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4 Henry Heller’s candid historical account and astute institutional analysis of the evolution of American higher education over the past seventy years constitutes a significant and timely contribution to the relevant current debate. Indeed, at present, the grave and far-reaching repercussions of academic capitalism are intensely felt not only in the U.S. but also, progressively so, throughout the Western world. It is by no means a mere accident that the outstanding achievements of the American university unfailingly multiply as the two main pillars of this institution suffer in literal, material terms more than ever before: on the one hand, students are plagued by an unprecedented loan debt crisis and on the other, faculty members are subjected to increasingly more precarious forms of employment, given that almost 70% of them work either as adjuncts or on a term-contract basis. Heller’s primary aim in this book is not simply to expose the fact that these phenomena are no riddles, but more importantly to examine critically the larger sociopolitical and economic forces that shape the university as an institution and are thus themselves strengthened through it, in the age of neoliberalism. To this purpose, the historian arranges a well-researched and multileveled narrative which traces all major developments in the humanities and social sciences that have taken place in the U.S. since the mid-1940s.
Right at the outset, Heller provides the reader with precise and valuable evidence about two highly consequential and interrelated failures that have severely affected American academic life at critical historical moments, namely the repression of history and the suppression of Marxism. The historian chronicles the effects of these dire ellipses in the American context and organizes his own institutional and historical survey by employing adequately the tools that the discipline of history provides and drawing effectively on the reserves that the theoretical outlook of Marxism offers. Specifically, this is a study that recognizes openly and fruitfully its debt to the legacy of outstanding and distinct Marxist thinkers, from Antonio Gramsci to Pierre Bourdieu and, primarily, Fredric Jameson. Veering intentionally away from either a schematic approach of the targeted issues or a rigid and pedantic adoption of political and economic analysis, the book is noted for its author’s clarity of vision that allows him to handle an impressively long list of balanced and fully-supported arguments in an effective, accessible and unaffected prose. Aiming to elucidate the specific ways in which universities as “key institutions of American society [have further consolidated their ties] to big business [and have thus become] virtual instruments of the U.S. state” (viii) in the span of the twentieth century, Heller insists, already in his preface, on the distinction between positive knowledge and critical knowledge. The author explains that in the first case the production of knowledge is approached as a process that can be “objectively true in some ahistorical sense” (ix), while according to the latter view, knowledge can never be anything else than “historically contingent” (ix). Admittedly, this is an instructive clarification for anyone who aspires to adequately comprehend the present conjunction, during which, in the historian’s own words, “an imperiled and crisis-ridden capitalism desperate to survive is trying to make the university an adjunct of private enterprise” (xiii). It is precisely for these reasons that Heller emphatically contends that a genuine critical perspective on American academic life can never downplay the significance of class inequality, the wealth that connections among disciplines yield, and ultimately the very gravity of historical understanding itself.

In Chapter One, titled “The Birth of the Corporate University,” attention is appropriately devoted to crucial aspects of the history of higher learning in the U.S. and its development as a system carefully programmed to safeguard primarily the hegemony of the ruling class across the country from the early years of the twentieth century to the onset of the Cold War. Heller comments incisively on the distinctive qualities and peculiarities of this system and thus argues convincingly on how university autonomy was in essence a mere pretext for the government to promote the interests of private businesses, throughout the late 1940s and the 1950s (16). Equally insightful is his assessment of private foundations which, over the same period, offered funds “not aimed at making the social sciences more scientific for their own sake but rather at promoting social stability and developing more effective means of social control” (19). Furthermore, the historian’s scope of inquiry allows him to explain the mid-century phenomenon of higher education being made available to vast numbers of the lower-middle class as a policy carefully designed for economic reasons but also as a strategy employed to fight the very threat of communism (26). At the same moment, the argument in this chapter revolves also around the division of labor in the university and its major consequences for the entire evolution of the American academe. Heller contends that the Cold War years witnessed the establishment of “tunnel learning and an uncritical pursuit of specialized knowledge largely separated from other disciplines [that] disregarded any
kind of historically founded, systematic perspective that would allow scholars to conceive of their discipline as part of a larger whole” (31).

This precise discussion expands fully in the second chapter, by the title “The Humanities and Social Sciences in the Cold War (1945-1960).” Particular interest is devoted to the period during which the sociocultural and political legacy of the 1930s was detrimentally marginalized and Marxist thinkers were restricted to the fringes of academic life, since the American university was severely affected by the post-war, wide-spread assault on the Communist Party and Marxism. Heller highlights purposely the fact that in this period the humanities became the field in which “hegemonic ideologies and knowledges were created which justified the continued dominance of the capitalist system under overall American command” (42). Elaborating on Gramsci’s influential distinction between traditional and organic intellectuals, Heller proposes the term “establishment intellectuals” as he dissects the formation of “a whole new stratum of intellectual apologists for the existing order” (45) across these academic fields in the forties and fifties. It is important to note that Heller manages also to voice sound arguments about major issues and offer insights into highly significant areas of interest well beyond the sphere of higher education itself. Thus, in one of the most informative sections of his study, he distinctly explains that during the 1950s—the period when American intellectual life was characterized by parochialism and detrimental isolationism—the U.S. managed “to impose its control by enforcing liberalization of trade through institutional frameworks like the World Bank, the IMF, and the GATT” (54).

