

The Mass Production of the Lumpen Intelligentsia: An Economic Model of the “Woke” Movement in U.S. Higher Education

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Abstract

This study relates the infiltration of cultural Marxism into American colleges to the creation and growth of soft graduate programs associated with the ideologies that form the modern generation or wave of the critical theory movement, referred to here as the “woke” movement. The formal economic model in this study asserts that the growth of these soft, politically correct graduate programs leads to increasing university costs and tuition, growing bureaucratic offices, and greater faculty pay and employment. The spiral in costs and tuition can only be restrained through an intertemporal optimization process.

Keywords

Economics of Higher Education, Critical Theory, Intersectionality, Economic Theory, Political Correctness, Woke Ideology, Soft Graduate Programs

1. Introduction and Background

Beginning in 2017 and continuing through 2018, three scholars produced 20 academic papers using pseudo-scientific jargon to argue for ridiculous conclusions with the aim of publishing them in high-profile journals in the fields of gender studies, queer studies, fat studies and other so-called grievance studies (Mounk, 2018). By the latter part of 2018, seven of the articles had been accepted for publication in peer-reviewed journals, while another seven remained in various stages of the peer-review process. Only six had been rejected (Mounk, 2018)¹. The

¹A *Wikipedia* entry indicates that the published papers appeared in *Gender, Place & Culture*, *Fat Studies*, *Sexuality & Culture* and *Sex Roles*. By 2018, other papers were forthcoming in *Hypatia*, *Journal of Poetry Theory* and *Affilia*. Additionally, *Porn Studies*, *Hypatia*, *Feminist Theory* and *Women's Studies International Forum* had offered invitations to revise and resubmit other articles.

over-arching goal of these scholars was to demonstrate the extent to which modern critical theory has infiltrated American higher education, and, as a consequence, how tertiary education in America contributes much less to the critical thinking skills of individual students than it had in past generations. Rather, higher education in America is now more focused on forming a growing army of college-educated unskilled workers and political activists, a mob of what [Will \(2020\)](#) refers to as the lumpen intelligentsia². These workers and activists also embody what Ortega y Gasset coined, in *The Revolt of the Masses* ([Ortega y Gasset, 1957](#)), the “mass man”, who he characterized by two fundamental traits,

“The free expansion of his vital desires, and therefore, of his personality; and his radical ingratitude towards all that has made possible the ease of his existence” ([Ortega y Gasset, 1957: p. 58](#)).

A couple of examples may illustrate the reach and damage of the “woke” movement³. [Brown \(2021\)](#) reports that an increasing number of English literature teachers are refusing to include the literary works of William Shakespeare⁴. In defending their position, they accuse Shakespeare’s classic works of promoting misogyny, racism, homophobia, classism, anti-Semitism and misogynoir. Many teachers who are continuing to include Shakespeare in their course syllabi are reframing his works through a modern lens ([Brown, 2021](#)). [Soave \(2020\)](#) cites a report in the *The Yale Daily News* informing readers that Yale University’s art department has decided to eliminate a popular introductory art course over concerns of overwhelming whiteness, maleness, and straightness of the artists comprising the Western canon. During the spring semester of 2020, the last semester in which the course was offered, the syllabus had shifted to issues concerning gender, race, class, the entanglement of art with Western capitalism, and climate change ([Soave, 2020](#))⁵.

Critical theory aims to provide an enlightenment about social and economic life that is emancipatory in that individuals are made to recognize the oppression

²This phenomenon was recognized previously by [Diamond \(1993\)](#) and [Shea \(1995\)](#), who noted that multiculturalists, poststructuralists, feminists, and lesbian and gay scholars sought to overthrow the established canon, devalue the study of Western civilization, and politicize academia. Modern-day social commentators argue that this view is evident in the summer 2020 demonstrations led by Antifa, Black Lives Matter and others that resulted in billions of dollars in property damage in various U.S. cities, including the toppling of statues of Junipero Serra ([Rodriguez & Collins, 2020](#)), Abraham Lincoln ([Mann, 2020](#)) and Winston Churchill ([BBC News, 2020](#)), among others. In another example from the summer of 2020, Princeton University decided to remove former U.S. President Woodrow Wilson’s name from its public policy school ([Pietsch, 2020](#)).

