

Knowledge and its Enemies: Towards a New Case for Higher Learning

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Acknowledgements

It was a quiet news day and I found myself at the Australian National University, covering a science conference. As a young reporter whose beat took in police, courts and industrial relations the halls of academe always seemed an improbable source of intrigue. As it happened, that day my attention was caught by a Californian scientist's concern that emissions from the Concord jet and aerosol sprays were eroding a layer of the earth's upper atmosphere, threatening to trigger collapse of the biosphere. This was before our understanding of 'climate change' had begun to mature. Could human technology really set off such a chain reaction? Moreover, could these concerns, if founded, change how people went about their lives? Exactly how do abstract ideas shape our social and material world, and if they? More importantly, was there a story in any of this? Yes, definitely, a 'few pars' decided the news editor.

Unknown to me a seed had been sewn. It sprouted some months later prompting my embarkation on an incredible journey. This began with my resignation and a return to higher education, now armed with some hard-nosed questions. Two paths were open for my probing: one, as a card-carrying student, gave me time to reflect upon the politics of science and society; the other, wearing my Press badge part-time, drew me deep into the labyrinthine world of academic and scientific research. Together, they led to a peripatetic career in science journalism, allowing me to extend my inquiry to many parts of the world, to Asia, Europe and North America. Conclusive answers may forever remain elusive but this thesis represents an effort to address fundamental questions concerning how human society coexists with the knowledge, and the artefacts of that knowledge, it alone creates. It was produced with the support of an Australian Postgraduate Award, but it is the culmination of field experience spanning two decades. The encouragement, inspiration and basic survival tips provided by many journalistic colleagues and editors all counted heavily towards this larger endeavour. However, it is my principal supervisor, Associate Professor Jeff Archer, and my co-supervisor, Dr Tim Battin, who oversaw this dissertation, to whom I owe a great debt. Their professional skill and the personal qualities they brought to this venture made the task achievable. I also owe a great thanks to Professor Lynn Meek and Associate Professor Leo Goedegebuure, who provided critical feedback, and additional co-supervision at key junctures. I also thank Paul Koshy, at Curtin

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Finally, I acknowledge the loving support of my wife Anne and our two children, Grace and Louisa, without whose confidence and enduring affection the writing of this thesis would have been inconceivable.

Abstract

The argument advanced here is that while the power of the state derives from a claim to a monopoly on sanctioned violence, the academy derives symbolic power by virtue of its grasp of universal human values and accepted truths, made potent by the fact that it can then speak to the legitimacy of the state. This symbiosis creates structural interdependence that was fundamental to the formation of the secular state and articulation of the global system of nation states. However, this relationship is also deeply ambiguous and tends to generate boundary conflict, particularly in liberal democratic systems where the lines of institutional demarcation between the state and the academy are often fluid and unclear. This leads to various propositions; such as, when the state becomes inward looking, and entrenched, it moves towards containing and capturing the academy. In this sense, the state can become the ‘enemy’ of higher learning as it seeks to exploit the instrumental value of the academy, rather than drawing upon the legitimising power of its symbolic values. The thesis predominantly uses a historical approach to examine the causal relations between Western traditions of knowledge creation and state formation. This leads to the conclusion that the role of the university, and its vocational purpose, grow out of its formative civil function. It also presents a series of structured case studies, based on Australia’s recent experiences, to test key propositions.

I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not currently being submitted for any other degree of qualification.

I certify that any help received in preparing this thesis, and all sources used, have been acknowledged in this thesis.

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Signature

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