

Reviewed by Peter Chiaramonte
Adler Graduate Professional School, Toronto

*Every situation is of man’s [sic] making and can only contain what man contains; thus one can imagine that the situation (and all its metaphysical implications) has existed as a human possibility ‘for a long long time.’*

Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*

*The idea of the university is not as straightforward as some would think.*

Cote and Allahar, *Lowering Higher Education*

*I Read the News Today, Oh Boy...*

How are we to make sense of it? Moments ago another incredulous television commentator in Montreal stared

down the barrel of the lens and asked, “What does disrupting the annual Canadian Grand Prix automobile race in Montreal have to do with student protests over higher tuition fees?” What’s the mystery? Formula 1 racing is—in addition to being the pinnacle of competitive test-pilot engineering—quite possibly the most extravagantly corporatized sport and entertainment spectacle in the history of the world. Yet so many mainstream media commentators appear narrowly fixated on the idea that current student protests in Montreal are all about the proposed raise in tuition fees for higher education.¹ For media commentators still puzzled putting the pieces of the Printemps Erable (“Maple Spring”) together with corporate excessiveness and the persistent nightly demonstrations against anti-protest legislation—and having to pay higher prices for lower quality goods—oh boy have I got the book for you.

University of Western Ontario professors of sociology, James Cote and Anton Allahar’s Lowering Higher Education: The Rise of Corporate Universities and the Fall of Liberal Education is a book I would, with one or two qualifications, recommend to any stakeholder in higher education who suspects that student protests, the Occupy Movement, and even the Arab Spring uprisings may at their heart be about much larger, more complex, and fundamentally connected struggles. What brought Lowering Higher Education to mind once more was an interesting side-note in the Montreal Gazette about increased tuition costs, debt loads, and overrated rewards. It was reported that many students enrolled in commerce, science, and professional programs in Quebec had voted not to boycott their classes. Most of the support for a boycott came from students (and some faculty) in the arts, humanities, and social sciences. This article is reminiscent of the way Cote and Allahar describe “the spoils of the culture wars” between modernist conceptions of reality (science, math, and technology), and the more recent postmodernist challenges coming from the side of the humanities and social sciences. Unfortunately, they

¹ According to Leo Charbonneau “The two solitudes reflected in the Quebec student protests,” University Affairs (posted April 25, 2012), even after Quebec tuition fees rise as planned, Quebec students will still be paying among the lowest fees in the country (less than $4000 a year by 2017).
remark, on many university campuses the distraction of this infighting has allowed a corporatization of universities to go uncontested for decades—eclipsing the citizenship function of higher education and converting the contemporary university into a mere extension of the corporate world (p. 21).

This thesis is presented in response to the comments and criticisms of their previous work, *Ivory Tower Blues: A University System in Crisis* (2007). Cote and Allahar have prefaced their sequel with a pledge to clear up some lingering misunderstandings about the rise of corporate culture and governance in our universities. Despite the often-cynical tone of their critique, the content and validity of their arguments add real value and insight to these discussions. The audience of stakeholders (constituents in what Cote and Allahar have named “The Educational Forum”) that might potentially benefit from the information and analysis contained in this book is vast and distributed. In the main arena are the students, faculty, and counselors directly engaged in the teaching and learning process. A step removed are the parents and administrators who support and supervise them. Ironically, those most remote from the classroom are the media, corporate and government research advisors, taxpayers, and the politicians who ostensibly govern what is taking place. There’s plenty here to reflect on.

*You Don’t Need a Weatherman to Know Which Way the Wind Blows...*

Cote and Allahar are eager to remind us that perhaps no other institution has the potential for so dramatically shaping the lives of its constituents, as does the university. To one degree or another, everyone has a vested interest in how we educate our citizens as well as how well we train new generations of skilled workers and professionals. Yet our students are being caught up in escalating tuition debt and the mindless pursuit of ever more paper, for which “in the end the economy is not noticeably more productive” (p. 19). The “paper chase” has basically become, they say, “an arms race to the bottom.”

Instead of mass education, what we have actually been providing is mass certification—a damning assertion to which Cote and Allahar add their claim that the large
numbers of ‘graduates’ we are certifying have evidently not enriched our society or the economy in ways that were expected or hoped for (p. 181). Whether or not you buy into that, what is apparent is that no effective action has been taken by government, business employers, or university administrators to alleviate unemployment and under-employment issues in our society. These problems are only exacerbated by the policy of sending more and more young people to universities (p. 51). Furthermore, “grade inflation,” “credential inflation,” “prestige rankings,” and the myriad consequences of corporate-style advertising have universities competing over what Cote and Allahar term “empty spoils.” Here they use their own discipline as an example—pointing out the recent trend in sociology departments to market specializations in criminology—in spite of the fact that there are precious few jobs available in that field. Apparently this fad has been sparked by the popularity of TV shows such as CSI with its sexy portrayals of careers in criminal profiling and DNA analysis. (In truth, those jobs usually go to psychology and chemistry graduates.) To sell these programs as “criminology” is false and misleading (p. 104). Those unfortunate students who have bought into false promises, they say, are stung by the reality of having few opportunities to earn and return what they have borrowed. Sooner or later they come to resent or rally against what they begin to sense was a squandered opportunity to realize a more intrinsically rewarding university experience. One that produces in them some greater sense of achievement.

