
Unmaking the Public University

*The Forty-Year Assault
on the Middle Class*

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Contents

Introduction	<i>1</i>
I. The Meaning of a Majoritarian Society	
1 The Three Crises and the Mass Middle Class	<i>19</i>
2 Declarations of Independence	<i>31</i>
II. Inventing PC: The War on Equality	
3 The Discrediting of Social Equality	<i>51</i>
4 The Market Substitute for Cultural Knowledge	<i>68</i>
5 From Affirmative Action to the New Economy	<i>80</i>
6 The Battle for Meritocracy	<i>92</i>
7 Diversity in the Age of Pseudointegration	<i>107</i>
III. Market Substitutes for General Development	
8 Facing the Knowledge Managers	<i>125</i>
9 English's Market Retreat	<i>142</i>
10 The Costs of Accounting	<i>159</i>
11 The Problem with Privatization	<i>173</i>

12	The Failure of Market Measures	195
13	Hiding Culture's Contribution	208
14	Half-Suffocated Reforms	220

IV. The New War—and After

15	The Blame-Academia Crowd: Culture War After 9/11	239
	Conclusion: Powers of the 100 Percent	265
	Appendix: Flaws of the "Liberal Bias" Campaign	277
	Notes	293
	Acknowledgments	369
	Index	373

Introduction

During the early 1990s, California's state government decided to solve its revenue shortfalls with program cuts, and as a result the state's four-year public universities lost about a fifth of their per-student public support in the space of three years. At the same time, the state's high-tech, white-collar industrial base—led by military aerospace—was looking as though it would never again be big enough to support California's famously affluent middle class. The Republican governor had angered his suburban supporters by raising taxes but had learned to use racial wedge issues to drive them back his way. As his campaigns against immigration and affirmative action heated up, and the economy faltered, the classic middle-class institution, the public university, took its biggest budget hits since the Great Depression. In the midst of what seemed to many like general institutional decline, University of California (UC) students on two campuses sought more resources for their Chicano Studies departments by staging hunger strikes.

The size of these protests was minute by comparison to the state's problems and to the scale of its everyday politics. The hunger strikers—at UC Los Angeles (UCLA) in 1993 and at UC Santa Barbara (UCSB) in 1994—were small in number, attracted little media attention, and had goals that most non-Latino students did not try to understand. From the outside the hunger strikes could be dismissed as typical examples of ethnic separatism fueled by political correctness, which was the kind of activity that conservatives said led to politicized campuses, biased classrooms, reduced learning, and the depreciation of a unified American culture rooted in European civilization. Even sympathizers doubted that the strikers had picked the best issue, or that their issue—more Chicano Studies faculty, a PhD program—merited a life-threatening strategy normally provoked by otherwise unopposable state oppression. In the

spring of 1994, the campaign for Proposition 187 was doing very well, and given that this proposition sought to deny public education to undocumented immigrants, some felt that the Chicano Studies department growth plan was a distraction from the larger battle. At UCSB the persistent small encampment in front of the administration building seemed too small to bother to remove, a remnant of an earlier time that any minute would fade away.

The truth was rather different. Many or most of the strike supporters were first-generation college students, themselves immigrants or the children of immigrants. They had worked to get into a public research university, and though their families were often from the factories and the fields—perhaps *because* their families were from there—these students were demanding resources for more academic research. Though the strike supporters were part of a generation that supposedly went to college only so they could earn more money, they wanted to help change the university to fit better with public need. The need they identified was for more research into cultural and social issues—for cultural, social, political, and economic knowledge that would not overlook or be biased against Latino communities.¹

These small protests insisted on three principles that had been central to the rise of the public university as a dynamic institution in U.S. society. The first of these was a broad social egalitarianism, here expressed by the idea that Latino culture and social life should receive the same top level of study and training—to master's and doctoral degrees—that was available for the study of British or Spanish culture. The second was a new kind of meritocracy, in which accurate knowledge was compatible with, and often dependent on, direct action on institutions that created and applied knowledge. The third was that educational needs should dictate budgets and not the other way around—that educational development should not be determined by the long series of economic crises that the state's leaders had managed to produce. By the 1990s, these three principles were no longer central enough to university culture to insure a pre-strike resolution.

The term “middle class” in this book's subtitle is shorthand for “college-educated”: as I explain in the chapters to come, it applies regardless of what social class the student comes from, or returns to. The middle class whose rollback is my subject is composed of Chicano hunger strikers, the children of blue-collar and service workers, of low-income shopkeepers—the full range of socioeconomic positions and family incomes who have had con-

tact with higher education because of the public university system that was built throughout the twentieth century.

