

“Three Moments in the History of Universities”

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I am grateful to Alexandra Thomas for the invitation to tell you about the history of universities in 15 minutes – an impossible task, of course. I have decided, therefore, to sketch out for you three crucial moments in the rise and development of universities.

Universities are the long-lived inventions of medieval Europeans; these institutions did not exist in earlier times and places. By this, I do not mean to suggest that there were no institutions for advanced learning before then or elsewhere: instances that come readily to mind would include Plato’s Academy and Aristotle’s Lyceum in ancient Athens, for example, or the law schools of Roman Beirut or Fatimid Cairo.¹ What made a University something else is conveyed by the history of the word itself. [Slide 01] The word “university” is the English descendant of the Latin word *universitas*, one of the words used in medieval legal documents to designate a **guild**, which was a fictional body, that is, a corporation of the *whole group* – universe, if you will – of masters of a trade, craft, or enterprise.²

¹ See Paul E. Walker, “Fatimid Institutions of Learning,” *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt*, 34 (1997), pp. 179-200, for demolition of the myth that (p. 179) the Fatimids deserve “the glory of having established the oldest continuously operating university in the world, al-Azhar. . . *Madrasa* and university are, of course, not equivalent expressions and the modern word, university, needs to be dropped altogether from this discussion. Although al-Azhar was once an important congregational mosque, it was never, even allowing a certain hyperbole, a university in the Fatimid period. The madrasa is now the subject of an intense scholarly debate concerning its exact meaning and origin.” On the law schools of Roman and early Byzantine Beirut, see Linda Jones Hall, *Roman Berytus: Beirut in Late Antiquity* (London: Routledge, 2004); other important centers of advanced learning that have sometimes been described as “universities” would include the learned community of Taxila, the capital of the Kingdom of Gandhara (in modern-day Afghanistan and Pakistan) from the fifth century BCE-the fifth century CE; Jundishapur (Gundishapur) in Sassanian Persia; and the Bayt al-Hikma of Abbasid Baghdad.

² Gaines Post, “Parisian Masters as a Corporation, 1200-1246,” *Speculum* 9 (1934), 423-45; the terminology that lawyers deployed for “corporation” was variable in the 13th century, and could include also: *corpus*, *communitas*, *collegium*, *societas*, *consortium*, *collectio personarum plurium*. See also Hastings Rashdall, *The Universities of Europe in the Middle Ages*, 3 vols. (originally 1895, but now invariably consulted as revised by F. M. Powicke and A. B. Emden [Oxford Univ. Press, 1936]), p. 4, note: “Long after the rise of the scholastic universities,

In many parts of Europe, several cities became famous during the twelfth century of the Common Era as places where students from all over Europe could find Great Teachers teaching newly available Great Books and new disciplines. Many of these works were newly translated into Latin from Arabic and Greek, and over the course of the twelfth and thirteenth century, scholars who could read Latin gained access for the first time to almost all the logical, mathematical, scientific, medical, and philosophical writings of Greek antiquity and of the Islamic world. [Slide 02] In addition, someone in Northern Italy had stumbled upon an early manuscript copy of Justinian's sixth-century codification of Roman Law, and scholars at Bologna had begun to study, teach, and write commentaries on this body of law. In Justinian's compilation, scholars discovered the useful idea of a corporation. By the end of the twelfth century, the most important of the scholarly cities where these new books could be studied, taught, and debated were sufficiently teaming with students and teachers for such scholars to *perceive* that they had a profession in common, namely, **learning and research**; to *feel* the need to constrain competition; and to *establish* criteria of mastery of their profession. [Slide 03] These were the three catalysts critical for the production of any Guild – and the three very first *guilds*, or “universities,” of scholars had obtained legal recognition in charters before 1220: first at Bologna, second at Paris, and third at Oxford.³

Not surprisingly, perhaps, given the study of Roman Law at Bologna, it was the law *students* who founded the first “university of studies,” as Italian universities are called to this day. Bologna

universitas is used (absolutely) of the town corporations or guilds.” See, too, Pierre Michaud-Quantin, *Universitas, expressions du mouvement communautaire dans le moyen âge latin* (Paris, 1970).

