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The University - An Owners Manual - Rosovsky,H

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### Author

Ariel, Joan

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# Recent Publications

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Rosovsky, Harry.** *The University: An Owner's Manual*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1990. 309p. \$19.95 (ISBN 0-393-02782-1). LC 89-9466.

**Trumpbour, John, ed.** *How Harvard Rules: Reason in the Service of Empire*. Boston, Mass.: South End Press, 1989. 450p. \$35 (ISBN 0-89608-284-9). Paperback, \$16 (ISBN 0-89608-283-0). LC 89-6206.

In the past several years, academic librarians and our faculty colleagues have witnessed an increased concern about American higher education, reflected in a multitude of publications addressing such issues as "cultural literacy," tenure, and the neglect of undergraduate education. The university has been besieged from without by conservative cultural critics and probed from within by academics disquieted by the shift in disciplines and values—from the social and spiritual to the scientific and specialized (or sometimes vice versa); from the aim to foster "fully developed human beings," in Wendell Berry's words, to careerism and commercialism. Debates rage about the political, economic, and moral problematics of the tenure system; the implications and obligations for academe posed by the changing demographics of our society; the impact and relevance of issues of race and gender (or racism and sexism to be more blunt). These forces affect not only student recruitment and faculty hiring, promotion and tenure, but also call into question the fundamental character, aims, and values of the university and of higher education.

If there is an epitome and ostensible

ideal of the American university, it is Harvard. Harvard's influential power—political and economic, ideological and pragmatic—casts so wide a net that it has been labeled "the Harvard factor." The exaltation of Harvard and its pervasive influence make the review of two recent books, each an investigation of higher education placing Harvard at the center, all the more relevant for anyone working in academia.

In the first, Henry Rosovsky, Dean of Harvard's Faculty of Arts and Sciences from 1973 to 1984, presents an optimistic defense of life in a major research university. Drawing upon his love for automobiles, he takes as his model the owner's manual and aims to present a guide to the university as an unfamiliar object which, in order to operate successfully, one must understand and learn to negotiate. Librarians will find this a highly readable guide to university administration and governance, the tenure system, graduate training, and core curriculum, enlivened by humorous anecdotes and Rosovsky's obvious personal passion for the Mercedes and BMWs of higher education.

Readers seeking an investigation of the particular challenges facing our campuses as we approach the twenty-first century, however, may be sorely disappointed. Fundamental questions about the purpose and availability of education and the very nature of research find no forum here. Rosovsky's enthusiasm for Harvard blinds him to the multiple implications of power and privilege embedded in the research university. He accepts exclusivity

and hierarchy as fundamental precepts: early on, his self-introduction admonishes us to "remember that universities are institutions that love hierarchies and distinctions at least as much as the military." He has little patience, for instance, with the student movements of the 1960s (he was only too happy to get out of Berkeley) and glibly refers to "the near classlessness of our society." Occasional references to women and minorities provide cosmetic touch-ups to the fundamentally sexist and elitist viewpoint, revealed in such presumably well-meaning yet unreflective statements as "All of us will have to adapt, and flexibility is particularly essential for women, because they are likely to wish or be forced to combine career and family." (Through parthenogenesis? one might ask.)

In sum, Trosovsky champions the status quo, tossing platitudes of "excellence" and "objective standards" to legitimize the prevailing social order, demonstrating little regard for the social responsibility of the university to the disenfranchised, let alone to the "just reordering of the world," to borrow an apt Jewish phrase. His self-congratulatory tone in a time when over two-thirds of the world's population is illiterate tests one's patience. In a postscript he dismisses as peripheral other such critical, social, and political issues as affirmative action, minorities, and university relations with the government, private sector, and community. Moreover, he skims the topic of sexual harassment and claims that "current negative attitudes toward higher education are related to the student revolt of the 1960s, our defeat in Vietnam, the decline in U.S. competitiveness, and similar national sources of unhappiness."

For academic libraries, faced with dramatic demographic changes on our campuses, increasingly politicized information policies and access, the advancing corporatization of the university, the myopic vision of the university in service of the few "owners" appears at best to be caught in a time warp which ill-serves both our present and future. His claim that the "owners" of the university, Harvard included, are multiple—students and

their families, alumni, faculty, donors, trustees, the press, and the general public—comes under closer scrutiny in *How Harvard Rules*. Here, John Trumbour, a Harvard Ph.D. student in history, aims to produce "a work of demystification," to deconstruct the myth of Harvard as an independent, liberal-left institution, and to unmask "Harvard's contribution to ethnicentrism and the 'superiority' of the West." Trumbour himself authors seven of the twenty-six essays, and the other contributors, mostly Harvard professors or graduates, include such notable scholars as Stephen Jay Gould, Ruth Hubbard, and Chester Hartman.

Following no particular party line, the authors examine a panoply of topics (corporate governance, urban development, labor struggles, sociobiology, racism, tenure, professional schools, core curriculum, and divestment) to expose "reason in the service of empire." Librarians will find the ten pieces in the section "Education, Ideology and Social Control" of particular interest. Here issues, such as undergraduate curriculum, law school education, and criteria for tenure, provide the material for challenging arguments that recur in different variations throughout the volume. Universities are first and foremost corporations: exploitative employers, wealthy real estate conglomerates oblivious to neighboring communities, profit-seeking institutions ignoring the conflicts of interest when faculty sell legal advice to multinational corporations or start their own multi-million dollar businesses. Tenure denials are rationalized as "necessary to uphold 'standards,'" but the standards upheld prove to be ideological, not intellectual. Individuals and movements that attempt to analyze meanings and curricula in a social context and within the framework of power relations, which act to transform education in the service of social reconstruction, find themselves quashed by hegemonic elites in collusion with external corporate power. Even the recent efforts at core curriculum reform represent, at bottom, intellectual management strategies designed to retain centralized intellectual production, defuse threats from the margins, and demobilize the disorderly at-

tempts to democratize education.

In each of these arenas, Harvard is under the microscope, but the description of the university's intellectual buttress to conservative social order, corporate power, and the national security state could be applied to many institutions, both private and public, my own among them. Some readers may be put off by the obvious negative bias and frequently polemical tone of these essays, yet considering the extensive footnotes and source citations provided by the authors for this litany of ills, one is hard-pressed to dismiss these arguments out of hand, vexing though they may be.

This impressive documentation (always appreciated by librarians) stands in marked contrast to Rosovsky's often glib assertions. If Rosovsky projects a Pollyannaish myopia, Trumbour, for his part, fails to extend his analysis to constructive suggestions for either reform or revolution. While he wildly denigrates potential allies who, he charges, are "Gucci Bolsheviks" or practice "a safe brand of feminism," he offers no coherent strategies for building coalitions for progressive change.

In our busy and often demanding lives, librarians frequently do not think they have the time to stop and look beyond the day's activities in the library and consider the institutions in which we work. Or, like me, we sometimes may fall prey to a certain smug satisfaction that, because (we think) we don't work directly for the war industry or are immune from the profit motive, we have "clean," socially important jobs. These books, particularly in combination, help us to understand better the modern research university and may encourage us to reassess our roles. They will have particular resonance for librarians in research institutions, but all readers, whatever their sense of ownership of the university or philosophy of service, will find provocative questions here. The reader may agree more with one than the other, but the two in dialogue frame the context and the debates that shape the conditions—challenging and contradictory—of our work.—Joan Ariel, *University of California, Irvine*.



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