

Oppenheimer's House; or, the Contradictions of Academic Life from the Cold War to Neoliberalism

Susan Hegeman

Abstract

This essay addresses the changing meaning of academic freedom and academic labor in the transition from the Cold War to the neoliberal university. Using Robert Oppenheimer as its touchstone example, it argues that academic life in the Cold War was characterized by a contradiction between academic freedom and self-governance and the interests of the state. It proposes a taxonomy of various ways that academics made sense of their work in relation to this contradiction. It then shows how this contradiction shifted with the end of the Cold War and the rise of the neoliberal university, so that state interests are now replaced with those of a neoliberal common sense, organized around private interests and the extraction of value. Finally, it offers some conclusions about the path forward for academics as they come to terms with the meaning of their labor in the neoliberal university.

The early Cold War period witnessed a spectacular, theatrical performance of repression of free speech and association, and of academic freedom. And yet this moment, which also saw the explosive growth of American universities and of cutting-edge research, was one in which some core elements of academic freedom, such as faculty governance, actually fared relatively well. With the end of the Cold War and the rise of neoliberalism, universities are now organized on the managerial model of the for-profit corporation. With

the majority of faculty now off the tenure track, many of whom can be fired at will, restrictions of academic freedom are becoming an increasing, and increasingly banal, feature of academic work. Forget public committees and denunciations of anti-Americanism; an unprotected adjunct instructor can now be fired just because she used a curse word in class. In the pages that follow, I will offer a brief narrative about the specific contradictions of each moment, and about the transition from one regime of academic freedom to another.

Oppenheimer's House I: The Cold War

If you are familiar with the topography of California's Bay Area, you know that the city of Berkeley and its famous campus are flanked to the east by a steep hill. In the late 1960s, my parents and I lived in a tiny bungalow high up on that hill, in Kensington. The view from the house was, as the realtors say, spectacular. Overlooking Berkeley and the bay, you could see all the way to San Francisco. But that house had another notable feature. In the basement was an elaborate tangle of wires and old electrical devices, including an entire 1940s-era telephone switchboard. My parents speculated that what we had in our basement was the remnants of a surveillance operation, a listening post. Its target, they inferred, was a house just below us, owned by the famous scientist J. Robert Oppenheimer.¹

Oppenheimer, of course, was the brilliant theoretical physicist who was tapped to head up the Los Alamos branch of the Manhattan Project in World War II. He was also a polymath and a poet, a man with literary and spiritual inclinations who read Charles Baudelaire during bomb testing, and, in describing his reaction to Hiroshima, famously quoted the *Baghavad Gita*: "I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds."² Before the war, Oppenheimer was also a political activist, involved in the cause of Republican Spain and in the plight of Jews (including his own relatives and many colleagues) under the Nazis. He also aided in the struggles of the California farmworkers, and in organizing for his local of the American Federation of Teachers. As would be made abundantly clear in the witch-hunt years of the 1950s, he was a leftist, and he had friends, students, relatives, and lovers who were members of the Communist Party. Consequently, he was under continuous surveillance from about 1940 to his death in 1967 (which was about when we moved into the Kensington house). But even more than his maltreatment at the hands of red-baiters—or the fact that he ultimately gave over the names of former students to his persecutors—the ultimate poignancy of Oppenheimer's story lies in his status as the famous "father of the atomic bomb," who quickly realized the horror that he and his colleagues at Los Alamos had unleashed on the world. He became, on both scientific and political grounds, the central opponent of the project headed up by his former colleagues E. O. Lawrence and Edward Teller to produce the hydrogen bomb. Because of this, and because of his many ties to leftist

politics, Oppenheimer was fired from his postwar role with the Atomic Energy Commission and was publicly disgraced.

Who knows if our house was actually the site of a surveillance operation, or if it was, if that operation was directed at Oppenheimer? More interesting to me is the fact that my parents readily inferred that this was the case, and have held to this belief ever since. As such, the story has something like the status of folklore, and its import is in what it says about the self-understanding of Cold War-era academic research scientists like my parents. In the late 1960s, my father was a young assistant professor at Berkeley and my mother a graduate student at the Medical Center in San Francisco. They were both liberals and moderately involved in political events in that time and place, including the Berkeley Free Speech Movement and the protests against the Vietnam War. They were both recipients of significant government support for their research, in the form of grants from the National Science Foundation (NSF) and National Institutes of Health (NIH). They both signed the McCarthy-era loyalty oath required of all California state employees. For them, and I suspect many others of their generation, Oppenheimer's story—of which his surveillance by his own government was a key part—spoke to a central contradiction of the life of the midcentury scientist, and indeed of all midcentury academics: one's freedom as an academic was always in tension with the interests of the state.