³ It is, I think, significant that the guilds were brought into being by people who were familiar with, indeed immersed in, other organizational structures that might have been more obvious models: the feudal structures binding rulers to vassals into which many of the masters had been born, or the increasingly delineated ecclesiastical hierarchies which they would join. For good introductions to these developments, see John W. Baldwin, *The Scholastic Culture of the Middle Ages* (Lexington, MA: 1971), ch. 2; Danielle Jacquart, “Aristotelian Thought in Salerno,” in P. Dronke, ed., *A History of Twelfth-Century Philosophy* (Cambridge: 1988), pp. 407-428; Pearl Kibre & Nancy Siraisi, “The Institutional Setting: the Universities,” and David C. Lindberg, “The Transmission of Greek and Arabic Learning to the West,” in D. C. Lindberg, *Science in the Middle Ages*

remained famous throughout the middle ages for studies in law and in medicine, while Paris became the foremost site of studies in the Liberal Arts and Theology. [Slide 04] Parisian theologians evinced nothing but hostility toward lawyers and the study of law. They thought the only reason anyone would study law or medicine was to become rich – something that theologians have rarely admired. Here you see an image from a thirteenth-century Parisian manuscript that compares scholars who buy law books from scribes in Bologna to buying weapons from the enemy.⁴

Like other professional guilds, scholars' guilds north of the Alps were constituted and governed by the **masters** of the profession, each of whom had begun in effect as an apprentice, advanced to the status of journeyman or bachelor, and finally had demonstrated the *mastery* of his profession's skills by completing the *masterwork* required by the masters of the guild. Their acceptance of the masterwork meant his admission to their ranks. In scholarly guilds, this means the masters established the curriculum and the qualifications for degrees.⁵ [Slide 05] You see here a 12th-century portrait of an important Parisian professor, Hugh of St. Victor.⁶ He taught Liberal Arts, and 900 years later historians still know his name and can read what he wrote. His status as professor is shown by the fact that he is sitting in what is literally a professorial chair; indeed, it is a throne, and a professor who was actually teaching courses was said to be “ruling” his classes. The Latin word for that “ruling” is *regens*, or “regent” – and it is from that professorial activity that

(Chicago: 1978), pp. 120-144 and 52-90; Stephan Kuttner, “The Revival of Jurisprudence,” in Robert Benton & Giles Constable, eds., *Renaissance and Renewal in the Twelfth Century* (Cambridge, MA: 1982), pp. 299-323.

⁴ Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek Ms. 2554, fol. 90: (B) “Ici vont li fill israel en la terre de paenie si enportent fer et la baillent as paiens por armes feire et li paien lor font espees et haches et totes armens et lor baillent et cil les prennent [l scr. et del.] et les emportent.” (b) “Ce qe li fil israel alerent en paenie por armes avoir et li sarrazin lor fistrent et lor baillèrent senefie les mauves escoliers qi leissent les euvangiles et la devinitei et vont a Bologne por aprendre lois et decrez et cil lor baillent et lor enseignent tel chose qi les confont et destruit.” Discussed in Tachau, *Bible Lessons for Kings*, chapter 9, forthcoming.

⁵ Pearl Kibre, *Scholarly Privileges in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, MA: 1962).

university regents got their start. Moreover, faculty elected the administrators, and the longest administrative term was three months.⁷

This was the structure that the masters of the Liberal Arts at Paris and Oxford adopted,⁸ and North American universities are ultimately their progeny. Of course, much has changed since the medieval university took shape. [Slide 06] For example, when our students don't learn what we want them to, we no longer beat our students with bundles of sticks, as we see this master preparing to do in this thirteenth-century image. Yet, I think it important to appreciate that the magisterial guilds began and remained focused on what was for their time **research**.⁹ Nevertheless, the faculty role in research had waned considerably by the time the English colonies of North America began to create institutions of higher learning, which were instead designed mostly to teach people to be clergy.

