



**Ernest Mandel**

# **The Changing Role of the Bourgeois University**

**(June 1970)**

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## **Introduction**

*Originally delivered as a speech at the Rijks Universiteit, Leiden, Ernest Mandel deals with the changing role of the university in bourgeois society. It is not a question of the university being integrated into capitalist society – rather its role within that society is changing. What used to be a training ground for the future elite is becoming much more the mass university in response to the growing demands of late capitalism for skilled manpower. A process of*

*proletarianisation of intellectual labour is taking place – an increasing division of intellectual labour which breeds feelings of alienation akin to those experienced on the factory floor.*

*The problem for revolutionary students has been how to evolve an effective revolutionary practice in the absence of a vanguard proletarian party. Mandel deals in this article with the lapse into populism which some comrades attempt to use as an answer to this challenge – “a going to the workers on an individual basis.”*

*However, if our analysis of the key role of the university in modern society is correct, then it ought to be possible for students to relate to the workers’ movement in a more structured and organized manner. Mandel deals here with some of the possibilities for action of this type.*

*One of the problems for revolutionary action in the student milieu is the rapid turnover of the student population. This means that experiences of struggles can be quickly lost. The corollary of this is that mistakes will often be repeated.*

*As a revolutionary **youth** organization, the Spartacus League seeks to transcend this problem. We are pleased to publish this pamphlet as a contribution towards developing a critique of the bourgeois university. It is one of a series of Spartacus League publications. If you are interested in information about these and our activities, you*

*should contact Spartacus League, 182 Pentonville Road, London N.1. (01-279 2616).*

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Over the past twenty-five years the function of the university in the West has gradually altered. In this process the university has been in large measure the subject and not the object of a programmed social change which can be summed up in the formula '*transition from the second to the third phase in the history of the capitalist mode of production*', or, in fewer words, '*the rise of neo-capitalism*'.

The function of the university during the two preceding phases of capitalism was primarily to give the brightest sons – and, to a lesser extent, also the daughters – of the ruling class the required classical education and to equip them to administer industry, the nation, the colonies, and the army efficiently.

Training in orderly thinking, fostering methods for independent scholarship, laying down a common cultural background and the informal ties based on this background between 'elites' in all areas of social life (the 'old school tie' system) – that was the primary role of the university education for the great majority of students.

Specialized professional training was only a by-product. Even in the natural sciences the stress was generally put on pure theory. The way in which higher education was financed in practice gave the ruling class a 'monopoly of knowledge.' Most university graduates were in fact professionally independent – members of the liberal

professions and businessmen – or directly associated with people in an independent position.

Neocapitalism has changed all that fundamentally. Two features of neocapitalism alike have produced the change: (1) the demand for technically specialized labor in industry and in the swelling state apparatus; (2) the need to respond to the increasing quest for higher education, which, in consequence of the rising standard of living, the middle class, government functionaries, white-collar workers, and – to a lesser extent – even skilled blue-collar workers, began to seek as a means of social advancement.

The university explosion which we are still experiencing has thus reflected a strongly increased demand for, and a no less strongly increased supply of, intellectual labor.

The university was not prepared for this, neither in the content itself of higher education nor in its material infrastructure and its administrative organization. This failure of the university to adjust to the demands of neocapitalism has been regarded not incorrectly as one of the causes of the worldwide student revolt. But it is in the nature of our society that it can force the universities to adapt to these needs of the ruling class.

In the context of neo-capitalism, technocratic reform of the university – transformation from the classical to the technocratic university – is inevitable.

The student revolt is not only a reaction to the failure of today's universities to adapt; it is at the same time a reaction against the so far too successful attempt to make this adaptation on the basis of almost total subordination to the demands and the interests of neocapitalism.

The connection between this third industrial revolution – often called the 'technical-scientific revolution' – the growing demand for intellectual labor, and technocratic

university reform is obvious. The third industrial revolution is to a certain extent distinguished by a massive reintegration of intellectual labor into industry, production, and even the work process, symbolized by the electronics specialist who runs and watches over automated production operations.

Thus a real 'labor market' for university graduates is developing. Talent scouts pick through every new class graduating from the important universities in the United States, Great Britain, and Japan, and the same procedure is increasingly being introduced into the West European countries. The law of supply and demand determines the wages of intellectual workers as it has those of manual workers for 200 years.