I am here considering "academic freedom" in both the conventional sense of the freedom to control the substance of one's teaching and research agenda, and in a broader sense of a whole culture, in which academics have traditionally enjoyed self-governance in the workplace and wide personal latitude in regard to such things as dress, sociability, communication, comportment, and time management. Self-governance and the relative freedom to set one's own working schedule, to dress as one likes, to be openly nonconformist or even eccentric: these are all privileges that are typically unavailable to most other workers, including other professionals. Privileged academics who have the option to work elsewhere will often justify their preference for university work on the basis of this kind of personal freedom, and say that they traded better compensation for greater personal autonomy and more congenial working conditions.

Of course, academic freedom in both the restricted and this broader sense has had its limits, and these limits are historically specific. The moment of the Cold War is generally remembered as one where the first kind of academic freedom, associated with the free pursuit of one's teaching and research, was jeopardized by the state's hunt for political subversives. Yet the second kind of academic freedom, related to personal deportment, was also at least covertly at play in many of the investigations and firings associated with this period. Ideological anti-communism often entailed the rigid enforcement of social normativity of all kinds. Thus, for example, the close proximity between the pursuit of communist sympathizers and the investigation and persecution of homosexuals.³ More generally, Ellen Schrecker, the preeminent scholar of Cold War

assaults on academic freedom, has noted that “squeaky wheels . . . who refuse[d] to conform to the expectations of their peers and administrators” were particularly likely to become victims of Cold War repression.⁴

In the neoliberal university, threats to academic freedom seem both less acute and more diverse. While various non-state actors have tried McCarthyite tactics such as blacklists in an attempt to chill academic freedom,⁵ other threats to academics’ pursuit of their teaching and research agendas have emerged that attack the funding structures of research and of the university as a whole. Meanwhile, as an officer in my faculty union, I have seen the stress and frustration among many of my colleagues as they react to the curtailment of faculty self-governance and the increasing bureaucratization and regulation of their work and behavior, sometimes emblemized by such things as speech codes and mandatory sexual- harassment and cultural-sensitivity training. But these are largely the concerns of relatively privileged (and often older) academics. For the growing cadre of adjunct professors and others without job security, many of these privileges of academic freedom simply don’t exist.

One of my tasks here is to offer some account of how we got from one moment of encroachments on academic freedom to those of our current neoliberal moment. How, for example, did we move from a postwar situation in which direct abrogations of academic freedom in the form of state-sponsored investigations coexisted with the understanding that college campuses were places that were largely governed by the faculty? How did we arrive at a situation in which, in the absence of the kind of direct attacks experienced under McCarthyism, academic freedom in both senses is now seen in some quarters as an unneeded luxury? The answer to these questions can be found, in part, in the history of the American university as the post–World War II home of big science. It is a history in which Robert Oppenheimer played a significant part.

Alongside his undisputed genius as a physicist, Oppenheimer was also a talented manager. As the head of the atomic bomb project team at Los Alamos, he recruited a scientific team that was necessarily diverse (many of its members were European refugees), interdisciplinary, and ego-driven. But to make his task more difficult, he also had to negotiate the complex relationship between his assemblage of scientists and the American military, which was sponsoring and overseeing the complex project. Though the scientists were brought to Los Alamos to conduct highly sensitive military research, they tended not to respond well to the discipline of a military base. Oppenheimer appears to have been largely responsible for mediating these complexities and helped establish an environment in which, in exchange for bowing to the rigorous security concerns of the military, the scientists of Los Alamos were free to behave more or less like civilians—or,

rather, like the youngish academics that many of them were. Foregoing uniforms, workday schedules, and regulated communications, the scientists dressed as they liked, set their own erratic hours, met regularly for open scientific colloquia, and apparently had lots of parties. Though the installation itself was visually every inch an army base, it had, for the scientists at least, something of the atmosphere of an isolated, midsized residential college.⁶