I do not use the term “middle class” in this broad way to support the American myth that the whole society is middle class. To the contrary, the middle class is being reduced in size, and is losing its non–college-educated members to stagnating or declining wages. I use “middle class” to refer to the numerical majority of the population whose contact with college was interwoven with the mainstream and politically powerful ideal that this majority was to have interesting work, economic security, and the ability to lead satisfying and insightful lives in which personal and collective social development advanced side by side. In common usage, “middle class” has been a metaphor for the white suburbs, but there has long been a deeper vision for which “middle class” served as the respectable, Protestant, politically palatable face. This vision was of a full political, economic, and cultural capability that would be in reach of more or less everyone through higher education and related public services.

This underlying vision has been under assault since the 1970s. The assault began in earnest just as the American middle class was starting to become multiracial, and as public universities were moving with increasing speed toward meaningful racial integration. This book tells the story of the assault, of its diverse strategies, and of the larger vision that the assault tried and yet finally failed to discredit.

American higher education is highly stratified: the wealthiest private universities can spend ten times as much per student as can a four-year public university. I discuss this inequality in some detail, but in the context of a distinctive type of public university that tried to overcome this stratification within the limits of the American social system. That type has been the public research university. In spite of its frequent ambivalence about inclusion, it sought to combine nearly universal access with the highest quality in teaching and research, and saw access and quality as not only compatible but, in a profound way, as mutually reinforcing. To achieve access in which the daughters of the artichoke fields and the sons of the auto body shops would study with Pulitzer-prize winners, these research universities had to become university systems and then move each of their campuses toward the synthesis of access and quality that had been at least provisionally achieved at their oldest flagships.

This vision was the product of the economic “golden age” that followed the global chaos and destruction of the Great Depression and World War II.

It was defined by massive public works and publicly subsidized industrial development in North America, Japan, and Europe. It was propelled by widespread social activism and the various civil rights movements that sought universal access to its ideals of social development. This notion of development could not be reduced to growth or increased living standards, but was to be defined by a people in the active process of shaping their desires, dreams, interests, interpersonal relations, and collective goals. This vision of publicly funded social development resulted in the creation of the first mass middle class in the United States—a middle class that included blue-collar production workers, unionized service workers, public-sector employees, and members of construction trades, to name just a few of the groups that were enjoying the most egalitarian access to prosperity in recorded history.

In the economically more difficult decades that followed—the period that begins in the late 1970s and that I cover in this book—the working-class portions of the mass middle class suffered the first wave of deindustrialization. Their white-collar cousins did little to help them, and to the contrary used the college degree as a dividing line between those who would succeed in the new postindustrial economy and those who, lacking the appropriate college credentials, would and should fail.

Readers with a knowledge of history will point out that this is what the middle class always does to the working class. It uses the vast numbers of working people for political leverage against hostile elites, and yet as soon as it can bond with those elites, it dumps the working class. In the 1980s the college-educated middle class in the United States betrayed the social majority just as its predecessors had, to take one example, after the creation of the Second Republic in France in 1848, when the bourgeoisie turned against the national workshops and workers' movements that had made the new republic possible. Drawing class boundaries did not work this time around. In the 1990s and the first decade of the 2000s, large-scale layoffs spread from the blue-collar workforce to become routine among white-collar staffers and managers.

This trajectory shows why the public university has such great historical importance. The public university was the institution where blue- and white-collar, children of both workers and managers, citizens of every racial background were being invited into a unified majority. As these normally opposed classes came together, they might outnumber and outthink traditional elites. In so doing, they could take over the leadership of the society. Of course, this creation of a functional middle-and-working-class majority

never quite happened. But it was a future repeatedly foretold and imagined, analyzed, and achieved here and there. Throughout this process, the public university was this new majority's principal workshop. No less importantly, the specter of this multiracial, worker-inclusive majority—formed not exclusively but influentially through higher education—motivated twenty-five years of conservative attacks on the university and its emerging, inclusive, hybrid middle class.

In the 1980s it seemed to many that economic decline would be limited to the blue-collar employees in the economic sectors like steel that were most vulnerable to international price competition. By the year 2000 this decline had spread to include the majority of the population: some estimates suggested that as much as four-fifths of the overall workforce had seen no increase in real wages since the late 1970s. One study found that between 1966 and 2001, “only the top 10 percent of the income distribution enjoyed [income growth] equal to or above the average rate of economy wide productivity growth.” Although the United States was supposed to be a full-fledged “knowledge economy,” it was increasingly “winner-take-all.”² Even college-graduate incomes were starting to stagnate, and real income increases went to a tiny minority: “the top one-tenth of one percent of the income distribution earned as much of the real 1997–2001 gain in wage and salary income as the bottom 50 percent.”³ It has turned out that the increased emphasis on college education has coincided with the decline of middle-class as well as of blue-collar, working-class fortunes.