*Thus a process is underway of proletarianization of intellectual labor. Proletarianization does not mean primarily (or in some circumstances at all) limited consumption or a low standard of living, but increasing alienation, increasing subordination of labor to demands that no longer have any correspondence to the special talents or fulfillment of the inner needs of men.*

If the university is to fulfill the function of training the specialists wanted by the big corporations, higher education must be reformed in a functional direction. Specialists on economic growth have 'discovered' that one of the reasons for the slow growth of the gross national product in Great Britain has been the overstressing of theoretical science in the universities at the expense of applied science.

The drive to adapt higher education to meeting practical needs is being promoted by every means – at the same time that the most intelligent masters of the big monopolies concede that in the long run pure theoretical research is

more fruitful than research along predetermined lines, even in the 'purely economic' realm.

Functionalization of the university is pushed to the extreme when education and academic research are subordinated to specific projects of private companies or government departments (the tying of certain British and American schools into research on biological weapons comes to mind, as well as the *war games* of some American schools dealing with civil conflicts in one or another colonial country).

But these ultimate cases must be seen for what they are – extreme examples and by no means the quintessence of functionalization, which is the substance of the technocratically reformed university.

Overspecialization, functionalization, and proletarianization of intellectual labor are the objective manifestation of the growing alienation of labor and they lead inevitably to a growing subjective awareness of alienation. The feeling of losing control over the content and development of your own work is as widespread today among so-called specialists, including university graduates, as among manual workers.

The anticipation of this alienation among the students themselves, in conjunction with unrest over the authoritarian structure of the university, plays an important role as a driving force of the student revolt.

Sixty years ago the conservative or liberal apologies for the existing social order were all the more convincing because the stability of the system was hardly questioned, even by its most radical critics. At best, social revolution was on the agenda only for the underdeveloped countries. For the West itself it was a vague future goal.

Two world wars, innumerable social and economic crises, and various revolutions have since greatly altered this view. Precisely because the existing social order is much less stable than before the first world war, the function of bourgeois scholarship is no longer primarily theoretical apology but practical reform and intervention in order to overcome certain crises.

*But for these very reasons, it has become much easier to challenge the capitalist system from both the theoretical and practical standpoints in the universities than it was in the past. This system is seen as only one of several possible variants and not as a self-evident reality.*

And so we have the peculiar three-pronged situation which gave rise to the student movement. From one angle, there is a growing dissatisfaction with the existing society, which virtually no one can deny is in crisis. Neocapitalist reform of the university carried out in an authoritarian way, and in large measure forced on the students, can only increase this malaise.

From another angle, the traditional critical structures, that is, the left political parties, and, above all, the workers movement have stopped playing their role of radical opposition to the existing society, for reasons I cannot dwell on here.

Since the critical students find no possibility for radical opposition and confrontation within these structures, they try to achieve this *outside* the parties, the parliament, and the manipulated mass media. But because they do not have the mass of the social weight to transform society themselves, their activity is limited to imitating such a social revolution in order to set an example that is limited to a kind of show.

For some student radicals this show is transformed from a means to an end in itself. In this way, despite their radical verbiage, they become victims of one of the most typical phenomena of a society based on an extreme division of labor, the phenomenon of partial and therefore false consciousness.

Other student radicals make an attempt to operate rationally, that is, they attempt to function as an example in a different way for the working class, as a detonator that can set off an explosion among these broader masses. The events of May 1968 in France have proved that this is not unrealistic.

*But these events also showed that a student revolt as such cannot substitute for a politically educated and organizationally consolidated revolutionary vanguard of the working class.*

Thus it seems that today's universities are caught between two conflicting pressures. On the one hand, technocratic reform is being driven through from the outside in the interest of the ruling class. On the other, a radical challenge is emerging from within the universities but, in the absence of support in other sectors of society, it gets bogged down in utopianism and impotence.

Is there any way out of this dilemma? Are students – and “intellectuals” in general – condemned to the choice of integrating themselves into the existing irrational and inhuman social order – disorder it might better be called! – or engaging in hopeless gestures of revolt by individuals or small groups?

An answer to this question presupposes an opinion on the capacity of neocapitalist society to overcome its most important inner contradictions. In opposition to Marcuse and others, we start from the position that the most



important contradiction in capitalist society – in its neocapitalist as well as its preceding stages – is the contradiction between capital and labor in the production process.

*We are convinced, therefore, that in the long run the workers cannot be co-opted into neocapitalism, because the fundamental contradiction between capital and labor will always reappear, whether or not this occurs in the realm of consumption.*

*Furthermore, many signs indicate that in the industrialized Western countries the center of gravity of the class struggle is slowly but surely shifting from questions of dividing the national income between wages and profits to the question of who determines what is produced, how it should be produced, and how labor should be organized to produce it.*

If our position is confirmed by events – and much of what has been happening in the recent two or three years in the plants of three major Western countries (France, Italy, and Great Britain) seems in fact to confirm it – then the dilemma referred to does not say all that can be said on the question of the role of the university in programmed social change.