The Manhattan Project's spectacular achievement (if that is the right word) helped define many features of postwar academic life. First and foremost, it provided a virtually incontrovertible demonstration of the view that scientific research and the training of new scientists were central components of national security, and thus constituted a public good. This was an idea reaffirmed repeatedly in the early Cold War during various scares about comparative Soviet technological gains, for which "Sputnik" has become a shorthand. But Los Alamos's achievements also helped persuade many that something very like the university—open, casual, collegial—was the best institutional home for big science, and indeed for research in general. Equally remarkably, by showing that scruffy, undisciplined, and possibly even foreign or leftist academic scientists could govern themselves and achieve results, the Manhattan Project helped promote the idea that universities could be run by the faculty, with minimal worker discipline imposed on them by their paymasters.⁷ The parallel between Los Alamos and the university would eventually come full circle, so that, in 1963, University of California president Clark Kerr would come to describe the university as effectively a military laboratory; that is, a secure space for the exercise of genius: "Inventiveness should be left to the individual faculty member within the protection and solidity of the surrounding institutional structure."⁸

Herein also lies the origin of that contradiction between state sponsorship and academic freedom. In a moment of massive state investment in science and education, the principle of academic autonomy was enshrined as an essential ingredient in the formula for success. Who better to select a team of promising scientists than another scientist? Who better to structure the plan of research? Who better to assess their work? These three issues—hiring, peer review and assessment, and self-management—form the core of faculty governance as a concept. And yet, this very openness and autonomy was potentially an issue of grave concern to those most invested in Cold War-era state security. Oppenheimer's open participation in the political and cultural life of the Berkeley campus before the war ultimately caused him in the postwar period to be investigated, surveilled, and sidelined from all militarily sensitive work.⁹ Thus, while scientific research for the military-industrial complex helped institutionalize one kind of academic freedom—the concept of faculty self-governance—it also led to outright censorship and denial of another.

The imperatives of military-industrial-academic science also drove the political economy of higher education throughout the long Cold War period. Indisputably, students and academics across all disciplines

benefited from the tremendously increased public expenditures in science and higher education and from the widespread perception that the support of research and higher education was in the public interest. The turn toward the model of big science also changed how faculty in all disciplines were evaluated and rewarded—especially at research universities, and all kinds of colleges and universities increasingly aspired to be just that. As the decades progressed, ever more normal schools and junior colleges became state colleges, and state colleges became state universities. Across fields, prestige accrued to research and publication, and to programs that produced graduate students. Even nonscientists came to see themselves, centrally, as researchers, and many came to worry that research activities were displacing teaching as a core activity of the professoriate. Also, the grant-funded research culture of the sciences changed the way that many faculty members, across fields, understood their employment. Many academics came to see themselves less as university employees and more as semi-independent contractors, whose primary professional identifications were with their disciplinary peers at other universities. Though some fields that did not rely heavily on external funding could reasonably ignore the contradiction between academic freedom and state sponsorship, a corollary contradiction soon emerged, between scholarly autonomy and self-governance versus the bureaucratic constraints of university employment.

As the model of the university's social relations and its ideological lynchpin, collaborative research science thus also organized the self-understanding of those other academics who also worked at research universities, such as those in the humanities and social sciences. In other words, scholars not based in the sciences developed a conception of themselves as academics and professionals in the context of this political and economic core of the research university. These academics could hold four basic and characteristic positions: they could embrace and emulate the model of work established by the Cold War university; they could openly critique the university's relationship to the government and military; they could rise above it all and ignore institutional contexts altogether; or they could develop a sense of professional mission in which they saw their role as somehow complementary to that of the sciences. Taken together, these general positions define a kind of ideological field within which many of our ideas about the role of the humanities and social sciences still operate.

Many humanities and social sciences scholars in the postwar academy embraced the model of government-sponsored scientific research as the core of the university by emulating scientists, whether in their working conditions, funding sources, and even their methodologies. In the early Cold War, whole new fields of the social sciences—especially area studies—emerged in the flood of government sponsorship.¹⁰ Additionally, we are now finally also learning the extent to which humanists also participated in, and benefited from, similar government patronage in the service of the US Cold War agenda.¹¹ More generally, there has

been a persistent ideological effort, since World War II, to justify the labor of all kinds of disciplines along scientific or quasi-scientific models. For example, in the social sciences, prestige often accrues to research that uses quantitative methodologies. But even in literary studies, we can see how various theoretical approaches that emerged on the scene in the midcentury, such as narratology and structuralism, attempted to capture something like the cachet of science. And there have even been attempts to emulate big science institutionally: the clearest example of this is the regularly offered proposal that we humanists organize ourselves and our students into hierarchical research groups, just like in the research sciences.¹²

Of course, university involvement in government and military research and propaganda efforts also had its academic critics, especially as the Cold War turned hot. During the Vietnam War, the extent of military research and funding on college campuses was opened to its severest scrutiny and became a target of student activism. In turn, this exposure of the core mission of the modern university also opened up a number of related radical critiques within disciplines, including, for example, an examination of the connection between anthropology and imperialism, or between sociology and the bureaucratic control of subaltern domestic populations. “History from below” and the literary “canon wars” similarly addressed disciplines’ complicity with ruling-class ideologies and social hierarchies of race, gender, and class.¹³ Or, more abstractly, some of the frisson of poststructuralist theory was precisely in the way that it was seen to interrogate some of the metaphysical underpinnings of the Cold War university. Deconstruction, in particular, challenged assumptions about the stability of meaning, the transparency of communication, and the authority of texts and authors.

