

Double Secret Privatization

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I remember as a freshman in college making a boneheaded move. I didn't feel like I had enough stuff. I was broke, and I had enough stuff to keep me alive and entertained, but I could never say no to acquiring more of it. I was fortunate enough that one day while exiting my dorm's food court, some guy I never met—who looked like he was in his late 20s—offered me stuff and this of course piqued my interest.

This tale is not salacious. The “stuff” was not anything illegal or even unethical.

What kind of stuff was it? I don't even remember. I assume there were t-shirts with beer company logos on them. There were probably CDs, maybe some video cassettes.

All that he asked was that I fill out some applications for credit cards. There were tiers. If I filled out one to two applications, I got one unit of stuff. If I filled out three to five, I get two units of stuff, six to ten earned three units. I do not remember how many I filled out, but I filled out the maximum number so I could get the most stuff plus the bonus stuff.

I really thought I knew how credit cards worked. I receive them, I tear them up, and then I get to keep this ton of free stuff. After months of receiving cards and tearing them up, I noticed that I needed more stuff. The stuff I got for free was old stuff now. I needed new stuff.

I flipped through my weekly batch of new credit cards and found a Bank of America card that was emblazoned with my college's logo. This would be the one that I kept and used to buy more stuff. Clearly I could pay it all back. I worked two to three jobs at a time in college and could never seem to get ahead, but for some reason I thought that magically I could pay off credit cards a month later for a hamburger today.

Looking back on this episode, I was very fortunate to find a steady job (and a steady side job) after college to pay off my debt. This was not the case for many of my friends, who watched themselves go into deeper and deeper debt as they started their careers in the thick of the Great Recession.

It was extremely irresponsible for a university that educates and houses thousands of 18-year-olds to allow financial predators on campus like that. It's just as irresponsible for the same university to lend its logo to Bank of America, which gives credit cards to young people knowing that most will be driven into intractable debt.

Lawrence S. Wittner's largely witty *What's Going On at UAardvark* is a must for anyone attending or teaching college in the neoliberal world. UAardvark is a university that after an intense branding campaign allowed corporations to name schools on its campus and pump ads into the lives of students on a daily basis.

This might seem like a cartoonish concept if you haven't set foot on a college campus in twenty years, but for Generation Yers, Millennials, and those who teach us, the “reforms” of UAardvark seem just like next logical steps.

The corporatization of the school did not stop at advertising. The military in collusion with corporations and the university administration hatched a plan to use the new “technology center” of the university to store nuclear waste. Wittner, possibly critiquing the new STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) craze, has the administration moving to eliminate all liberal arts

departments of the university while opening the new technology center. STEM is popular among education “reformers” who invoke the “yellow peril” in mouthing the tired talking point that U.S. students lag behind our Asian counterparts in science and math. They use this new yellow peril to make the case that if we don’t invest in science and math, the Little Yellow Men will beat us, striking a blow against American Exceptionalism.

In Wittner’s novel, the military fully supports this New Technology Center, which is really just a Trojan horse for externalizing military costs to the university. Dump nuclear waste in the school and tell everyone it’s a good thing. Then, fire anyone who would be opposed to it in the name of “reform.”

One piece that I found entertaining was the chapter on the executive board of the faculty union. The leadership had become bedded with management, and the union president speaks highly of the dim-witted, corrupt university president after the announcement that he would erect a statue of her. She claimed that the honor would be a great thing for the union. Wittner takes a nice jab at craft unionism in his depiction of the collusive faculty union president refusing to stand in solidarity with other university workers in another union.

Yes, the novel is quite humorous in spots but ham-fisted in others. Take Wittner’s rendition of the protagonist’s back story. He is a leftist professor version of *The Wire*’s McNulty. He was a ruggedly handsome, dedicated English professor who became a total mess after neoliberalism reared its ugly head at his once sacred academic grove. He drinks, he misses classes. The author says his union involvement is what keeps his job secure, which I find deeply problematic as it feeds into the narrative that tenure saves bad teachers. Then his wife leaves him to become a “committed lesbian” and a massage therapist. I find it troubling that the author had to follow the trope of a woman “becoming gay” on account of a failed relationship with a man.

Then there’s his characterization of the students, who are unfailingly apathetic, dim, and obsessed with consumerism. It’s another tired trope, and one used against every generation. Of course, there was one standout student, and a handful of admirable faculty.

In truth, I was underwhelmed by the depiction of Wilma, the union president, posed simply as power-hungry and using the union purely as her instrumentality. With collusive union leaders, the story is usually more complicated than that. I would have liked to see her character slowly compromise her way to becoming corrupt.

One aspect I found interesting was how Wittner described the maintenance workers as being highly politicized and the professors as being largely apolitical, using their union meetings to discuss *administrivia* while the janitors studied Marx and discussed building union power.

Had the workers organized across job category as part of the education industry, instead of isolated into job classifications, there could have been push back. The arrogance and apathy of the academics kept them from organizing with the people who cleaned their rooms. Wittner drops hints that had solidarity really existed on campus between professors, maintenance staff, and even students, there could have been real resistance to the corporatization of the university. The divisions between all of these people kept the status quo.

After the outdated, toothless union showed no signs of life, the protagonist and his poker buddies decide to start a sort of alt-labor “rebellion” group that would cause chaos on campus and attract media attention.

The revolt resembles college comedy hijinks à la *Animal House* and *PCU*. Hopkins, the dim-witted

President of the UAardvark becomes much like the hapless Dean Wirmer.

One part that I found particularly entertaining was the jab at sectarianism where a group called the "League of Revolutionary Workers and Peasants" criticize the rebellion as being counter-revolutionary. It makes me think of the armchair critics who criticize people working for real change.

Although I found many of the characters and situations contrived, the caricaturing allows for Wittner's ideas to flow. At bottom, in his prose Wittner militates against privatization and for solidarity among all working people. That alone makes the book valuable for people who don't quite understand the dangers of privatization. It could easily serve as a springboard for discussion. I could see teaching this book to high school students who are about to attend college. Many of these concepts give students some context to the corporatization of universities.