There is a way out of this dilemma because a force still exists which has the potential to bring about a radical transformation of society. When it does not let itself be trapped by neocapitalist functionalization, the contemporary university can also escape the other side of the dilemma – quixotic rebellion. *The university can be the cradle of a real revolution.*

We must immediately include a warning in the argument. Whenever we speak of ‘the university,’ we mean the people

of the university collectively, that is, the teachers and the students. We do not mean the university as an institution.

As an institution, the university is incorporated in the existing social structure. Students, professors, and workers cannot finance and maintain any universities in the final analysis as long as the social surplus value is not collectivized, that is, as long as we live in a capitalist society.

In the long run the university as an institution remains bound with golden chains to the power of the ruling class. Without a radical transformation of society itself the university cannot undergo any *lasting* radical transformation.

But what is impossible for the university as an institution is possible for students as individuals and in groups. And what is possible for students as individuals and groups can, on the collective level, temporarily emerge as a possibility for the university as a whole.

The role of students as a driving and initiating force for the renewal of society is not new. Marx, Lenin, and Fidel Castro after all must be rated as intellectual and not manual workers.

To begin once more like the pioneers of the modern workers movement, spreading anticapitalist revolutionary socialist consciousness in the working class, is as possible today for students and intellectuals as it was three quarters of a century ago. The task is more difficult because this is not the first time it has been attempted and because a mountain of failures and disappointments weighs on the consciousness of the broad masses.

There are, however, many indications that the young generation of blue- and white-collar workers suffers less from this skepticism than the older generation. Moreover, ties can be developed between the students and young

workers, as they have been in several Western countries. Once the initial difficulty is surmounted, the task automatically becomes easier than in the nineteenth century, because the objective conditions are much riper.

What the university must offer the young workers is first of all the product of theoretical production, that is, scientific knowledge, nothing so sterile as the masochistic populism of some students who want to go '*to the workers*' with empty hands and empty heads to offer them their muscles and vocal cords. What the workers need most of all is knowledge, a radical critique of the existing society, systematic exposure of all the lies and half-truths projected by the mass media.

It is not easy to put this knowledge into words that can be understood by the masses. Rhetoric and academic jargon are as sterile as populism. But the job of popularization comes after that of assimilating real knowledge. And it is in this latter realm that a really critical university can make its prime contribution today to transforming society as a whole and of its parts that is all the more radical and relevant for being serious, scholarly, and incorporating a large amount of factual material.

The basic data for such a task are a thousand times more easily accessible to students and academics than to those who are faced with making a living in the day-to-day professional world. Collecting and processing the basic data is a practical step towards self-criticism and social change on the part of the contemporary university.

We have all said that the most important contribution, at least as a starting point, that the university can make toward the radical transformation of society lies in the area of theoretical production. But it need not limit itself to pure theoretical production. It can serve as a bridge to practical

experimental application, or experimental practical research.

The larger the number of students, and the broader the student challenge, the more extensive becomes the possibilities for uniting theory and practice. We have a rich storehouse of literature on the problem of alienated labor – 90 percent of it written by learned philosophers, sociologists, or economists; 10 percent by self-educated workers themselves. A few priests and ministers have tried to supplement previous theoretical knowledge of this problem with practical experience in the factories.

Why shouldn't working students in medicine, physiology, and psychology begin to apply such experiments on a large scale to their own experiences in a modern enterprise, above all to description and analysis of the experiences of their fellow workers? Critical medical students will be able to analyze the problem of fatigue, of frustration caused by alienated mechanical labor, by a steadily rising intensity of labor, better than positivist doctors – if they combine real professional expertise with a grasp of social phenomena in their full context, and enrich this with personal experience.

But this is only one example out of many. Converting the mass media from instruments for producing conformity to instruments for criticizing the society can be tested out with precision and can prove very effective. The police use films of demonstrations to facilitate repression. Amateur radical films – which tens of thousands of people have the potential for producing – can be used just as well to train demonstrators in self-defense against repression.

Today's technology can be used at innumerable different points as a means for exploring the existing repressive structures and as a means for exposing the existing repressive structures and as a means for speeding the self-

emancipation of the masses. Here is an unexploited, challenging area of work for students and academics of all scholarly disciplines, in which the first requisite is: *Begin yourself to overcome the contradiction between theory and practice.*

Here emerges another important contribution that the university can make to the radical transformation of society. As a permanent institution, the university remains subject to the control of the ruling class. But wherever the struggle of the university collective for self-management assumes such scope that a temporary breakthrough in this area occurs, then for a short period the university becomes a 'school of self-management' for the entire people. This was what happened in the Sorbonne in Paris in May 1968; this is what happened, among other place, in Chicago in May 1970. These examples were extremely limited in scope and duration. But under favourable circumstances the attraction of such examples for the broad masses can be very promising.