³Merriam-Webster.com defines “woke” or “wokeness” as an awareness of and an active attention toward important societal facts and issues, especially issues of racial and social justice. Secondarily, it defines the term as politically liberal or progressive, as in matters of racial and social justice, especially in a way that is considered unreasonable or extreme. Similarly, Dictionary.com defines the term as having or marked by an active awareness of systemic injustices and prejudices, especially those involving the treatment of ethnic, racial, or sexual minorities. The Center for Renewing American defines the term as an ideology that believes American society is fundamentally oppressive on the basis of race and identity.

⁴The opening line of [Brown’s \(2021\)](#) report is, “William Shakespeare, thou hast been getting cancelled.”

⁵It is because of anecdotes similar to these that [Daniels \(2022\)](#) reports on Pew research indicating that the share of individuals who viewed universities positively fell by 11 points, from 61 percent to 50 percent, between 2010 and 2019, and that [Gordon & Robillard \(2022\)](#) advise high school graduates to forgo a college education. [Daniels \(2022\)](#) reports, for example, that universities are viewed by many as subverting free expression and the unfettered search for truth. The most recent survey by the Heterodox Academy, which conducts an annual survey of campus climates, finds that the percentage of students who believe the climate on their campus prevents people from saying things they believe increased from 54.7 percent in 2019 to 63.5 percent in 2021 ([Daniels, 2022](#)).

they are suffering as oppression and are thereby partly freed from it⁶. Critical theory, which has its roots in Marx (1867), is often described in its modern form as cultural Marxism, and is generally associated with the Frankfurt School, György Lukács and Antonio Gramsci (Held, 1980; Finlayson, 2005; Kolakowski, 2005; Haralambos & Holborn, 2013; Adamson, 2014; Miller, 2020, 2022). It includes, but is not limited to, critical race theory (Kendi, 2019; DiAngelo, 2020; Hannah-Jones, 2021), critical gender theory (Kogan, 1997; Beasley, 2005), and intersectionality (Collins & Bilge, 2020), among others⁷.

This study relates the diffusion of critical theory into American colleges to the creation and growth of soft graduate programs associated with the ideologies that form the modern generation or wave of the critical theory movement (e.g., Suhr and Johnson, 2003)⁸. These relatively new soft graduate programs concentrate mainly in the areas of culture (Carey, 1992), diversity (Schultz, 1993), ethnicity (Hu-DeHart, 1993), gender (Chuang, Krishna, & Daniels, 1995) and sexuality (Brickell, 2004)⁹. These soft graduate programs have expanded to include black studies, Chicano studies, feminist studies, gender studies, sexuality studies, women's studies and queer studies, to name a few. Upon receipt of freshly-minted doctorate degrees, students from these areas seek high-paying jobs. However, given the typically anti-market nature of their degrees, they are often confined to specific niche areas of employment, such as in the public sector, academe and non-governmental organizations (NGO) associated with left-wing political entities.

The relatively small size of these soft academic programs means that PhD graduates find employment as college and university faculty only if these programs grow and multiply, as they have over the past several decades. Their expansion generally begins as a new specialization in an established area of inquiry, such as communications, English, sociology and philosophy¹⁰. After the specialized area has grown in size it gains independence as a new area of academic inquiry. Those graduates who do not secure a faculty appointment, but wish to remain in academe, often find employment in university administration,

⁶This definition of critical theory comes from Professor Daniel Koltonski of Amherst College (<https://www.amherst.edu/academiclife/departments/courses/1314S/PHIL/PHIL-366-1314S#:~:text=Description,task%20of%20ending%20that%20oppression>). See also Felluga (2015).

⁷Intersectionality investigates how intersecting power relations influence social relations across diverse societies as well as individual experiences in everyday life. As an analytic tool, it views categories of race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, ability, ethnicity and age as interrelated and mutually shaping one another (Collins & Bilge, 2020: p. 2).

⁸Dalrymple (2005) equates political correctness to communist propaganda (Glazov, 2005). Barker (1994: p. 271) observes that “[o]ne usage of the term ‘politically correct’ denotes public conformity to ‘left’ political views.” On the other hand, Lauter (1995) argues that charges of political correctness are a smoke screen designed to discredit higher education.

⁹The first of these relates to the “culture wars” that dominate much of the political party divisions in American politics.