The entirely exceptional phase of the 1960s in this historical evolution constitutes the content matter of the third chapter, as the discussion focuses on the revolutionary changes the decade brought for the American university and society at large. In his trademark lucid and pointed prose, Heller highlights the significance of the student movement in this period and argues convincingly that through the students’ fight the Marxist thought was rediscovered in American academic life. It is indeed no surprise that the historian highlights adequately the connections between the vigorous sociopolitical engagement of students across different campuses all over the country, the civil rights movement and the anti-war movement. Time and care is specifically given here to the Free Speech Movement and the struggle of both students and academics who vociferously posed the question whether “knowledge would continue to be controlled by the existing economic and political elites, or would be democratized and put into the service of building a more egalitarian and peaceful society in which knowledge was no longer subject to commodification” (99). In this chapter, Heller takes also the chance to comment, briefly yet instructively, on the great value but also the shortcomings of Noam Chomsky’s contributions to this debate (118) as well as on the impact of the work of intellectuals epitomized here by Leslie Fiedler that “served to challenge the elitism and social and sexual repression that characterized life in the universities during the 1950s” (130). Last but not least, the historian prepares as well the ground for the next chapter of this review and thus distinctly notes that “although the student left had challenged the stability of American society, the mobilization of conservative and reactionary forces behind the Nixon presidency revealed that ruling-class institutions were still intact” (119).

Indeed, the vibrant and fertile, yet unmatched, decade of the sixties was followed by still another long period marked by the retreat from history; hence the title of the fourth chapter which covers the years from 1980 to 2008. The historian inspects the multiple
ways in which passivity towards public affairs and complicity with the established order, as well as conservatism and materialism, became traits that characterized all social strata—including the working class—in the U.S. over the span of these three decades and were complemented by analogous qualities that defined the contemporary academic life. Heller insightfully contends that the moment “fostered a mood of intellectual disenchantment which invaded American university campuses in the form of so-called French theory” (139), the main representatives of which were noted, among other things, “for their rejection of left-wing politics [which] reflected a certain embourgeoisement of the French intelligentsia as a whole” (139). Effectively enough, the author resorts, first and foremost, to the work of Fredric Jameson in his effort to review the peculiarities of this prolonged, contradictory and challenging period and consider the developments in each one of the disciplines on which he focuses. Heller pays tribute to Jameson’s theoretical positions and thus manages to argue credibly that postmodernism “tried to disarm whatever critical capacity existed in the humanities and social sciences, paving the way for the academic capitalism of the new millennium and putting into question the future of these disciplines and thereby the existence of the university” (144). In addition, he insightfully explains that these mutations in intellectual life went hand in hand with “the full deregulation of international and national markets, the dismantling of the welfare state, the total commodification of society” (145).

Throughout the book, Heller organizes the material by devoting, in each chapter, one individual subsection to each discipline he discusses. By definition, these are brief and general parts not intended to cover the entire spectrum of exceptions and peripheral advances in these fields over the different periods. Instead, the author’s aim is to capture in them the overall span of the dominant directions in each discipline and as a result he manages to articulate valid observations and sound arguments on identified crucial issues. Thus, in the fourth chapter he accurately stresses that the cultural turn of the late twentieth century gave some place to Marxism which had, nonetheless, “little connection with mass politics or a real strategy of liberation” (147). While the significance of the redeeming features of such theoretical endeavors is by no means ignored, the discussion offers substantial evidence that allows the reader to assess sufficiently the factors responsible for the “sterile quality of much of the theory that [...] developed within academe in the age of neoliberalism” (169).

Heller’s ultimate aim is to interrogate amply the stakes and challenges of this very age, and thus he concludes his study with a chapter which serves two main purposes. First, the author seeks to explain in depth the term “The Neoliberal University,” which serves as a title for the chapter. Once he emphatically recapitulates the argument that, throughout the span of the studied period, the positive knowledge produced in the humanities and social sciences “was not sufficiently grounded in history and tended to conceal or rationalize the question of class conflict and the drive of American imperialism overseas” (171), he proceeds to explain that postmodernism and neoliberal economics, in late twentieth century, “deliberately turned their back on history” and thus served to delink these disciplines “from the revolutionary politics that marked the 1960s” (171). Furthermore, the historian examines the ways in which the axioms of neoliberalism find nowadays application in higher education policies and thus argues insightfully that since “[t]he quest for disinterested knowledge or knowledge for knowledge’s sake, including focusing on basic or theoretical science as against immediately useful or profitable knowledge, was deemed to be out of date, [u]niversities had to be reformed to direct their
teaching and research according to the dictates of the private sector” (184). In the aggregate, he purposely exposes the gist of neoliberal claims in this area of interest. In a direct manner, the reader is reminded that “[e]ducation for the neoliberals is by no means a public right but rather a potentially profitable private investment which produces rational consumers and disciplined workers” (187).

In brief, the cataclysmic effect of neoliberalism on education is adequately inspected here. Yet, at the same moment Heller does identify two different reasons for optimism regarding higher education matters. This effort is the second purpose that the final chapter accomplishes. On the one hand, the historian supports the position that the destruction of “the public character of the universities as well as other institutions may help eventually to undermine and delegitimize capitalism itself, [for] so driven are the powers that be to sustain a crisis-ridden capitalism that they drive forward heedless of longer-term consequences” (188). While on the other, he highlights the openings and possibilities for resistance to the imperatives and dictates of the corporate university. In particular, he assesses the significance of student participation in movements such as Occupy and evaluates the random sparks of faculty activism and unionization across a number of U.S. campuses during the present decade.

In conclusion, precisely because the current moment undoubtedly witnesses phenomena such as social movements which “peter out” (198) very quickly on both sides of the Atlantic and since academic communities are characterized by an anemic sociopolitical engagement in many places across the Western world, the type of analysis and assessment practiced in this book proves more pertinent than ever before. Given that resistance to the force field of globalized late capitalism has not as yet developed beyond its nascent stage, this study’s most important contribution across borders is indeed the call and invitation to inquiring minds that they constantly return to history.