

Overview

by Mark F. Smith

Welcome to the 2010 issue of *Thought & Action*, the *NEA Higher Education Journal*. Our theme for this issue is “Radical Transformations,” a term encompassing both radical transformations that have been imposed upon higher education, as well as the political implications of the term—how higher education can radically transform society to create a more just, equitable, and democratic world. As George Counts wrote in his famous pamphlet published at the height of the last Great Depression, “Dare the School Build a New Social Order?”

Ellen Schrecker of Yeshiva University interprets the political origins of the current crisis in “The Roots of the Right-Wing Attack on Higher Education,” which she traces to the 1960s. Even while higher education was growing exponentially, Schrecker argues, controversies on the nation’s campuses helped create a conservative reaction that “so undermined public support for the academy that most Americans now see the nation’s faculties as radical, elitist, and somehow alien to most ordinary citizens.”

Underlying much of the political debate was “a confrontation between two approaches to higher education.” Both approaches, the ivory tower devoted to the pursuit of truth, and the activist university carrying out the business of the state, had characterized American higher education throughout its history. But during the radical transformations of the sixties, Schrecker argues, “defining the nature of the university turned into a highly charged partisan struggle that rages to this day.”

Tom Auxter is a philosophy professor at the University of Florida and president of United Faculty of Florida, an affiliate of NEA and the American Federation of Teachers representing the state’s public sector faculty. In his article, “Radical Transformations in Higher Education: Where Do We Go From Here,” he sees the problems facing the 21st century university—decreased public funding, shifting costs to students and their families, corporatization, and the exploding

exploitation of contingent faculty—as growing directly out of policies created during the presidency of Ronald Reagan and pursued by for the past three decades by its political heirs. At the same time, Auxter sees hope in higher education and its unions. In his words, “It is time to take courage and take action. There is no alternative to creating our own radical transformation.”

Auxter and Schrecker give us the broader historical and political context. Teri Yamada, professor of Asian Studies at California State University Long Beach (and president of the university’s chapter of the California Faculty Association) takes her analysis to the campus and system level. In “Restructuring the California State University: A Call to Action,” Yamada details, among other questionable schemes, the bizarre efforts of CSU Chancellor Charles Reed to bring Tony Blair’s discredited “deliverology” management guru, Sir Malcolm Barber, and his system, to California. Yamada focuses on how these new management outlooks are transforming what was once the finest public higher education system in the world, into public-private partnerships that serve corporate interests rather than the public good.

Yamada explicitly notes that those who question the corporate solutions advanced to address alleged failings are “accused of being obstructionist” thereby denying any debate over the nature of proposed transformations. One either accepts or rejects change. However, change is not an option. As Tancredi tells his uncle in Giuseppe Di Lampedusa’s classic novel, *The Leopard*, “If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change.” The question is what kind of radical transformations we need to implement in order to create a higher education system that meets the highest aspirations of the public good.

In addition to the special section, this issue of *Thought & Action* contains a variety of contributions, some transformational and some addressing ongoing pedagogical, disciplinary, and governance concerns. From the repressive anti-immigrant climate in Arizona, to new ways of looking at science from the United Kingdom’s Royal Society, our authors detail the challenges faced by faculty and staff at colleges and universities across the nation and around the world.

Finally, please take a look at our new Miscellany section, a collection of shorter, easy-reading pieces with a practical bent. As always, the *Thought & Action* Review Panel welcomes your comments and encourages you to consider becoming a contributor. 

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