Most observers have been reluctant to blame middle-class economic stagnation on U.S. economic policy: they point to irreversible changes in the global economy and note that no American government has explicitly sought to lower middle-class living standards. But given the complexity of modern economies, no government would need to attack the middle class openly to downgrade and reduce it. More roundabout methods would work just as well—better, in fact, since they arouse less opposition. In this book, I argue that this is precisely what has happened. To oversimplify somewhat, conservative elites who had been threatened by the postwar rise of the college-educated economic majority have put that majority back in its place. Their roundabout weapon has been the culture wars on higher education in general, and on progressive cultural trends in the public universities that create and enfranchise the mass middle class.

In *Unmaking the Public University*, I show that the culture wars have coincided with the majority's economic decline for the simple reason that these wars propelled the decline by reducing the public importance and economic claims of the American university and its graduates. While most commentators have seen the culture wars as a distraction from economics, I show that the culture wars were economic wars. They sought to reduce the economic claims of their target group—the growing college-educated majority—by discrediting the cultural framework that had been empowering that group. This target group was to provide the postindustrial economy and its descendant, the “New Economy,” with the knowledge workers on which its productivity and adaptability depended. The culture wars discredited the cultural conditions of the political and economic ascent of these college-educated, middle-class workers. The culture-war strategy was a kind of intellectual neutron bomb, eroding the social and cultural foundations of a growing, politically powerful, economically entitled, and racially diversifying middle class, while leaving its technical capacities intact.

The early material in the present volume covers the period in which commentators were describing the country's shift from an industrial to a postindustrial economy, and it overlaps in time with the end of my previous volume on higher education, *Ivy and Industry*. That book described the meanings of the university to industrial society and traced a hundred years of efforts to identify the value of cultural knowledge—incarnated in various forms of humanism—in light of the superior authority of technological and managerial thinking. The focus of that volume was the set of *cultural capabilities* that the university instilled in the generations that it sent off into the world. One pivotal form of cultural capability in the industrial economy was the combination of procedures and sensibilities we call professionalism, which I analyzed as a type of craft labor that enabled both relative independence and large-scale organization. It is hard to overestimate the economic value of the kinds of professional and intellectual independence that came out of universities and that could maintain individual agency even in large organizations in conjunction with similar capabilities among blue-collar workers. This independence underwrote the many waves of knowledge economies that swept the United States and Europe throughout the twentieth century. Professional labor also managed to protect itself

with good salaries, working conditions, benefits, and security that were not generally available to blue-collar workers, and these maintained the white-collar belief that capitalism could fulfill and develop at least some of its workers. The economic importance of professional craft labor also elevated the institution that created and groomed this labor—the university. *Ivy and Industry* explored the economic as well as the cultural frameworks that this university-made labor produced.

That story ended in the early 1980s, as the forces shaping today's university were gathering strength. Economic development—service to market share, profits, and growth—was looming larger in university decision making, and I discussed several ways in which the humanities fields lost confidence in the university mission they sponsored, most particularly in one major goal of undergraduate humanities instruction: to instill a capacity for individual agency that allowed for self-governed *human* development even within complex institutions. Such development went well beyond growth and technological improvement, involved active and collaborative processes of self-definition, and thus needed its own goals and standards. Yet these were either weakly advocated or eclipsed by simpler economic goals. The outcome was something like an agency crisis, a combination of a weak individualism and a weak socialization that made it harder to articulate objectives, desires, and activities other than those that adapted to direct economic pressures.

When the first long wave of thinking about postindustrial society arose in the 1950s and 1960s in the writings of economists and sociologists like David Riesman, Richard Nelson, Kenneth Arrow, Fritz Machlup, Clark Kerr, Gary Becker, John Kenneth Galbraith, Daniel Bell, and William Whyte, it drew on the period's concerns about the excessive other-directedness and conformity of the new "organization man." Partly in response to this, and partly floated by the great expectations for society in the period, the writers of the 1960s and early 1970s took for granted the persistence of majoritarian economics and the value of noneconomic forms of human development. These closely related ideas pervaded the culture of the time. California governor Edmund "Pat" Brown, in his 1963 inaugural address, declared, "Through the turmoil of change, and sometimes chaos, Californians have pressed on toward the good society—not for the few, not for the many, but for all." He continued, "We are here to prove that a civilization which can create a machine to fulfill a job can create a job to fulfill a man."⁴ This sort of egalitarian humanism was common to the Keynesian growth

policies that dominated American policy making in the period: economic development led to human development, and the latter should be available to everyone. Though the women's and civil rights movements were needed to provide correct definitions of "everyone," capitalist development was viewed as a means to a range of higher ends.

The research university's leaders had also combined economic and noneconomic goals, and having completed an analysis of the university's pre-1970 history, I asked at the end of *Ivy and Industry* whether in the post-1970s period the concept of human development would be able to compete with and influence economic development. Would the university's public mission remain distinct from, even as it contributed to, the private sector's pursuit of growth and profit, not to mention product monopolies and global dominance?