¹⁰Hermanson (2017) offers an interesting appraisal of empirical research in philosophy, contending that fashionable views in the profession concerning implicit bias and stereotype threat, two important pillars of the critical theory that underlie soft graduate programs, are only weakly supported, that philosophers often fail to report the empirical work responsibly, and that the standards for evidence are set very low so long as you take a certain viewpoint.

particularly in the newly-burgeoning areas of diversity, equity, inclusion and sustainability. As the number of faculty jobs is limited, many of these graduates become higher education administrators. It has been recognized that growth in the number of these soft program graduates—the lumpen intelligentsia—occurs with the expansion of colleges and universities, often through open admissions, and that this growth generates a larger number of university administrators relative to university faculty (Will, 2020).

In this paper we show that the growth of these soft, politically correct graduate programs leads to increasing university costs and tuition, growing bureaucratic offices and expansion of these same graduate programs, and greater faculty pay and employment¹¹. The spiral in costs and tuition can only be restrained and controlled through an intertemporal optimization process. That is, the university must realize that costs and tuition fees are functions of time and the number of graduate students enrolled in these soft programs. The next section of this study formalizes the problem of the mass production of lumpen intelligentsia. Lastly, discussion and concluding remarks appear in the final section.

2. An Economic Model

Literature in the economics of higher education that focuses on the impact of modern critical theory on higher education is quite limited. Block & Dauterive (2007) analyze the effects of government involvement in the U.S. higher education system on the advent and growth of political correctness in this system, as well as the mitigating role of free speech rights in the presence and absence of marketplace considerations. They argue that the state of siege on the part of students against academics and administrators of the 1960s has been replaced by one led by university administrators, who were in large part the radicals of the 1960s, and who are now waging a war of political correctness against students and faculty (Block & Dauterive, 2007). Given that the conceptual arguments provided by Block & Dauterive (2007) represent the only contribution in this area to the economics literature of which we are aware, study of the impact of modern iterations of critical theory and its outgrowth of political correctness on higher education in the U.S. is certainly under-theorized. Our economic model not only addresses this void in the literature, it also contributes to a growing body of recent economic approaches to a number of other unique issues facing academe, such as workplace mobbing (Faria, Mixon Jr., & Salter, 2012; Muazzam, Anjum, & Visvizi, 2020), controversial forms of financing education (Mixon Jr., 2019), and difficulties associated with internal labor markets in higher education (Faria & Mixon Jr., 2020; Pelegrini & França, 2020), among others.

In our economic model, the university's problem is that the growth of soft graduate programs associated with a politically correct ideology produces a

¹¹Affordability is a primary concern in higher education. Research by Chetty, Friedman, Saez, Turner, & Yagan (2017, 2020) finds that nearly 40 top American colleges and universities enrolled more students from families in the top one percent of income earners than from families in the bottom 60 percent of income.

number of graduate students, S , that look for jobs in academe. Lumpen intelligentsia is composed by the majority of S , so there is no loss of generality in assuming they are the same. A sizable portion of these graduates are not absorbed by faculty jobs, and instead augment university administration as bureaucrats, B . Thus, there is a clear relationship between the production of lumpen intelligentsia, S , and the time variation in the number of university bureaucrats, dB/dt :

$$\frac{dB}{dt} = S \rightarrow B = St + B_0. \tag{1}$$

The number of bureaucrats in (1) grows over time because of S , where t is time and B_0 is the initial number of university administrators.

University costs associated with bureaucracy and the creation and maintenance of these politically correct graduate programs is given by,

$$C = \omega B + \theta S = \omega St + \omega B_0 + \theta S, \tag{2}$$

where ω is the bureaucrat's wage and θ is the unit cost of students, S , in the soft graduate programs. These costs always grow over time, given that, even with constant ω and θ , we still have,

$$\frac{dC}{dt} = \omega S > 0. \tag{3}$$

The university's total revenue, pE , depends on its tuition fee, p , and enrollment, E . We assume that enrollment is an increasing function of faculty, L ,

$$E = L^\alpha, 0 < \alpha < 1. \tag{4}$$

Taking into account the costs associated with faculty pay, WL , the university's net revenue is,

$$\pi = R - C - WL = pL^\alpha - \omega St - \omega B_0 - \theta S - WL, \tag{5}$$

where W represents faculty salary.