Both those who defend and those who attack research universities commonly assert that the emphasis upon research by university faculty is a modern phenomenon – indeed, a post-World-War-II phenomenon.¹⁰ This is one of the most widely diffused and mistaken truisms abroad in the land, and it underlies the facile assumption that the alleged *post-war addition* of research to a

⁶ Oxford, Bodleian Library, Ms. Laud Misc. 409, fol. 3v, provenance: twelfth-century, St. Albans.

⁷ Katherine H. Tachau and William J. Courtenay, "Ockham, Ockhamists, and the English-German Nation at Paris, 1339-1341," *History of Universities* 2 (1982), 53-96, p. 86, endnote 29.

⁸ It is interesting that the very earliest guilds, at Bologna, were organized by journeymen **students**, that is, by the bachelors of arts— and by and large, universities founded south of the Alps and Pyrennes were and remain student guilds, as are the universities of Latin America, founded on their model. In addition to sources cited in notes 2-3 above, for Oxford's early history, see now T. H. Aston, ed., *The History of the University of Oxford*, vol. 1, J. I. Catto & R. Evans, eds., *The Early Oxford Schools*, and vol. 2, Catto & Evans, eds., *Late Medieval Oxford* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1984, 1992).

⁹ I am not alone in claiming this; see Henry Steele Commager, "The University and Freedom: 'Lehrfreiheit' and 'Lebrnfreiheit,'" *Journal of Higher Education*, 34 (1963), 361-70.

¹⁰ Fill in Examples (Murray Sperber, *Beer & Circus: How Big-Time College Sports is Crippling Undergraduate Education* (NY: 2000 ; new AHA *Historical Education for the 21st Century* and 1958 study, Rand Study, etc.)

professor's duties is the cause of name-your-problem in academe: the emphasis on research in graduate education, or the diminution of faculty attention to undergraduates, for example.

II.

This brings me to the second critical moment: the foundation of the first *modern* research university in Berlin in 1810. In 1810, the University of Bologna was over 650 years old, and the universities of Paris, and Oxford were about 600 years old; the first scientific journal, the *Philosophical Transactions* of England's Royal Society, was 145 years old; Lloyd's of London was 122 years old. By contrast, the New York Stock Exchange was only 18 years old; the Louisiana Purchase treaty was 7 years old; Abe Lincoln was one; the *New England Journal of Medicine* would not be founded for another two years, and Jefferson's University of Virginia would not be born for another nine. [\[Slide 07\]](#)

In 1810, the vision of the university of Berlin's founder, the Prussian educational reformer and linguist Wilhelm von Humboldt, was to unify teaching and research. New knowledge was to be created by faculty and by students working on research projects under the supervision of a professor, who would teach them rigorous methodologies in laboratories or, in the humanities and social sciences, in the equivalent, long-term research seminars. The knowledge gained in research was to be disseminated through lectures by the researchers themselves.¹¹

The new German conception of a university – as an institution dedicated first of all to research by its faculty and students, and only secondly to the dissemination of that research – presupposes that a university exists for its faculty, who are its *raison d'être*, and not *just* for, or even

¹¹ In addition to Jonathan Cole, *The Great American University* (New York: 2009), see James Turner, *Philology: the Forgotten Origins of the Modern Humanities* (Princeton: 2014).

primarily for, its students. And, from the start, the University of Berlin attracted the very best scholars, beginning with the philosopher Hegel.

There were, to be sure, nineteenth-century critics of the new university model, most famously Cardinal Newman. In *The Idea of the University*, Newman stated that “if [a University’s] object were scientific and philosophical discovery, I do not see why a University should have students.”¹² But by the time Newman wrote in 1854, students had been voting with their feet, drawn, as in the Middle Ages, from many countries to study with professors whose research publications had made them famous. Hundreds of well-to-do Americans were attracted over the course of the nineteenth century as students to Berlin and other German and French universities that adopted Berlin’s model and gained international prestige for their excellence.