On the surface, it seemed that the university and its graduates were set to inherit the earth. After all, the term "postindustrial" and its successor the "New Economy" had no meaning outside of the knowledge economy. The contemporary period was an era in which, as Daniel Bell wrote, "information and knowledge" would replace the industrial economy's dependence on "capital and labor" as the "major structural features" and sources of value.⁵ Services would now be more important than manufacturing, and knowledge would be the crucial source of new value and competitive success. Technological innovation would be the central driver of prosperity and change, and it would have to be rapid and continuous. Enormous amounts of financial capital were required, and capital markets were becoming increasingly sophisticated partners in creating the new products and new industries that technology made possible.

In this schema, information, technology, and financial capital depended in the end on human capital. The formation of the cutting-edge workforce of today and tomorrow was a matter of survival in a global economy. Practical education was the most—and for some, the only—valuable government-funded program. This education had to be technical, adaptable, and, perhaps most important, responsive to market pressures rather than to abstract intellectual goals. In a market context, professional standards could damage the most adaptive and functional forms of education just as government bureaucracy had, in this view, damaged the economy. Though liberals like Robert Reich wanted an orderly transition to the New Economy with many social supports, and conservatives like Gary Becker wanted faster transitions with no supports, nearly all agreed that the replacement of an industrial economy with a knowledge economy made in-

tense and continuous education of central importance, and that it could not be held back by regulations, whether from legislators, administrators, or faculty, that delayed adaptation to the new conditions. The truth of this transition to a postindustrial economy and society seemed confirmed by the Clinton years, when slow growth in productivity and gross domestic product finally gave way to a boom based on information technology, biomedicine, the Internet, advanced technical knowledge, and, it was said, the world's most savvy and risk-loving capital markets.

If the university's social importance grew through the 1980s and 1990s, it was largely as a postindustrial institution. It was relatively poor in financial capital but rich in human and knowledge capital. It created the new technology and the technocratic workforce to run and continuously reinvent the New Economy. It produced flexible, adaptable, innovative workers who could thrive in a rapidly changing market economy by constantly upgrading their skills and creating the new value that would give their companies the indispensable competitive edge. Students were to focus on developing the knowledge base for tomorrow's jobs. If they were constantly having to pay more and more for their education, this was not necessarily bad: they were buying a private good that would arm them to create the higher incomes for themselves that would also benefit society as a whole. Their rising incomes would allow them to repay their rising tuition.

And yet this vision of the university as a privatizable knowledge factory coincided with a decline in the vision of broadened access and egalitarian development that I tracked in *Ivy and Industry*. Even those who supported the "market-smart" and industry-friendly university recognized that the public university's democratizing mission was being eclipsed by financial concerns.⁶ Other signs of change appeared. The university's administrators and much of its faculty became closer to industry. More research funding came from industry in leading-edge science and engineering fields. Public funding was sharply reduced during the downturns of the early 1990s and early 2000s, causing sharp tuition increases and intensified private fundraising. Public universities were influenced by changing business practices, including the cash-flow evaluation of individual academic units and the outsourcing of many non-core services such as student dining, which had some striking effects, including the transformation of most student centers into midprice shopping malls. In general, universities became more important elements in various industries' attempts to control market share, sometimes through product tie-in agreements, and more centrally through

efforts to own and market their employees' intellectual property to outside firms. Major new initiatives at public universities—building construction, laboratory facilities—were increasingly dependent on private funds. These flagship projects raised the university's prestige but could also cost it dearly: a \$50 million research sponsorship over five years might require an equal amount from the university to build new facilities and hire new personnel. Administrators at times had to rob Peter's teaching budget to cover Paul's new research institute while hoping Mary would get a similar gift to stem the deficit later on. Resources were more likely to flow toward fields that were close enough to the market to provide a possible return on investment; funding for core functions and for their infrastructure was sometimes shorted, so that it became more common for older teaching buildings to look like they belonged on the other side of an iron curtain from the new laboratory center. This dependence on private funding fed the tendency to judge higher education less by its overall contribution to all the forms of development—personal, cultural, social, and economic—than by its ability to deliver new technology and a plug-in workforce to regional businesses.

An internally coherent logic drove this vision: since the New University would be judged by its economic contribution, and since private enterprise drove the creation of economic value, there was no reason not to privatize the university's core functions—that is, make them more responsive to market forces and business methods.

And yet questions persisted: What of the public university's traditional and distinctive mission of broad cultural and human development? What about research on fundamental scientific questions with no visible commercial potential? What about the pursuit of complex sociocultural knowledge to help a polarized world? The issue could be posed subtly, in the language of conference addresses to educational and industry leaders that expressed concern about the vagueness of the modern university's mission, or more starkly, as by the cardiologist Stanton A. Glantz when he told *Inside Higher Ed*, "The university is about the seeking and discovery of truth—and the protections of academic freedom are to protect that process. Academic freedom isn't about money. It's about free speech and free thought."⁷ However it was expressed, the point remained that the university, though open to and serving a capitalist society, had to preserve methods and goals that distinguished it from society—at least from its financial measures and motives. And yet these distinctive university goals were harder and harder to define.