The political flip side of this open resistance has often been attributed to the formalists and the functionalists, including the “consensus historians” who favored national genius and cohesion over struggle and social conflict, and the literary new critics, who emphasized the close analysis of literary texts to the exclusion of any social, biographical, or historical context. Indeed, the new critics could be seen as resorting to a rigorous practice of literary criticism to transcend the ugliness of Cold War culture, with its debased language of totalitarian propaganda, its advertising, its bureaucracies. As such, it could be seen as a kind of mandarin refusal of the Cold War university as well. But such a view doesn’t entirely hold up to scrutiny. First, it is now known that some of the very organs of the new criticism—journals like the *Kenyon Review* and the *Partisan Review*, and even the Iowa Writer’s Workshop—were recipients of CIA funding, and therefore implicitly participants in Cold War propaganda efforts. Second, it is important to see their techniques of rigorously decontextualized reading as themselves directed toward a critique of society. The new critics saw themselves as engaged in a kind of rescue operation for a language and a literature hopelessly contaminated

by a coarsened and commercialized popular culture. Theirs was social critique by way of an intense focus on what they worried were the lost capacities of language itself.

Though this tour of the ideological dispositions of the Cold War humanities and social sciences is admittedly sketchy, I think it suffices to suggest a more unified picture of the role of the humanities and the social sciences in the Cold War university. These disciplines existed in a *complementary* relation to scientific-technological-state prowess. Michael Löwy and Robert Sayre have defined “romanticism” expansively, as a strain of critique, a kind of loyal opposition, to the socially dominant narrative of modernity and technological progress.¹⁴ In the sense I described above, during the Cold War period the academic humanities and interpretive social sciences in particular took up this romantic role of critique of the dominant, becoming something like the conscience of Cold War society and the structuring conditions of the postwar university. In other words, in the Cold War university, our job was not to stop the bombs from being built but to ensure that their builders had the tools to mindfully understand what it was they were doing: to become like Oppenheimer, invoking the *Bhagavad Gita* as they watched the carnage. Indeed, I would add that this is largely the position even of those who espoused a radical critique of the university, or who seemingly sought refuge in formalism or aesthetic contemplation. Holders of both of these positions also, at times (which is to say strategically, and particularly in regard to their teaching mission) participated in what I think we can see as the larger ideological justification of arming future citizens to respond to the onslaught of technological and political change.

After Hiroshima and on through the years of Sputnik and the space race, scientists in the United States were granted extraordinary social prestige. Physicists of the immediate postwar generation were imbued with the status of public intellectuals, recruited by Rotary Clubs and Congress alike to pontificate on all manner of issues, from public education to global politics. But humanists and social scientists and their allies in the media were quick to see another side to all this adulation of science and its workers. In having devised a weapon like the atomic bomb, it seemed clear to many that our society’s technological competence exceeded its skills at social organization, diplomacy, justice, moral and historical reasoning, and much more. What better role for the humanist or social scientist than to fill this gap? To take just one very early example of this line of thinking, the popular social science writer Stuart Chase responded to America’s new status as the world’s only atomic power as follows: “As the first item of the educational agenda, I respectfully suggest that another two billion dollars be allocated, this time to the *social scientists*. An equally urgent directive should go along with it. Perhaps after some time in the laboratory and plenty of courage and effort, they can show us how to live with the unbelievable power the physical scientists have loosed upon us.”¹⁵

This sentiment, widely expressed in the early Cold War, created a new *raison d'être* for fields like psychology and sociology, which now claimed the key social role of understanding and explaining the violent and irrational impulses of nuclear mass destruction. But it also helped define one of the most enduring rationales for a liberal arts education as a whole: the idea that a broad and socially tolerant educational experience provided the necessary preparation for citizenship in an increasingly complex and dangerous world.¹⁶ This liberal arts mission would, in turn, provide the necessary ethical complement to the university's other role as the producer of government-sponsored scientific research.