Two Yale classmates, Andrew Dickson White and Daniel Coit Gilman, who, after graduation, had travelled to Europe and studied at the Sorbonne, the Collège de France, and the University of Berlin, became the founding Presidents of the first two American universities to transplant Von Humboldt’s model of the research university to our shores.¹³ [Slide 08] These were Cornell University, founded in the year our Civil War ended, and Johns Hopkins University, founded a decade later. The students who earned their Ph.D.s at Hopkins and Cornell spread this research model throughout the United States. Thanks to the structure established at Johns Hopkins University, in the United States, not only do research universities commonly have medical schools and their own hospitals, but von Humboldt’s seminars are still the backbone of instruction

¹² Quoted in Cole, *Great American University*), p. 17.

¹³ See Andrew Dickson White’s *Autobiography*, vol. 1 (NY: 1905), pp. 34-42. In Berlin, White (and, evidently, Gilman) attended the lectures of some of the most famous researchers of the day. They also visited Oxford and Cambridge, coming to appreciate the tutorial system; obituary for Daniel Coit Gilman, *Proceedings of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 52 (1917), pp. 836-39, at p. 837.

in the humanities.¹⁴ (These are not what scientists or Europeans now call “seminars;” instead, they function as “laboratories” of humanities research.)

Cornell and Johns Hopkins universities were founded near the beginning of the era known as “the Gilded Age,” a period in American History characterized by the development of enormous fortunes by ruthless monopolists who, from the 1870s to the present, have often been labelled “robber barons.” Their practices produced extremes of wealth and poverty not reached again until our own day. In their later years, several of these industrialists were persuaded to found or endow universities, and several who did so, chose the research university model for the institutions they would fund. Thus, in 1891, the railroad baron and former California Governor, Leland Stanford founded the university named for his son; and the petroleum magnate John D. Rockefeller founded the University of Chicago in 1890 and, in 1901, The Rockefeller Institute – now Rockefeller University, a research university that has no undergraduate students at all. This is an important reminder that there are, and can be, universities without undergraduate students, but there are *no* universities without faculty.¹⁵

III.

¹⁴ Cole, *Great American University*, pp. 19-22, 29-31; concerning the Louisvillian, Abraham Flexner, see also pp. 35-38. Daniel Coit Gilman’s Inaugural Address as President of the new Johns Hopkins University, delivered Feb. 22, 1876, sets forth his vision, including his clear intention of establishing a Medical school as part of the University as soon as this would prove feasible. The address is available at http://webapps.jhu.edu/jhuniverse/information_about_hopkins/about_jhu/daniel_coit_gilman/ (accessed 8/16/2014).

¹⁵ Cole, *Great American University*, pp. 22-23, 27. Similarly, Duke University: “In 1887,” at 50 year-old college (formerly Trinity college), “the youthful, Northern-born, Yale-trained John F. Crowell became Trinity’s president. Committed to the German university model, which emphasized research over recitation, Crowell directed a major revision in the curriculum, established the first campus-wide research library and, most important, persuaded the trustees that the college’s future development lay in an urban setting where it would be far easier to attract student, faculty and financial support. In 1892, after a spirited competition among piedmont cities, Trinity opened in Durham, largely because of the generosity of Washington Duke and Julian S. Carr, influential and respected Methodists grown prosperous in the tobacco industry...”;