The Three Crises and the Mass Middle Class

By 2005 or so, it had become impossible to ignore the sense of crisis that hung over the American college and university. It had become hard to see higher education in terms other than crisis, and harder to capture its situation in other than crisis terms. Campuses had become habituated to worried talk about money, and the less money they had, the more they talked about it. Financial management and fund-raising had come to dominate the daily lives of academic administrators who used to spend more time on program development. Confirming the sense of crisis, the first-draft report of the Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education said, "Our year-long examination of the challenges facing higher education has brought us to the uneasy conclusion that the sector's past attainments have led it to unseemly complacency about the future."¹ There was in fact no complacency on campus, only pervasive concern.

The Eclipse of Development

Humanities faculties were particularly afflicted, and carried a list of problems in their heads. We now work in corporate universities, they said, not liberal arts ones. Science was for sale to the highest bidder, while humanities fields stayed poor for lack of something to sell. Enrollment in the liberal arts had never recovered from earlier drops, they knew, and they watched administrators make their colleges more like vocational schools. Academic departments were treated as cost centers, and winning sports coaches could make ten times the salaries of Nobel-prize winners. Even the term "liberal arts" was now a problem, since it was made up of two words, "liberal" and "arts," each of which was suspect in its own right.

Academia's labor policies deserved special mention. Academia had long used its educational status to pay non-star employees modest wages. Colleges and universities had generally opposed unionization, as the long campaigns against graduate-student unions attest. The university had increasingly differentiated salary scales for different faculty specialties, while a bidding system for star faculty increased salary spreads within fields.² As public funds were cut and costs continued to rise faster than the inflation rate, universities of all kinds increasingly used two-tiered employment systems in which the status, salaries, and working conditions of tenure-track faculty were of a different order than those of temporary instructors. Since 1970, the proportion of temporary instructors—most of whom were “permatemps” who worked for long periods on short-term contracts—to that of full-time instructors had doubled. In literary and cultural study, more than half of undergraduate instruction nationally was delivered by “temporary” instructors by the year 2000.³ The university generally followed prevailing business methods toward reducing labor costs and did not take a leadership position on the principle of good work for all.

Many scholars noted that in recent decades humanistic knowledge had had to contend with a resurgent commercialism in every walk of American life. American commercialism was of course as old as America itself, and yet in the 1990s and its “New Economy,” this commercialism seemed to reach into new areas of public and private life. The recession of the early 1990s intensified awareness of the university's dependence on public funds. The private-sector boom of the later 1990s encouraged the university to look to business for its growth opportunities. The boom also enhanced the prestige of business prescriptions for university ills, offered a stock-market cure for endowment anxieties, and encouraged everyone to see knowledge entrepreneurs as the key to future prosperity.

In the midst of powerful business solutions to educational problems, what role could the humanities play? As the overall culture got more commercial with every passing year, as the arts of interpretation seemed overwhelmed by broadcast media, as reading faded before viewing, as college-educated people seemed eager to give up their political power and their college administrations to market forces, in what areas could the humanities disciplines make deep and yet visible contributions?

One obvious area was that of “human enhancement,” though that had become once again the province of the biosciences, including those associated

with nanotechnology.⁴ This was a transhumanist twist on a long-standing area of enormous interest we could call “human development,” a field that covered the social, cultural, intellectual, and psychological factors that are required for any forward movement of society. We can think of human development as a central though largely undiscussed outcome of the liberal arts. Music, dance, theater, literature, sculpture, film, and other disciplines normally operated on two different levels. They produced enhanced, even Dionysian, states of cognitive capability that overcame at least for a time the limits of our ordinary condition. They allowed the imagination of a higher permanent state for both individual and humanity as a whole, one that would be more equitable, more peaceful, much smarter, and on a daily basis more ambitious and less defensive. These disciplines also operated on a second level: they produced *cultural knowledge* about the psychological, interpersonal, and cultural capabilities that allowed society to evolve. If the arts and letters produced states of pleasurable awareness that made human development seem possible and meaningful, they also produced literal forms of knowledge that could join the social and natural sciences in building the new architectures on which would rest new and better social worlds.

The postcolonial period intensified debates for and against development, which many analysts correctly saw as a proxy for economic forms of control reintroduced by the Western powers. The whole concept had at best a mixed reputation in the humanities and social sciences.⁵ But development became increasingly important as the cold war wound down and as many of the social and economic payoffs of globalization were either slow in coming or absent altogether. One vivid expression of a broad notion of development came from the United Nations.

