

# **Towards a Political Theory of the University: Public Reason, Democracy and Higher Education (Morgan White)**

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Review of

## *Towards a Political Theory of the University: Public Reason, Democracy and Higher Education*

by Morgan White. Abingdon, England: Routledge, 2016

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In *Towards a Political Theory of the University: Public Reason, Democracy and Higher Education*, Morgan White urges academics and policy-makers to discuss the role of the university in light of the increasing economic pressures that risk altering its fundamental priorities. Because democracy is often said to require empowering and emancipating public education, these pressures motivate urgent conversation. The role of the university and the actors within it, White argues, is being privatized. From this core concern White posits his own conception of the role of the university within a democratic state, and offers a wide and detailed exploration of relevant perspectives, theories, and practices.

White's political theory rests on several premises. The first is that a democracy requires its citizens to be capable of holding their state accountable. The second is that the university has traditionally played the central role in filling this need—by passing down knowledge, increasing the autonomy needed by successful citizens, and providing a forum for political criticism. To White, the role of the university is that of “enriching democracy through a process of civilization” (p. 1). The third premise is that the privatization of higher education institutions (HEIs), which is becoming increasingly noticeable in Western institutions, is a threat to the university's achievement of this central goal, as well as a threat to its ability to maintain its traditional emancipatory priorities. It follows from these premises, he argues, that HEIs ought not be marketized, lest they fail in their crucial political role. While White makes use of a range of philosophical perspectives, it is Jürgen Habermas's *Theory of Communicative Action*, in particular, on which he builds his conception of the role of rational communication, deliberation, and argumentation in the public sphere necessary for democracy to survive.

White's first central premise is that democracy requires that citizens are capable of holding their state accountable. Citizens must be capable of questioning and criticizing their state, and providing legitimate opposition when necessary. Should we lack this opposition, White argues, one of the necessary conditions of democracy will remain unfulfilled. This conceptual argument represents the groundwork on which the rest of the book is built. White relies on Habermas among others to point to the emancipatory benefits of higher education, citing its ability to evoke the autonomy needed in citizens to maintain democracy.

To White, higher education institutions fulfill this necessary role. They play a “special” (p. 35) and “unique” (p. 175) part in maintaining criticism of the state and, therefore, democracy itself. This is White's second central premise: “[U]niversities are institutions that mediate between the formal and

informal public realms and, as such, they are places that cultivate both narrow and wide modes of civility in order to cultivate the authority to act appropriately in different contexts” (p. 5). Universities do this, White says, by “providing knowledge, self-confidence, virtues and skills” to their students, and that “all of these combine into a ‘language of action’ that goes well beyond attributes for the labor market” (p. 176).

White’s third major premise is that the privatization of HEIs hinders their ability to maintain their emancipatory priorities. Early in the book, he makes the distinction between private and public economies, and posits an argument against the privatization of “credence goods” such as higher education. The impact of economic priorities on the traditions of the university and its ability to fulfill its role as the central home to political discourse and criticism stand as a threat to the maintenance of a truly democratic society. The emancipatory (and therefore democratic) benefits of the university cannot survive, White says, in the climate of a marketized system.

These views, when taken together, effectively mean that, should privatization alter the priorities of the university to a point where it can no longer maintain its unique and necessary role in providing criticism of the state (and no other feasible alternative presents itself), then democracy, too, is at risk. In short, as the traditional university falls, so too does democracy. Additionally, this means that the state has a significant stake in protecting higher education institutions from privatization, insofar as it is obliged to foster the characteristics in citizens which democracy requires. White points, for instance, to the increasing prevalence of workplace skills in university curricula as an example of the prevalence of this kind of economic influence.

It is, however, important to note that the priority within White’s political theory seems to be to uphold the institution of the university—specifically its traditions and role in supporting criticism of the state. “A democratic politics requires education fit for democracy, not an education that is itself democratic” (p. 8), he argues. While he acknowledges that students go to university for a wide number of reasons, among which democratic reasons are merely one set, he claims that “the good of universities should be considered first in democratic terms” (p. 42). This argument seems curiously to set aside, or at least devalue, the stated goals of students themselves.

White argues that, in light of the crucial political role HEIs play, students ought to trust in their professors’ epistemic commitment to providing them with truly necessary knowledge. As an example of this, White uses student satisfaction surveys. Authority (of the professorial kind), it is claimed, is necessary for universities to be successful in their emancipatory goals, and this authority is undermined by market-inspired evaluation systems used by students to critique or influence their professors. “Trusting relations between student and teacher,” White says, “are fractured in a higher education context where students report back on whether they are satisfied with their university experience” (p. 176). In White’s view, students voicing their satisfaction levels with their educators and education is similar to customers voicing their satisfaction levels when buying a car or other non-credence privatized goods. However, while these forms of evaluation surely create uncomfortable outcomes in many cases, the arguments provided against them by White are somewhat concerning. White asks students to respect the authority of the institution, and to trust in the epistemic commitments of their educators. Whether or not this is a reasonable ask depends on whether White’s characterization of the university and of educators’ epistemic commitments is, indeed, an accurate representation.

White speaks to the UK context, in particular, but his discussion is applicable to many other Western institutions, and certainly to the circumstances within Canadian institutions. While

philosophical conversations regarding the role of the university have long taken place, these discussions change with the differing pressures of each era. While the question of the university's place within democracy is longstanding, the increasing prevalence of market forces in higher education institutions has certainly increased the need for analyses such as White's. *Towards a Political Theory of the University: Public Reason, Democracy and Higher Education* provides an informative and far-reaching addition to this debate, and also represents a cogent call to action. However, it is also important to keep in mind that White offers a political theory of the university *as told from the perspective of the institution itself*. The people who are meant to place their trust in the traditions of the university, and in the authority of its actors, are curiously peripheral in this conversation.

### **About the Author**

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