Oppenheimer's House II: Neoliberalism

The topography of the East Bay has not changed since the 1960s. If you look down the hill from Kensington, you will still see the roof of the house that once belonged to Oppenheimer, and beyond that, the San Francisco Bay. But the social landscape has changed immeasurably since the end of the Cold War, and with the rise of neoliberalism, which celebrates the values of an unencumbered entrepreneurial capitalism, and correspondingly entails the retreat of the state from the support of social goods such as public education, and from the regulation of the free flow of money, goods, and workers.¹⁷ While the University of California still dominates the immediate area, so does the computer industry. A bus now stops in North Berkeley to ferry employees to Googleplex, Google's Mountain View corporate headquarters. Famously modeled after a university campus, with lots of recreational facilities, public art, and open spaces, its function is to entice hard-working young employees who are still nostalgic for their own college years—and, of course, ultimately to maximize shareholder profit.¹⁸ Let's call this the neoliberal version of Los Alamos, an update of Clark Kerr's conception of institutional "protection and solidity." Its superstars are no longer academic researchers like the atomic scientists but the vastly wealthy founders of Silicon Valley's businesses: people like Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg and Tesla and PayPal's Elon Musk.

The rise of neoliberalism has substantially changed both the political-economic organization of the university and its defining rationales. Whereas the social rationale for American research universities was once connected to national security and supremacy, universities are now portrayed as predominantly drivers of economic growth—especially insofar as they provide training and facilities that support "innovation" and entrepreneurship.¹⁹ Similarly, the teaching mission of universities is now popularly understood in terms of providing employers with skilled workers and with providing job training and access to class mobility for students. In short, once widely regarded as a public good worthy of state support, higher education as a whole

is now seen as a private good, whose benefit accrues to the private sector labor market and to the tuition-paying student-customer.

In numerous and multifaceted ways, this change in the mission of higher education is related to the changes in the way higher education—especially public higher education—is funded. The withdrawal of state funds from public colleges and universities has been dramatic. According to a report by the American Council on Education, “Based on the trends since 1980, average state fiscal support for higher education will reach zero by 2059, although it could happen much sooner in some states and later in others.”²⁰ This loss of funding for state higher education systems has been rather unsatisfactorily compensated for with money from private donors, and rising tuition. Students, who bear ever-greater burdens in tuition and student loan debt, increasingly demand that their college educations give them clear job credentials. This, in turn, supports the view among many lawmakers that higher education’s central benefit is to individuals, and that therefore it doesn’t require state support. Which only drives up the costs to the students in the form of increased tuition.

Meanwhile, government support for research has stayed flat, even as competition for funding has intensified and costs have ballooned.²¹ Filling in this gap are corporations, philanthropies, and even wealthy individuals. The impact on academic research—and academic freedom—is fairly clear. Private donors to academic science are often less interested in the long and drawn-out process of peer review, or in basic research, and far more focused on pet projects, applied research, and quick results. They also have the capacity to shape research agendas to conform to personal taste, financial self-interest, or even ideological bias—the most obvious case of this being the philanthropy of energy industry billionaires Charles and David Koch, which has supported research by climate change skeptics.²²

Perhaps a less obvious feature of this privatization is the process by which public universities especially have become sites of the transfer of wealth from the public sector to private hands. According to a *New York Times* story on private philanthropy in science, “a cottage industry has emerged, offering workshops, personal coaching, role-playing exercises and the production of video appeals” to help scientists court potential benefactors.²³ But what the article doesn’t say is that a good many of these scientists who have abandoned pursuing NSF grants in favor of perfecting “elevator pitches” of their research to wealthy donors were probably trained on public funds and work in buildings built and maintained by taxpayers. Indeed, the institutions in which they work could be seen as historical accretions of public money. Whatever prestige their university “brand” possesses was created on public funding. But from the perspective of corporations, it is of course the prestigious brand and its related access to tuition-paying students that is the most desirable asset of the modern university, and there is an effort underway, often with the help of state legislators, to figure out

how to profit off these public assets.²⁴ For example, while the debate about online education has been dominated by various pedagogical concerns, another, relatively underdiscussed, issue is the way that university partnerships with corporations like Pearson, Udacity, or Coursera to carry out online education effectively work to hand over the publicly created infrastructure of the university to extraction by private interests: they get access to lucrative college brands and a pool of potential tuition-paying students. It's less clear what the universities—to say nothing of the students—get out of it, besides appeasing corporate-friendly legislatures and boards of trustees.²⁵

Concomitant with these changes in the funding structure and the understanding of the social function of higher education, the university's organization and culture has also changed. It is increasingly patterned after corporate business, with its management model of profitability, efficiency, hierarchy, accountability, and measurable results. All of which has had a significant impact on academic freedom, in terms of both faculty governance and relaxed worker discipline.