Human development is about much more than the rise or fall of national incomes. It is about creating an environment in which people can develop their full potential and lead productive, creative lives in accord with their needs and interests. People are the real wealth of nations. Development is thus about expanding the choices people have to lead lives that they value. And it is thus about much more than economic growth, which is only a means—if a very important one—of enlarging people’s choices.

Fundamental to enlarging these choices is building human capabilities—the range of things that people can do or be in life. The most basic capabilities for human development are to lead long and healthy lives, to be knowledgeable, to have access to the resources needed for a decent stan-

dard of living and to be able to participate in the life of the community. Without these, many choices are simply not available, and many opportunities in life remain inaccessible.⁶

The passage goes on to cite Aristotle: “Wealth is evidently not the good we are seeking, for it is merely useful for the sake of something else.” And it notes, “In seeking that something else, human development shares a common vision with human rights.”

Human development has always struggled for attention, but since the end of the cold war in the 1990s, it has lost further ground to the economic notion of world development called globalization. Economic development has in turn become increasingly identified with technological progress. When giving examples of twentieth-century progress, few would mention recent theories of international relations or the United Nations itself; a few more might cite modernist art or the civil rights movement; most would mention the automobile, radio, *Sputnik*, television, nuclear power, cell phones, and the Internet. Is this because science and technology produce nearly all progress and the arts and social practice virtually none? In fact there is nothing natural about this skew toward technology: *Cultural* capability is no less fundamental to human development. And yet this everyday interrelation between culture and technology now generally lies beyond the limits of both policy and felt experience.

In contrast, the centrality of culture to development was not lost on the mid-twentieth century, which remembered well the worldwide destruction of World War II and lived in the shadow of nuclear apocalypse. The period produced books like Ray Bradbury’s *Martian Chronicles*, where, in another world represented by Mars, art and science had merged to produce an advanced civilization, where Mrs. K ate “the golden fruits that grew from the crystal walls” and cleaned her house “with handfuls of magnetic dust which, taking all the dirt with it, blew away on the hot wind,” and where Mr. K read by moving his hands across the singing book. Interestingly for us, Bradbury described business as usual—murder and war, disrespect, ignorance, sorrow—as the result of a failure of *cultural* knowledge. The rockets had already gotten humanity to Mars, meaning that the big technological problems were already solved. There was easy travel to other planets, but then lethal cultural stupidity when we got there. The deeper problems turned out to be not scientific but cultural. In other words, if cultural knowledge was in crisis, then scientific knowledge was in crisis, too.

In the postwar period, there was an institution devoted to keeping cultural and scientific knowledge under one roof. That institution was the university.

The Three Crises

To understand the past and present of this problem of cultural knowledge, we need to see society, industry, and the university as tangled up together rather than polarized, and as experiencing three parallel crises. Each crisis characterized the post–World War II period, but became acute and unresolvable in the 1970s. The end of the Bretton Woods currency agreement in 1971, the Nixon resignation in 1974, and the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Saigon in 1975 signaled the end of the cold war political and economic order that had already been weakened by twenty years of attacks from civil rights, antiwar, and other social movements. But then something strange happened. Instead of the new political and economic order that might have resolved the social and cultural conflicts of the 1950s and 1960s, a previous leadership consensus was restored. We used to call this restored order “Reaganism”; Patrick Buchanan, the Republican speechwriter and media figure, called it the “Reagan counterreformation.” The British called it “Thatcherism.” Europeans and many in the global South called it “neoliberalism” or “the Washington consensus” or “neocolonialism.” The French called it *la pensée unique*. Whatever it was called, it continued and intensified under the Bush II administration. Throughout this period that began in the late 1970s, three crises—economic, political, and cultural—remained unresolved. They were confined and contained on a national scale but continued to create division and hostility (see Table 1).

The political crisis emerged slowly with bus boycotts and lunch-counter sit-ins in the 1950s and grew to freedom rides and full-scale marches on the Pentagon in the 1960s. By the 1970s U.S. society was confronted with unrelenting claims for multilateral democracy within its borders. This was to

Table 1 The three crises

Domain	Epoch-making challenge
Politics	Multiracial mass democracy
Economy	Decline of profits, rise of knowledge-workers
Culture	Civil-rights “science”-movements rooted in qualitative, context-specific, cross-cultural knowledge

have meant power sharing among traditional white elites and communities of color all over the country. This potential dispersal or even democratization of power provoked the enormous improvement in Republican political organization after the defeat of Barry Goldwater in the presidential election of 1964; the effort culminated in the control of the three branches of the federal government and the escalation of executive authority in the early 2000s.⁷ These strategies successfully delayed the imagined solution of cross-racial political parity. The crisis of American democracy continued, expressed by the sense after 2004 that the country had politically divided into “red” and “blue” halves.