In a certain sense this is the central problem of 'programmed social change'. Programming for whom and by whom? That is the question. The argument advanced by the opponents of democratic self-management in the universities as well as in the plants deals with competence. Society is divided into 'competent' bosses and 'incompetent' workers, as they see it. Let us leave aside the question of whether the 'competence' of the bosses is such as to justify their retaining the function of decision-making. Whenever we compare this proclaimed competence with the results, at least insofar as society is concerned, then there are at least a few reasons for doubt.

The decisive argument against this concept, however, is not affected by such a value judgment. With the development of computers and the functionalized

university, a system is emerging in which the control of levers of economic power, the concentration of economic power goes hand in hand with a growing monopolization of access to a no less horrible concentration of information.

Because the same social minority keeps a tight grip on power and information while scientific knowledge becomes more and more specialized and fragmented, a growing hiatus is developing between detailed professional competence and the concentration of information that makes it possible to make centralized strategic decisions.

The members of the board of directors of a multinational corporation can leave thousands of small decisions to 'competent professionals.' But since the directors alone have the final outcome of the information-gathering process at their disposal, they alone are 'competent' to make the central strategic decisions.

Self-management overcomes this hiatus by giving the masses the necessary information to equip them to understand what is involved in the strategic central decisions. Any member of the mass who is 'competent' in this or that detail plays a participating role in making these decisions whenever cooperation and not competition among individuals is the social norm.

If the capitalist system survives, despite the tremendous crisis of capitalist production relations caused by technological progress, the growing alienation of 'competent professionals' from 'incompetent masses' is inevitable. If, however, the system of private ownership of the means of production, independent investment decisions by firms, and generalized commodity production, is replaced by democratically centralized, planned self-management of all the producers and workers, a universal social interest arises in eliminating 'incompetence' in general. And this social

interest will be reflected in a tendency toward universalized higher education.

The increasing exclusion of unskilled labor from the productive process – its exclusion from the tertiary sector as well is only a question of time – makes such universal higher education in fact an absolute necessity, since a growing sector of the population will be condemned to the status of unemployable drop-outs in the midst of great social wealth.

Furthermore, technocratic university reform, functionalization of the university – debasement of higher education to fragmented, overspecialized, and unintegrated professionalism – what the radical German students call '*Fachidiotismus*' ('Professional Cretinism') – has developed increasingly into organized incompetence.

One of the sharpest accusations that can be lodged against the existing social disorder is that in a period when scientific knowledge is expanding at explosive speed, the level of university education is steadily declining instead of rising. Higher education is thus incapable of fully exploiting the rich potential of scientific productive power. Moreover, it is producing incompetent labor power, not in the absolute sense, of course, but in comparison to the possibilities created by science.

Some neocapitalist spokesmen say openly what they want, like the authors of the West German university reform program. It is in the order of things therefore for them to cynically assail the too liberal character of the old Humboldtian university. They admit that from their point of view, that is, from the standpoint of neocapitalism, the freedom of students to read, to study, and to attend lectures as they choose must be curtailed.

Subordinating – not production to human needs but human needs to production – that is the very essence of

capitalism.

*Self-management, therefore, is the key to full development of both scientific competence and the potential productive power of science. The future of the university and of society intersect here and finally converge. When it is said that many people are not suited to a university education, that is doubtless a truism... in the context of our present society. But this is not a matter of physiologically or genetically determined unsuitability but of a long process of preselection by the home and social environment.*

When, however, we consider that a society that subordinates the development of men to the production of things stands the real hierarchy of values on its head, we can assume that, with the exception of marginal cases, there is nothing inevitable about this unsuitability.

When society is reorganized in such a way that it puts the education of people before the accumulation of things and pushes in the opposite direction from today's preselection and competition – that is, surrounds every less gifted child with so much care that he can overcome his 'natural handicap' – then the achievement of universal higher education does not seem impossible.

Thus, universal higher education, cutting the workday in half, and all-embracing self-management of the economy and society based on an abundance of consumer goods is the answer to the problem of the twentieth century – what shall the teachers teach? 'Who will watch the police?' The social development would become a fundamental process of self-education for everyone. Then the word 'progress' will have real meaning – when humanity has the competence to determine its own social fate consciously and relying only on itself.