Once regarded as the appropriate people to run the university, assess their colleagues' performance, and develop research agendas and curricula, faculty are being steadily pushed out of these governance roles. Indeed, where there was once "faculty governance," the new model is now one of "shared governance," in which faculty are understood to share the oversight of the key missions of the university with an increasingly professional cadre of administrators. Much of this erosion of faculty governance has to do with the increasing percentage at many universities of adjunct and nontenured faculty, who do not have the same kinds of expectations of professional or institutional service placed upon their work. Yet even many tenure-track academics are now struggling to maintain their central role in areas as basic to academic culture as the hiring and evaluation of colleagues and the shaping of the curriculum. An interesting example of a recent conflict between faculty and administration over control of hiring priorities took place in 2016, when UC Riverside's ambitious "cluster hiring" initiative ran afoul of the university's relatively powerful faculty senate. Among the faculty's concerns was that the initiative placed decisions about hiring priorities in the hands of senior administrators, overriding hiring priorities determined by faculty within departments.²⁶

As far as worker discipline is concerned, universities no longer offer passive "protection and solidity" within which genius researchers can work and play as they wish. Nor is this an entirely negative thing. It is somewhat harder, for example, to be a sexual predator or even a bully in the new corporate model of academia. Yet—especially for those without the protections of tenure—the "squeaky wheel" who, as Schrecker observed, most often runs afoul of administrators in academic freedom cases is arguably in a more precarious place than ever.

Some Conclusions

Under neoliberalism, the central struggle over academic freedom is not with the government but with the neoliberal university itself. Clearly, the reduced power and autonomy of faculty in the neoliberal university has changed the balance in the opposition between “professionalism and unionism” that Henry Reichman identified in his history of the AAUP’s gradual embrace of collective bargaining.²⁷ As academics at all levels of prestige and privilege increasingly find themselves excluded from college and university governance and subject to corporate labor discipline, as they have seen their status as “professionals” seemingly erode in the face of corporate management techniques, they have joined and will continue to join the labor movement. Recent years have seen significant growth in the numbers of faculty unions, especially those representing adjunct and nontenured faculty.²⁸ And with good reason. In 2013, Robin Meade, an adjunct professor and president of the adjunct union at Moraine Valley Community College, was summarily fired after criticizing the college administration’s treatment of adjuncts as “a disposable resource.” Without union protection, that would have been the end of the story. But because of established rules regarding retaliation against those engaged in protected union activity, she was ultimately reinstated and awarded a settlement.²⁹ In a managerial climate that celebrates “flexibility,” academic unions and collective bargaining have, at the very least, a vital role to play in simply establishing and enforcing the stable ground rules of academic employment and basic norms of academic freedom.

But the current climate surrounding academic freedom is not entirely confined to the university; instead, it extends to the larger social context within which universities operate. Our sense of mission as academics also relates to, and must offer a positive social vision for, this larger social context. In the Cold War, a liberal arts mission developed that provided an ethical complement to the military-industrial-research complex. Now, it seems clear that the way forward for the liberal arts is to develop a similar kind of rationale with regard to neoliberal capitalism. As in the Cold War, this is not an ideologically unitary project but rather can contain a number of different ideological strains and positions, from participation in and emulation of the things that neoliberal capitalism most values—entrepreneurship, monetizable innovation, the production of a skilled and flexible workforce—to outright opposition to it. In between, as in the Cold War, are a range of other possibilities; for example, radical interrogation of disciplinary complicity with neoliberalism and Olympian remove from the political-economic order as a whole—a gesture that itself may contain a certain strain of utopian critique. However this position is inflected, within constraints of the neoliberal university, our role as teachers, for better or worse, is to equip students with some critical capacity to understand this

socially dominant organization of our society, even as they find their futures within (and in some cases opposed to) it.

However, one clearly indispensable piece of our role as the “loyal opposition” *and* as citizens must be to vigorously defend the very concept of the public good, over and against the privatization of all. As citizens, we should be vigilant about the mining of publicly funded resources for private gain. But as academics, what social authority we have is connected to the idea of the public good, to which we contribute by teaching future generations and engaging in research. We must, therefore, assert that these activities are beneficial not just to private individuals but also to society as a whole. In practical terms, this means that we must aggressively support mass access to higher education and vigorously defend the public value of research—even (or perhaps especially) basic research, “blue-sky” projects, and other “wasteful” academic work that is not easily understood in monetizable terms.