The second crisis was the decline of American economic preeminence on which its golden-age affluence hinged. The devastated powers of Germany, Japan, and, to a lesser extent, France and England were back to full strength, cutting into the U.S. share of global markets. The erosion of position was marked by falling profits even in the best-positioned corporations. Income for four-fifths of the population stagnated between 1973 and 1996 and increased only slightly afterwards. Average annual gross domestic product (GDP) growth rates in the 1990s, even counting the vaunted New Economy boom, were about the same as those of the 1980s and well below the growth rates of the 1950s and 1960s. The first decade of the 2000s was worse. During the post-1980 period, the average annual work year increased in the United States by almost 20 percent, even as it fell in other wealthy countries.⁸

The core feature of this change has been what I call the *end of economic majoritarianism*. Progress continued for a minority who advanced at rates much higher than the growth of GDP in the top 10 percent as measured by wealth or income, and much higher than that in the top 1 percent and 0.1 percent. Income progress more or less ended after the mid-1970s for the bottom 80 percent. At the same time, anxiety about profitability and productivity increased, and policy makers gave executives a free hand in using mass layoffs as a routine business strategy.⁹ Economic and management discourse overwhelmed discussion of broader social and cultural matters. Development was increasingly reduced to economic development, which was in turn narrowed to a few popular measures such as rates of GDP growth and the Dow Jones industrial average.

The third crisis was the eclipsing of qualitative knowledge about cultures and human relations. The areas that emerged from the classical trivium, and which Kant called the lower faculties—now including literature, language, philosophy, history, and the arts—faced renewed decline in the pub-

lic eye. The humanities fields were said to produce no useful knowledge, only complications, ambiguities, multiple interpretations, and attacks on current social arrangements that arose from an irrational grudge against capitalist success. In politics, the humanities were linked to social movements and identities—Asian American, queer, the so-called underclass—that made new claims for recognition and resources. In the economic sphere, the humanities were associated with a restive middle class that in the 1960s had revolted against the iron law of productivism, and had come to demand job satisfaction, personal freedom, self-actualization, and plenty of mind-expanding leisure. While science and engineering fields were seen as producing profitable knowledge, the humanities were often cast as the source of nonknowledge or even a kind of *antiknowledge*, one that led to social division and economic costs.

Beneath the surface, this third crisis split qualitative from quantitative knowledge. C. P. Snow had called this the “two cultures” problem. A more contemporary formulation of this split was proposed by the communication scholar Sandra Braman, who defined it as a conflict between mathematical algorithms, associated with efficiency and control, and narrative creativity, associated with autonomy, desire, human relations, and human rights.¹⁰ The same contrast, admittedly oversimplified, appeared in international relations, where a one-world model of capital and product markets presented itself as an enlightened, universal culture, and thus collided with the vision of professional cultural study, which had developed sophisticated understandings of context-specific and intertranslatable human communications that showed how meanings were both conditioned by their cultural contexts and yet negotiated across boundaries. This second, “narrative” view and its forms of complex cultural knowledge lost public credibility in the 1980s, as American majority nationalism was refounded in opposition to Soviet communism and the new Islamic Republic in Iran, and in the 1990s, as a security-minded economic nationalism stereotyped and repolarized the post-cold war world. Policy makers were obsessed with culture—recall the widespread interest in Samuel Huntington’s *Clash of Civilizations*, written from within policy studies, or a book on religious culture called *Terror in the Mind of God*, written by a UCSB sociologist, or more recently Thomas Frank’s bestselling *What’s the Matter with Kansas?* But even as culture became central to mainstream analyses of domestic politics and international affairs, the standard version had little contact with culture as nonbinary and complicated as knowledge about life in actual

communities around the world. Even as the Berlin Wall came down, many American policy makers intensified their attacks on domestic brands of multiculturalism and affirmative action and on international brands of economic diversity, though these practices were the foundation of a multilateral world.

The third crisis persisted in the mainstream policy and media misconception that culture was a source of economic regression, social disorder, and unruly pseudoknowledge. This mainstream failed to grasp or even acknowledge the sheer complexity and power of culture, which involves irreducible internal differences, constant change, and permanent negotiation; in short, which involves creative forces that cannot and should not be managed. The cultural knowledge required for sustaining human development in a multilateral world was disparaged or ignored.

The central mechanism by which the cultural knowledge was sidelined was the culture wars. The central site of this sidelining was the university. The university-focused culture wars blocked genuine solutions to the first two challenges of multiracial democratic politics and majoritarian economics by undermining the requisite cultural capabilities on which these solutions hinged.

