reproducing the stratified nature of society. There, Don, is where I don't necessarily agree with you that universities are uninteresting to the political systems. Probably not about numbers, but they are very strongly linked to the meritocracy of explaining social stratification in places where there is more or less broad higher education enrolment.

I'd say that against the deterministic view that Bourdieu put forward at one point there's the idea that precisely that is one of the issues for political contestation, and it goes in one, in a very basic direction, once again, about access. The US can be the most highly funded system in the world but it still only enrolls 40% of the age group. Many countries are above that, even in Latin America (not Mexico by the way). That doesn't necessarily mean that there's equality in access immediately, and the notion that was put forward by the California Master Plan by Kerr in the 70s and later by Burton Clark in this diversification of institutions agenda all over the world that was – I don't know, maybe Burton Clark just rationalised what the World Bank and other international agencies were pushing or driving for – this stratification between universities and vocational institutions and other types of higher education, where it's obvious that students do not have access to the same levels of income and socio-economic status if you come from one institution or the other.

So, basically what Simon Marginson's work on universalisation – it's interesting that we call universal enrolment systems those that are more or less around 60% of enrolment – would that work for a basic elementary education if we said, "Oh we have a universal system, we only enrol 60%?" Of course it doesn't work and it's only a hundred years ago that universal enrolment for elementary education was put forward. I do think that we have to move towards an agenda of true universal enrolment in a much more homogenous setting of institutions in different countries. Obviously that is a big, big, big political battle and it comes surrounded with a lot of issues of how the contemporary

society is built and how inequality is explained, but because, well, we all know this discourse about how our performance in the educational system essentially explains how well we're doing in society, and that gives a lot of leverage and legitimacy to social systems. It has been doing it for ages.

So, I do think that instead of saying that universities are basically driving inequality, I'd say that it depends on the state of the political battles at the time. In moments in which social groups in society are capable of expanding enrolments and access to more homogenous institutions in terms of quality and opportunity, then universities can perform a role to overcome or to diminish inequality. As we are right now, in the state that universities in most of the world are in right now, essentially we are not only reproducing, but increasing inequality everywhere. Just that would be my response to your question, Jussi.

*Jussi Välimaa:* Yes, any comments, questions?

*Tiffany Viggiano:* Hello, my name is Tiffany Viggiano, I'm here from the University of California at Riverside, and I am here on a Fulbright Finland grant so I'm interested in studying global equity in Finland and so I'm really interested in this conversation because also to Amy's point I think that it's just not critical enough, because I don't think that you can talk about global equity without talking about international education and the way that many systems of higher education across the world are contributing to global inequity. So I'm interested to hear your thoughts on that.

*Imanol Ordorika:* Well, I probably haven't come across clearly enough. I'm not talking about global equality. I'm talking about equality, trying to address it from an international perspective, bringing cases from different places in the world. There is global inequality, there is inequality between countries and within countries and between regions and all of that we all know, but I'm trying to bring some cases forward, just to show how inequality in education in higher education is expressed in different ways.

For example in the US, you have this 40% coverage where more or less 60% of enrolment is in community colleges and special-focus institutions, not in the RU-1 and the master's degree-granting institutions and all of that, that's one type of inequality. When you have like eight million young people, between

18 and 24 years old, that have no education at all and no jobs, that's a different type of inequality, so there's no unique global form of inequality, at least in my view. We can say that globally there is inequality, but it is expressed in very different ways and in the ways in which they have developed in our countries, and we need to have this broad international understanding but we also have to be grounded in the realities of our systems everywhere, our countries and even our regions, and the even the types of institutions within our countries because sometimes, as we were saying before, we are a very privileged crowd.

We come from the research universities from everywhere, but most of the faculty in the world don't even come to conferences like this. They live in a different world and, talk about the students, that's a different type of setting and dialogue.

*Brian Pusser:* To your point, which I think is a really, really important one. As I'm sitting here, if you were to think about the ebb and flow of this conversation, at times we argue that we're powerless, increasingly powerless, and other times we're powerful and I think we have to take a stand on that and I think that universities are enormously powerful because they're institutions of the state. And to Amy's point, they reflect the missions and values of the state and we're not very comfortable with that. We simply don't want to confront the idea that, as institutions of states that are attempting to dominate others, universities are trying to impose a kind of hegemony globally, this is a very old story. Universities play a very powerful role in that. They're centres of instantiating and reinforcing norms through scholarship and through the construction of discourse, through alliances with the political sector. That doesn't mean at the same time that they can't be forces for various kinds of protest, contests, liberation. They're conflicted, they're contested in their own right, they're enormously complicated institutions. But I think it's important. There's enough romanticising of them to go around, and it's really important for us to call ourselves out. I don't think we can argue for state theory and that political institutions of the state play an instrumentally important role, and then assume that somehow universities are not going to incorporate and reflect some of the primary missions of the state that are not aligned with social justice, that are not the kinds of things that we might

advocate in some other setting or some other context, that's what we are.

*Jussi Välimaa:* Well, part of the reasons why I wanted to focus on inequality is that one of the promises of higher education when the massification of higher education started was the promise or assumption that when there were more students in the higher education there will be more equality. So, more equality because of the increasing number of students. Simon Marginson has edited, with Brendan Cantwell and Anna Smolentsova, a book on high-participation systems where they argue, and we have a chapter in there, that what has happened is really that, instead of increasing equality, inequality has maintained. There's been a strong stratification of the systems, the stratification of the higher education institutions, where the elite go to the best universities and we rest go to those less good higher education institutions. The only exception to this rule seems to be Nordic institutions. My point is mainly, state integration really matters. But what kind of state integration, do you have an opinion about that?