The April 22, 2017, March for Science perhaps marks a strange coda for this essay.³⁰ Yet I think it is both symptomatic of some of the changes I have traced, and indicative of some of our way forward. The very idea of the necessity of such an event is in its way shocking. It is shocking that “science” must take to the streets to announce itself as a constituency, to announce that science has a public role. Indeed, it is even shocking to some that scientists are giving up their characteristic position of neutral objectivity to embrace something that looks like advocacy. But one can see the event as in some way speaking to the contradictions of academic life in the neoliberal moment, when the public value of science (and research and teaching) must be asserted, as must scientific (and by proxy, academic) social authority. This is an authority that has all too often been assumed, and taken for granted, since Oppenheimer’s era and the high moment of government-funded big science. The marchers marched because they now clearly understand that with a national government that is in many quarters hostile to scientific research, and indeed to professional expertise, they have to reclaim the idea that they have some role in the public good. From this basic fact derives not only professional prerogative but also the social legitimacy of our claims to academic freedom.

Susan Hegeman is a professor of English at the University of Florida. She is the author of books and articles on the intersections of US literature, culture, and the social sciences. From 2014 to 2017, she served as the president of the University of Florida Chapter of United Faculty of Florida (UFF-UF). She can be reached at shegeman@ufl.edu.

Notes

¹ My thanks to Sally Hegeman and George Hegeman for allowing me to tell their story, and to Guy Emery and Kim Emery for their thoughtful comments on an early draft of this essay.

² Kai Bird and Martin J. Sherwin, *American Prometheus: The Triumph and Tragedy of J. Robert Oppenheimer* (New York: Vintage, 2006), 306; James A. Hijiya, "The Gita of J. Robert Oppenheimer," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 144, no. 2 (June 2000): 123–67.

³ See Stacy Braukman, *Communists and Perverts under the Palms: The Johns Committee in Florida, 1956–1965* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012); Barry Werth, *The Scarlet Professor: Newton Arvin: A Literary Life Shattered by Scandal* (New York: Anchor, 2002); and David K. Johnson, *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

⁴ Ellen Schrecker, *The Lost Soul of Higher Education: Corporatization, the Assault on Academic Freedom, and the End of the American University* (New York: New Press, 2010), 38; and see Schrecker, *No Ivory Tower: McCarthyism and the Universities* (New York: Oxford, 1986).

⁵ Hank Reichman, "Now There's a Blacklist?," *Academe Blog*, September 10, 2014, <https://academeblog.org/2014/09/10/and-now-theres-a-blacklist/>; Christopher Mele, "Professor Watchlist Is Seen as Threat to Academic Freedom," *New York Times*, November 8, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/28/us/professor-watchlist-is-seen-as-threat-to-academic-freedom.html?_r=0.

⁶ Bird and Sherwin, *American Prometheus*, 210–13; James Kunetka, *The General and the Genius: Groves and Oppenheimer—The Unlikely Partnership That Built the Atom Bomb* (Washington, DC: Regnery History, 2015). See also Richard Lewontin, "The Cold War and the Transformation of the Academy," in *The Cold War and the University: Toward an Intellectual History of the Postwar Years*, edited by Noam Chomsky et al. (New York: New Press, 1997), 1–34.

⁷ See Christopher Newfield, *Ivy and Industry: Business and the Making of the American University, 1880–1980* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 115–31.

⁸ Clark Kerr, *The Uses of the University*, 5th ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001 [1963]), 72.

⁹ Oppenheimer was barred from working at the University of California's new weapons lab, which would come to be called Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory. His opposition to the construction of this lab put him at odds with its founders, Edward Teller and Ernest Lawrence. Teller, Oppenheimer's former subordinate at Los Alamos, testified against Oppenheimer in the hearing that ultimately denied Oppenheimer his government security clearance. Bird and Sherwin, *American Prometheus*, 531–37; Istvan Hargittai, *Judging Edward Teller: A Closer Look at One of the Most Influential Scientists of the Twentieth Century* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2010), 243–316; Gregg Herken, *Brotherhood of the Bomb: The Tangled Lives and Loyalties of Robert Oppenheimer, Ernest Lawrence, and Edward Teller* (New York: Holt, 2003).

¹⁰ See Carl E. Pletsch, "The Three Worlds, or the Division of Social Scientific Labor, circa 1950–1975," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 23, no. 5 (1981): 565–90.