If the university is public, it is managed so as to obtain $\pi = 0$. If it is private and for-profit, we have $\pi > 0$. Given the actual events, we assume that universities are not optimizing over any controls, and instead attempt to ensure that net revenue is greater than or equal to zero,

$$\pi \geq 0 \rightarrow R \geq C + WL. \tag{6}$$

Over time, as long as C is always growing, the university strives to keep total revenue growing so as to guarantee,

$$\frac{dR}{dt} \geq \frac{dC}{dt} = \omega S > 0. \tag{7}$$

The growth of total revenue over time depends on rising tuition fees and increasing enrollment. In order to obtain the inequality in (7) we must have,

$$\frac{dR}{dt} = E \frac{dp}{dt} + p \frac{dE}{dt} \geq \frac{dC}{dt} = \omega S > 0. \tag{8}$$

Let us consider some specific cases. In the first, enrollment, E , is constant and

tuition fees are increasing, $\frac{dp}{dt} > 0$. Therefore, tuition fees must grow at least by ωS ,

$$\frac{dR}{dt} = E \frac{dp}{dt} \geq \frac{dC}{dt} = \omega S > 0. \tag{9}$$

In the second, the tuition fee, p , is constant and enrollment, E , is increasing. Therefore enrollment must grow at least by ωS ,

$$\frac{dR}{dt} = p \frac{dE}{dt} \geq \frac{dC}{dt} = \omega S > 0. \tag{10}$$

As a consequence, increasing bureaucratic costs associated with the production of the lumpen intelligentsia (the soft graduate programs) push universities to either increase tuition and/or enrollment. This explains the positive and steep time trend in universities' fees and the move of many universities toward open admissions.

What is the impact of the mass production of the lumpen intelligentsia on faculty employment and pay? Assuming that faculty employment and pay vary over time, they should evolve so as to satisfy the following inequality,

$$(p\alpha L^{\alpha-1} - W) \frac{dL}{dt} - L \frac{dW}{dt} \geq \omega S > 0. \tag{11}$$

The first of two necessary conditions to guarantee that the inequality in (11) hold is that the value of the marginal product of faculty is greater than faculty wage,

$$p\alpha L^{\alpha-1} > W. \tag{12}$$

The second is that the growth rate of faculty employment, $\hat{L} = \frac{dL}{dt} \frac{1}{L}$, must be greater than the variation of faculty pay over time, $\frac{dW}{dt}$, divided by the marginal impact of faculty on the university's net revenue,

$$\hat{L} > (p\alpha L^{\alpha-1} - W)^{-1} \frac{dW}{dt} > 0. \tag{13}$$

If we assume W to be constant, faculty employment over time should evolve as to satisfy the following inequality,

$$\frac{dL}{dt} \geq \frac{\omega S}{p\alpha L^{\alpha-1} - W}. \tag{14}$$

According to the inequality in (14), faculty employment grows over time if the marginal impact of faculty on the university's net revenue is positive (i.e., if the value of the marginal product of faculty is greater than faculty marginal cost, given by faculty wage, $p\alpha L^{\alpha-1} > W$).

Lastly, there is an important implication of the mass production of the lumpen intelligentsia, namely, that faculty are outnumbered by administrators over time if the following inequality is verified,

$$\frac{d\left(\frac{B}{L}\right)}{dt} = \frac{dB}{dt} - \hat{L} \frac{B}{L} \geq 0 \leftrightarrow \frac{S}{B} \geq \hat{L}. \quad (15)$$

The inequality in (15) indicates that as long as the ratio between graduate students of soft programs and bureaucrats, S/B , is greater than the growth rate of faculty employment, then bureaucrats outnumber faculty over time. Note that if $S > B$, which is expected given that B absorbs only a fraction of S , and as the growth rate of faculty is slow (i.e., $\hat{L} < 1$), then the inequality is easily fulfilled.

In sum, the mass production of lumpen intelligentsia, S , yields a number of results. First, university costs grow over time at a rate proportional to S , ωS . Second, given increasing costs, university revenue must grow over time, forcing universities to admit more students and to charge higher tuition and fees. Third, lumpen intelligentsia affect faculty pay and employment at the same time if the growth rate of faculty employment is greater than faculty pay variation over time divided by the marginal impact of faculty on the university's net revenue. Lastly, faculty are outnumbered by administrators over time if the ratio between S and B , or S/B , is greater than the growth rate of faculty employment.

3. Concluding Comments

Over the past few decades, elements of critical theory have crept into classrooms at America's colleges and universities, the culmination of which has been the creation and growth of soft graduate programs associated with the ideologies that form the modern generation or wave of the critical theory movement. According to a formal economic model developed and presented above in this study, the creation and expansion of these relatively new soft graduate programs, which include black studies, gender studies and queer studies, to name a few, has led to an increase in both the costs and price of higher education in the U.S.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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