The Middle Class Crucible

The restoration of traditional authority depended on blocking the three crises that had emerged within that system of authority. But why did these conservative countermovements need to spend so much energy attacking the university? Why did the attacks not only persist but intensify after the antiwar movements had left campus? Even as the culture wars were fought in rural congressional districts over issues like flag burning, abortion, and gay marriage, why were they fought just as bitterly in colleges and universities across the country? The reason was that changes in post–World War II American society had given the college-educated middle class a political, economic, and cultural weight that threatened the country’s conservative elites with permanent marginalization.

The white middle class was of course not historically opposed to conservative rule. The nineteenth-century bourgeoisie of the United States had endorsed colonialism, exploitation, removal of Native Americans, and various other cruelties and crimes in the name of its superior virtue. By the middle of the twentieth century, however, the American middle classes

seemed better positioned to justify a new direction. They had helped defeat fascism and end the Holocaust in Europe, and they did not actively support the maintenance of European colonialism. Though the middle classes had been dragged into the New Deal by labor and other liberal or left-wing social movements, they seemed finally to have come to endorse strong public services and collective provisioning. The middle classes also seemed to have shifted allegiances from *laissez-faire* capitalism to the social state. In 1945, big business was looking pretty bad and government was looking pretty good. Unregulated corporate capitalism had produced the Great Depression and had supported fascist regimes in Germany, Italy, Japan, Vichy France, and elsewhere. By contrast, big-government Keynesianism had gotten the majority back on its feet; big-government planning had, in the United States and the United Kingdom, just won World War II.¹¹ Veterans were returning from the European and Pacific theaters to expanded social subsidies for everything a white middle class could want—subsidized highways and hospitals, low-interest guaranteed government loans for building and buying the new suburbs, new forms of unemployment and disability insurance, and massively expanded higher education.¹² The trade union movement, once fought by private armies, shot by Pinkertons, and actually bombed in Kentucky by the embryonic army air force just after World War I, had been institutionalized and was now at the bargaining table in the country's largest and wealthiest firms.¹³ The civil rights movement was gaining strength and was becoming a pillar of international diplomacy in the rivalry with the Soviets for the hearts and minds of the decolonizing global South.¹⁴ Once again, but this time without a shot being fired, and in spite of McCarthyism and other forms of repressive anticommunism, the masses were making very large claims on the national treasure. And they were doing it from the inside, as members of the sacrosanct middle class.

Mass democracy was acquiring, for the first time in U.S. history, a material base in the form of mass prosperity.¹⁵ The “affluent society” not only made the white population richer and, in many cases, elitist; it also created a new sense of *mass* entitlement and *mass* expectation.¹⁶ There was something in the United States like the spread of an informal *mass right* to economic prosperity, which supported, fed, and was fed by the right to mass democracy, which was used to expand the right to prosperity beyond the white population.

The public university was at the center of this change. In the five years after World War II, California higher education enrollment tripled from

26,400 to 79,500; enrollment passed 300,000 by 1960. Nationally, higher education enrollment increased 78 percent in the 1940s, 31 percent in the 1950s, and 120 percent in the 1960s. Public institutions had about half of total higher education enrollment in 1950; by 1995 they had 80 percent.¹⁷ These institutions depended utterly on the public coughing up unprecedented amounts of tax dollars, and cough up they did. Much of the funding came in the form of cold war defense spending, but most of it came from state taxpayers whose kids would be the first or second generation in the family to go to college. Though these universities were predominantly white—97 percent white in 1940; still 80 percent white in 1995—they were producing wave after wave of well-educated and potentially independent, intellectually active people who seemed to have lost their reflexive respect for authority. Political interests and advanced education formed an unsettling combination. The Right was already complaining bitterly about college campuses in the 1950s; Ronald Reagan launched his political career as governor of California in 1967 by having run not so much against his popular New Deal opponent, Pat Brown, as against the students and faculty of the University of California at Berkeley (UC Berkeley). The university had become a site of open dissent around civil rights and free speech, as well as a place of opposition to business and political leadership that had brought the country problems that ranged from racial inequality and air pollution to the Vietnam War.

To make matters worse, these college brats were being described as the center of a new kind of economy, a postindustrial economy.¹⁸ At one time the loyal allies of elites had been the fairly small middle class—the clergy, tradesmen, and so on—who had been validated in the United States, from Jefferson to Emerson to Teddy Roosevelt, as a natural aristocracy. In the twentieth century this got a little trickier. Progressives and allies like Walter Lippmann described a class of technical experts who had organized themselves into professional societies: they had made themselves somewhat independent and more than a little indispensable.¹⁹ In the early 1960s, UC president Clark Kerr, most famous for his opposition to the student radicals, had actually been placing college students at the center of the economic future. “The basic reality, for the university,” he wrote, “is the widespread recognition that new knowledge is the most important factor in economic and social growth. We are just now perceiving that the university’s invisible product, knowledge, may be the most powerful single element in our culture, affecting the rise and fall of professions and even of social classes, of regions and even of nations.”²⁰ The moderate Kerr, running