¹¹ Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* (New York: New Press, 1999); Eric Bennett, "How Iowa Flattened Literature," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 10, 2014, <http://www.chronicle.com/article/How-Iowa-Flattened-Literature/144531>.

¹² See, for example, Sander L. Gilman, "Collaboration, the Economy, and the Future of the Humanities," *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (2004): 384–90.

¹³ See E. P. Thompson, "History from Below," *Times Literary Supplement*, April 7, 1966, 279–80. On the "canon wars," see Paul Lauter, *Canons and Contexts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); and Richard Ohmann, *Politics of Letters* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1987).

¹⁴ Michael Löwy and Robert Sayre, *Romanticism against the Tide of Modernity*, trans. Catherine Porter (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).

¹⁵ Stuart Chase, "The New Energy," *The Nation* (December 22, 1945), 710; qtd. in Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994 [1985]), 168.

¹⁶ Robert A. Jacobs, "Curing the Atomic Bomb Within: The Relationship of American Social Scientists to Nuclear Weapons in the Early Cold War," *Peace and Change*, 35, no. 3 (July 2010): 439.

¹⁷ See David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); and Saskia Sassen, *Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

¹⁸ See Caroline Kitchener, "How Companies Try to Make Work More Like College—and Why That's a Bad Thing," *Vox*, April 27, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/first-person/2017/4/27/15272172/college-graduate-jobs-recruit>.

¹⁹ See, for example, the Innovation Hub, a startup incubator affiliated with the University of Florida, whose website boasts of supporting "nearly three dozen technology-based startup companies," which "raised \$67 million in investment" and "created 800+ jobs." Innovation Hub at the University of Florida, "Creating Collisions," <http://floridainnovationhub.ufl.edu>.

²⁰ Thomas G. Mortenson, "State Funding: The Race to the Bottom," *American Council on Education*, Winter 2012, <http://www.acenet.edu/the-presidency/columns-and-features/Pages/state-funding-a-race-to-the-bottom.aspx>. For a fuller discussion of the implications of this trend, and of the general retreat of the welfare state and its relation to higher education, see Christopher Newfield, *Unmaking the Public University: The Forty-Year Assault on the Middle Class* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

²¹ Schrecker, *Lost Soul*, 167; William J. Broad, "Billionaires with Big Ideas Are Privatizing American Science," *New York Times*, March 15, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/16/science/billionaires-with-big-ideas-are-privatizing-american-science.html>.

²² Steven A. Edwards, "Science and the Billionaire Philanthropists," *American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS)*, May 6, 2013, <https://www.aaas.org/blog/capitol-connection/science-and-billionaire-philanthropists>.

²³ Broad, "Billionaires."

²⁴ The analogous situation in K–12 education is in the charter school movement, where taxpayer-provided public funding to schools is seen by corporate educators as a potential source of revenue.

²⁵ Newfield points out that corporate online education bears strong similarities to the privatization of other public utilities, such as the British rail system. See Newfield, "University Week: Virgin Air, UF Online, and the Price of Privatization (Updated)," *Remaking the University* blog, March 30, 2014, <http://utotherescue.blogspot.com/2014/03/university-week-virgin-air-uf-online.html>.

²⁶ Colleen Flaherty, "Cluster-Hiring Cluster & %*#?," *Inside Higher Ed*, February 1, 2016, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2016/02/01/uc-riverside-faculty-survey-suggests-outrage-cluster-hiring-initiative>.

²⁷ Henry Reichman, "Professionalism and Unionism: Academic Freedom, Collective Bargaining, and the American Association of University Professors," *JAF* 6 (2015): 1–18. <https://www.aaup.org/JAF6/professionalism-and-unionism>.

²⁸ Peter Schmidt, "New Study Charts Recent Proliferation of Faculty Unions," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 27, 2017, <http://www.chronicle.com/blogs/ticker/new-study-charts-recent-proliferation-of-faculty-unions/116611>.

²⁹ Virginia Myers, "Ruling Vindicates Adjunct's Right to Speak Out," *AFT*, November 3, 2015, <https://www.aft.org/news/ruling-vindicates-adjuncts-right-speak-out>; Robin Meade, "Another Victory for Adjunct Rights," *Academe Blog*, March 14, 2017. <https://academeblog.org/2017/03/14/another-victory-for-adjunct-rights/>.

³⁰ Nicholas St. Fleur, "Scientists, Feeling under Siege, March against Trump Policies," *New York Times*, April 22, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/22/science/march-for-science.html>.