Will Technology Save the Day?

It is a curious development, remark Cote and Allahar in their Chapter on “Technologies: Will They Save the Day?” that so many people are willing to let technology drive the curriculum when it should be the other way around. The authors acknowledge that new technologies can facilitate learning, but they alone are not going to replace teachers the same way the Internet may be replacing the Library. In and of themselves new technologies are clearly not always the only means, or the best means, for reaching students and helping to hone critical thinking. In fact, some believe that they can have the exact opposite effect (p. 174).
We are allegedly becoming a “knowledge society,” the authors argue, yet the corporate culture is proving itself a progressively poor model for the higher education environment. Not wishing to put too many words in their mouths at once, but truthfully, how well do you think the current levels of intense specialization in the quantitative sciences of finance, accounting, and information processing are equipped to provide future leaders of society a common language for negotiating complex social changes? Despite all the posturing and proselytizing by politicians, administrators, and info/tech-evangelists—students and professors at “ground zero” can tell you just how little the average university does to promote a truly “creative class” of so-called “knowledge workers.”

According to Cote and Allahar, what we need are more citizens capable of navigating varying degrees of social complexity with knowledge, leadership, and courage—not more university degree offerings in ‘Video Gaming,’ ‘Resort Management,’ and ‘Surf Science’ (p. 185). The book presents several fascinating cases, first-person accounts, and international comparisons throughout.

The Increasing Corporatization of the University and the Subsequent Alienation of Its Key Constituents

“Crisis, What Crisis?” Reading Cote and Allahar, it’s fair to question once again the fundamental purpose of higher learning to create sufficient intellectual enlightenment opportunities. How, we might ask, does that help the economies of the world? In this book the authors suggest that having individuals capable of teaching themselves—in whatever fields they occupy—provides greatly needed leadership in both public and private enterprises everywhere. Unless, they conclude, some broad-based social paradigm shift occurs, the ensuing disputes between corporate universities and liberal education will only result in our continuing to pretend to offer first-class higher education, while students make believe to have learned something at that level. The truth will be that universities are becoming “holding pens” that eventually stamp out counterfeit degrees “that are little more than expensive ‘fishing licenses’ for lower-level white-collar jobs” (p. 191). Graduates may have little or nothing but temporary or contingent employment opportunities available to them,
but no end to the number of credentials they can go on to obtain with easy loans and government grants.

Although at times acerbic in tenor, Cote and Allahar do an expert job of connecting many of the dots in these vicious cycles of effects. In their view, our universities have drifted off course—and now we find ourselves in a place where neither the promise of wisdom nor the guarantee of a lucrative career is a likely outcome. The crisis in lowering higher education didn’t just happen overnight. Nor will it likely be solved overnight, or any time soon. But rather than despair, Cote and Allahar’s controversial critique of university systems attempts to arouse a rallying cry for social change and education reform. That’s an admirable ambition they share with many others. However, their final chapter on recommendations and conclusions about “the way forward into the new millennium” reads as hollow, sidetracked, and stranded in the end. (What do Bell Curves and IQ tests have to do with charting the way forward?) But I applaud the professors’ summons to reflect deeply upon the consequences of deserting the traditions of the liberal arts for the economic allure of “pseudo-vocational training.” They believe in the university and they want to change it. They want to help it recover from stumbling further into just another business for selling loans. 2 To that end they would have us working together to elevate higher university standards—by understanding and truly appreciating the transformative potential of a first-class liberal education.

---

2 In an interview with Scott Jaschik (http://www.insidehighered.com/print/news/2011/02/23/interview), Cote and Allahar said, “In Canada, we are perhaps watching a process that is already more advanced in the U.S., and can therefore see its insidious nature more clearly.”
About the Reviewer

Peter Chiaramonte, PhD, is an independent scholar at the Adler Graduate Professional School in Toronto. His articles, book reviews, and author interviews on the subject of higher education and institutional leadership have appeared in Education Review and elsewhere. He holds undergraduate degrees in philosophy and liberal arts and graduate degrees in the history and philosophy of education. Peter’s books and book chapters have been published with Prentice Hall/Pearson and Broadview/Garamond Press.

Copyright is retained by the first or sole author, who grants right of first publication to the Education Review.

Education Review/Reseñas Educativas is a project of the National Education Policy Center http://nepc.colorado.edu

Editors
David J. Blacker
blacker@edrev.info
Gustavo Fischman
fischman@edrev.info
Melissa Cast-Brede
cast-brede@edrev.info
Gene V Glass
glass@edrev.info

Follow Education Review on Facebook
and on Twitter: #EducReview