The fact that extremely wealthy businessmen founded many of the first great research universities in the United States is *not* irrelevant to the third significant moment in university history that I want to mention: the foundation of the American Association of University Professors in 1913. Extremely wealthy businessmen – in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century as today – were used to getting their way, often through the deployment of money or the threat of its removal.¹⁶ Their understandable tendency to believe that only successful businessmen could be good trustees or regents of the universities they helped create, produced the conditions in which founders, donors, and/or trustees contested the faculty’s authority over the curriculum and faculty appointments, or their role in governance, and made it likely that trustees would construe faculty expression of controversial ideas as insubordination. The catalyst for the founding of the AAUP was a series of firings of professors and at least one university president for expressing ideas with which university trustees or founders disagreed. The most spectacular case was that of Professor Edward Ross, who was fired at Stanford because Mrs. Stanford didn’t like his ideas about immigrant labor and railroad monopolies –her husband having become wealthy through his control of a railroad monopoly. [Slide 09] Ross’s colleague, the philosopher Arthur O. Lovejoy, resigned in protest, moved to Johns Hopkins, and together with the pragmatist philosopher and educational

(<http://library.duke.edu/rubenstein/uarchives/history/articles/narrative-history>). Vanderbilt, 1873, became a research university with its 2d Chancellor, James Kirkland, who had a German Ph.D.

¹⁶ As Louis Brandeis wrote to his brother, Alfred, in 1927, when they were successfully trying to develop a sleepy, municipal seminary into the University of Louisville, and Alfred was getting frustrated with the trustees (*Louis D. Brandeis, Letters, vol. V, 1921-1941*, ed. Melvin Urofsky & David Levy (1978), pp. 261-62: “The need of money is great and urgent. The value of money is familiar to [the trustees]. The [fundraising] drive, as a means of raising money, is a prevailing fashion. To devote themselves to the obvious need, and to pursue familiar ways is natural. It doesn’t require thinking or vision. I do not criticize it. I accept it as a fact. While I recognize it as an obstacle, I am convinced that it is not an insuperable one. ... But even if the trustees were really interested in the things we are, and understood them, it would have been impossible for them ... to do the thinking necessary to carry out the purposes we have in mind. No matter what one’s background, that takes time, and if one has not the background, it takes a great deal of time. Moreover, the necessary thinking cannot be done by those who govern. It must be done by others; ... to a great extent it must come from the customarily downtrodden members of the faculty, who should be encouraged and taught to overcome their meekness.”

reformer John Dewey, at Columbia, organized the A.A.U.P., in 1913. They were soon joined by the legal reformer and dean of Harvard Law School, Roscoe Pound.

The founders of the AAUP created the modern structures of tenure as the essential condition for freedom of thought in research and teaching and for attracting the most excellent scholars to academe. Lovejoy, the founder of the *Journal of the History of Ideas*, was a specialist in ancient, medieval and early modern philosophy. He was, therefore, thoroughly conversant with the history of the medieval universities.¹⁷ He knew that faculty governance and authority has been present – with ups and downs – from the 12th century, and that the notion of **academic freedom** and the struggle for it began then. He was also familiar with faculty governance and authority in the major European universities of his own day.¹⁸ As Lovejoy understood, universities have remained vibrant institutions, the fonts of new knowledge, social change, even the “great and indispensable organ[s] of the higher life of a civilized community,”¹⁹ as the first AAUP declaration stated in 1915, precisely *because* of faculty governance, unsettling debate, and academic freedom.

¹⁷ Arthur O. Lovejoy (1873-1962), the early proponent of the species of intellectual history known as “the History of Ideas,” was also the author of many essays and several books, most famous among them *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of An Idea* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1936). For Lovejoy’s generation, the principal vademecum to medieval universities and their legal status as guilds was Rashdall’s work (cited above), and Lovejoy’s understanding of the nature of medieval universities’ faculty structures, governance, and academic authority is evident from his writings. See Daniel J. Wilson, *Arthur O. Lovejoy and the Quest for Intelligibility* (Chapel Hill: 1980). On his role in founding the American Association of University Professors and its Committee A on Academic Freedom, see also: Walter P. Metzger, “The First Investigation,” *AAUP Bulletin* (Autumn 1961), 206-210; W. P. Metzger, “Origins of the Association: An Anniversary Address,” *AAUP Bulletin* (Summer 1965), 229-237; Matthew W. Finkin, “The Assault on Faculty Independence,” *Academe: Bulletin of the American Association of University Professors* (July-Aug. 1997), 16-21; Daniel H. Pollitt and Jordan E. Kurland, “Entering the Academic Freedom Arena Running, The AAUP’s First Year,” *Academe: Bulletin of the American Association of University Professors* (July-Aug. 1998), 45-52. It is worth noting that Metzger’s articles indicate that already in 1913, when Lovejoy began to call his colleagues to form what would become the AAUP, the notion of the “Research” University, with the expectation that its faculty would publish their results, was already well established.