*Imanol Ordorika:* What kind of state integration?

*Jussi Välimaa:* Yeah.

*Imanol Ordorika:* Oh, I think that the state in itself, and there we address state theory itself and it's a site of political contestation. This is an old debate: Is the state instrumental to capitalist accumulation? Is the state relatively autonomous? Is a state a site of contestation? Gramsci wrote a lot about this and also Poulantzas in his later work, about the fact that there are certain state institutions within which contestation is taking place.

One of them is a political system. But what we're seeing is that many political systems are in crisis. Bobbio has said you can see that you have trouble in a political system when there is not much difference between the political parties that you're voting for. Yeah, it's not the same to vote for Hillary or for Trump, but in terms of state project itself and economic development, it's not

such a big, different story. Now probably that's the most extreme case in all of the countries, or in many of the countries, but what is the role of higher education in that condition? Are we only reproducing? I don't think so, I think that we have been in a long stage of reproduction with this idea that the universities are connected to the knowledge economy and that we are producers of knowledge to be exchanged in the market.

And one of the products of universities are graduates of higher education, it's for the job market. We have been doing that historically. That has been the role of institutions. But there's always, sometimes it's a weak battle, other times it's a stronger confrontation, to establish at least some equilibrium between the creation of goods to be exchanged in the market and the creation of other types of knowledge and understandings of society, other types of value related to higher education and to expand it to a broader set of the population.

So, I'd say that the confrontations that take place inside and around higher education are part of confrontations that are taking place in terms of trying to redirect nation-states. It's very difficult to think about it after 30 or 35 years of neoliberalism, where nothing seems to move, and everything seems to be set in stone, and all the discourse of possible transformations and changes in society has been in some ways overwhelmed by the notions that the market and the economy define everything in society. Now, that is part of the intellectual challenges of universities to try to develop new ways of thinking about transformations in a broader arena that goes outside of the university itself. But I do think that this is happening, and it's happening because we have all of these demographic changes, migrations that are shifting the political balance everywhere.

We have all of these human rights crises everywhere, we have a very unstable international political condition that allows for at least starting to think that things can be different in a broader sense than some of the battles that we have taken in the last years, where we are trying to establish small equality projects, community connections between universities and small local businesses or local communities and stuff like that, which was like kind of a small resistance space that we have taken. We need to be thinking in a much broader scope in order to make these challenges to the state in general and to its institutions and in particular to higher education.

*Brian Pusser:* So, one quick comment on that. If we're going to talk about higher education as a product of contest between the state, the civil society, actors who are marginalised by both the state and the civil society, we're going to have to do more on inequality in the civil society. So the differences in wealth

are something we talk about all the time and I talked about it today. But there are also differences in political access, in access to discourse, gender inequalities, historical racism, any number of historical and contemporary structures and standpoints in the civil society that are in turn driving the contest over higher education. Or at least attempting to drive the contest, the relationship between inequalities in the civil society and inequalities that are driven by state policy are very similar to conversations about inequality in higher education and the role of higher education institutions. To the point about, your point about Scandinavia, Nordic states I would say that the attitude in the civil society towards collective action, towards shared institutions and responsibilities is different than in other contexts. It's reflected in all the institutions of these societies and it's reflected in the state role, but no one of these is driving that or reflecting the other. Again, it gets back to this idea that this is a contest, so to argue for a more robust and emancipatory higher education system probably argues the same has to happen in the civil society and in another debate a few years from now we could have the same structure where we'd be talking about the civil society and higher education and ask the same questions and march through where we stand and where we sit with regard to that.

*Imanol Ordorika:* Just a very brief comment because we don't need to think that *everything* is moving backwards or in the wrong direction, just look at female enrolments almost everywhere in the world. There are some regions that are really in very difficult conditions, but in a lot of countries, female enrolments are above male enrolments now. This is a change that has happened in 20 years. Now, feminist discourse has two explanations for this. One is that higher education has become uninteresting for males and they are withering or they're moving away from higher education. I don't think there is evidence to support that argument. I would think that one of the groups, or one of the social movements that almost all over the world has been pushing more strongly to attain certain levels of equality, especially in education,

has been women's movements. And there have been very important results and these are relevant contests. These are some of the things that have been gained and that have happened because there has been social action around it, and there are numbers to show it which is something in favour, and that also shows that things can be done when there is social action and organisation.

*Jussi Välimaa:* Thank you very much. I think we are reaching the end of our session. We have been discussing about higher education and the politics in higher education, looking at higher education from a micro and a macro perspective, about academic careers, the role of higher education in society, so actually my question to you would be, do you think that academics should be politically active? Just to make it more serious, I'd like to ask all of you who think that academics should be politically active to raise their hands. Thank you very much. This is a very personal but also academic question, where we commit these tools to our careers, to our society, to our higher education institutions. I don't think that there are right or wrong answers, but I think that all of us need to have a personal relationship to the question.

So I think my colleagues, my friends, would have many more things to say, but I'm very sorry, we have to stop now.

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## Notes

- 1 Works by scholars mentioned in this conversation can be found in the References at the end of the chapter.
- 2 Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People’s Army (Spanish: Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – Ejército del Pueblo).
- 3 African National Congress.
- 4 For statistics and examples of research and analyses of inequality and social mobility in higher education that informed this conversation, see the work of Professor Raj Chetty, Harvard University, Professor Emanuel Saez, UC Berkeley, cited in the References.

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