Creating the Market University: How Academic Science Became an Economic Engine by Elizabeth Popp Berman

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I wish in a way that Ecklund had followed through with some interviews of identified scientists like Edward O. Wilson, who it seems to me are trying very hard to have what one might call a religious view of the world without any theology. Wilson has as little belief as Richard Dawkins, yet the world vision of the two men could not be more different. The former lives in a world throbbing with vitality whereas the latter lives in a world of cold indifference. (Is this in part a matter of nationality? Although the American Revolution was Enlightenment fueled, the skeptical philosophies of the 18th century never put down roots in the New World in the ways that they did in the Old.)

Ecklund is not just a social scientist. She is also an engaged advocate. She wants to see more understanding in America between science and religion, and she thinks that this means that science must do a better job than it does. There must be more outreach by scientists, combined with more humility about what science can and cannot do. She argues for a realization that science itself does not solve ethical problems, and for these we must turn to philosophy and perhaps even religion. Frankly, I am a little skeptical about how far these efforts will go, or even how possible they may be. Scientists at elite universities don’t get credit—promotions and grants and awards—for science education and outreach. At least, you had better wait until you have won your Nobel Prize before you do that sort of thing. But I don’t want to end on a cynical note because what Ecklund does show is that there is much more potential in the scientific community for gap bridging, an activity that might or might not pay dividends. I don’t think anyone is going to turn the 50% of Americans who deny evolution into faithful Darwinians overnight. But she does suggest that the task is not entirely hopeless; that there is some chance of reducing the hostility to and distrust of science; and that above all those of us who love science should not think that sneering at our opponents is going to change things—and, moreover, that not all of us who love science want to sneer anyway.


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The recent discovery of the Higgs boson—the elusive particle that theoretical physicists have been in search of for several decades—represents something of an anomaly in modern science. Unlike the discovery of DNA—a scientific breakthrough that is comparable in terms of its significance—this advance is not likely to lead to commercial applications any time in the foreseeable future. When giddy physicists uncorked champagne at the news of the discovery, they did so to mark the triumph of science and not
because they would soon be rich. This orientation is now relatively rare in academic science, since, as Elizabeth Popp Berman argues in her important new book *Creating the Market University*, the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake has been gradually displaced by the logic of the market in recent decades.

How did this transformation occur? A roundup of the usual suspects would include university administrators chasing after industry for scarce resources as government largess dwindled and opportunistic entrepreneurs attempting to parlay the research of university scientists into fat profits. But as Berman’s well-researched and intelligently crafted book shows, the story is both more complex and more surprising. Neither universities nor industry initiated academic science’s embrace of the market. Instead, Berman’s account suggests that government was the primary instigator of the commercialization of university science, although this was not the result of a coherent policy but rather a diverse set of measures undertaken to spur innovation as the U.S. economy flagged relative to its international competitors beginning in the 1970s.

Berman arrives at this argument through a carefully constructed set of case comparisons. She first briefly examines three sites of nascent commercialization of university science in the 1950s and 1960s, including industrial affiliate programs, research parks, and industrial extension offices. These initiatives experienced only modest success in this period because, while universities were not overtly hostile to business, they tended to view their relationship to commerce somewhat passively (what Berman refers to as the “science as resource” rather than “science as engine” model that would predominate in later decades). In addition, these market experiments had difficulty securing sufficient resources either from business or government to become self-sustaining. In fact, there was a great deal of skepticism that university science could yield marketable results in a reasonable time frame, making it difficult to lure either private investment or government financing to underwrite such ventures. Finally, the generosity of government funding for science pursued independently of commercial applications significantly attenuated the pull of the market during this period.

Predictably, as federal dollars supporting academic science became scarcer in the 1970s, space opened for the growth of a new logic reorienting researchers to the market. The main empirical chapters of the book involve a more expansive comparison of three distinct forms of university-industry partnership that developed in the 1970s and 1980s, marking the turn to the market. Biotechnology offers perhaps the most dramatic case of marketization. Initially, biotech scientists who became involved with commercial initiatives were ostracized by their colleagues; by the 1980s, as Berman (p. 148) reports, it would have been difficult to identify any prominent researcher working in this field without involvement in commercial activities. Berman’s second case is patent policy. Prior to the 1970s, the idea that universities would seek to profit from the research produced
by faculty scientists was treated as inherently suspect. But by the 1980s, technology transfer officers were standard on many campuses, helping faculty to patent their research and winning substantial resources for universities in the process. The creation of university-industry research centers is Berman’s third case, offering a more mixed picture than the first two cases, but nevertheless underscoring the emergence and consolidation of a market logic over the course of the 1970s and 1980s. A wide array of factors are implicated in the turn to the market in each of these cases, but more important than what distinguishes the three cases is what they hold in common: a diverse set of government policies shaped by a growing recognition of innovation as the critical challenge facing the U.S. economy beginning in the 1970s.

Berman (p. 167) notes that her ultimate ambition is to raise questions about what role markets should play in our society: “How do we decide when society is best served by relying on individual self-interest and exchange to allocate scarce resources efficiently, and when other means of organizing human activity are better, fairer, or more appropriate?” I am in complete agreement that it is critical for economic sociology to address these questions, and I applaud Berman’s effort to raise them here in a serious way. If there is a disappointment with this otherwise excellent book, however, it is that Berman never makes it clear precisely what is at stake in the shift to a market logic in academic science. If we still lived in a world in which the logic of science prevailed over commercial values, how would scientific inquiry proceed differently, how would the products of academic research find their way to market, and how would the mission of the university (in the sciences and beyond) be organized in ways that are no longer recognizable to us today? Berman offers hints in her analysis, but never a fully elaborated discussion. One senses a hesitancy in this dispassionate account to venture too far into what might be perceived as normative territory, but in my view the issues involved are simply too important to justify staying so far above the fray.


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The figure of the Indian call-center worker with the fake American name and accent has become a prevalent trope through which the cultural crossings of globalization are imagined and embodied. The American public has been bombarded by representations of India’s outsourcing industry, from PBS documentaries such as 1-800-INDIA to NBC’s hit sitcom Outsourced. But such representations access neither the everyday trials of workers in