¹⁸ See also the 1955 classic, Richard Hofstadter, *Academic Freedom in the Age of the College, with a new introduction by Roger L. Geiger* (New Brunswick, NJ & London: 1996) and Walter P. Metzger, “The German Contribution to the American Theory of Academic Freedom,” *Academe: Bulletin of the American Association of University Professors* 41 (1955), pp. 214-230.

Moreover, given what Dean Roscoe Pound [Slide 10] wrote and taught about judicial appointments, I believe he was primarily responsible for one of the most important statements in the AAUP's 1915 *Declaration of Principles on Academic Freedom and Academic Tenure*:

“There are [some colleges and universities] in which the relation of trustees to professors is apparently still conceived to be analogous to that of a private employer to his employees The above-mentioned conception of a university as an ordinary business venture, and of academic teaching as a purely private employment, manifests also a radical failure to apprehend the nature of the social function discharged by the professional scholar. . . . [T]he nature of the relationship between university trustees and members of university faculties [is this:] The latter are the appointees, but not in any proper sense the employees, of the former. For, once appointed, the scholar has professional functions to perform in which the appointing authorities have neither competency nor moral right to intervene. . . . So far as the university teacher's independence of thought and utterance is concerned . . . the relationship of professor to trustees may be compared to that between judges of the federal courts and the executive who appoints them. University teachers should be understood to be, with respect to the conclusions reached and expressed by them, no more subject to the control of trustees than are judges subject to the control of the President with respect to their decisions.”²⁰

¹⁹ The 1915 *Declaration* can be found at <http://www.aaup.org/AAUP/pubsres/policydocs/contents/1915.htm> (accessed 8/19/2014)

²⁰ According to the revised, 1940 *Principles on Academic Freedom and Academic Tenure*: “Institutions of higher education are conducted for the common good . . . [which] depends upon the free search for truth and its free exposition. Academic freedom is essential to these purposes and applies to both teaching and research. Freedom in research is fundamental to the advancement of truth. Academic freedom in its teaching aspect is fundamental for the protection of the rights of the teacher in teaching and of the student to freedom in learning. . . . Tenure is a means to certain ends; specifically: (1) freedom of teaching and research and of extramural activities, and (2) a sufficient degree of economic security to make the profession attractive to men

IV.

What can we learn from these three moments? Americans tend to be presentists, to think that our own time is unique, and that technological progress and economic forces produce only one possible outcome, and must “change everything.” But history shows us that we are often wrong, that the pressures of the present are not unprecedented, and that we can – indeed must – choose what futures we want to work to create. History is not circular, but Americans have experienced very *similar* circumstances before. The era in which the American research universities were created was the one period that most closely resembles our own, economically and politically. The loudly-voiced ideology that would impose business practices and values upon all human endeavors is today, in our second gilded age, not easily distinguishable from that of the first gilded age and early twentieth century. For that reason, many of the A.A.U.P. documents written 100 years ago could have been written yesterday.²¹

Moreover, if business models work so well, why are there no for-profit corporations that have been in existence as long as the oldest continuing universities? Businesses come and go, with few lasting more than 150 years, and none as old as the University of Bologna. Indeed, few are as old as von Humboldt’s University of Berlin or even the University of Iowa.

Finally, the research university model has proved extremely valuable for the United States and the world, in spite of the fact that only about 6% of the many institutions of higher learning in

and women of ability. Freedom and economic security, hence, tenure, are indispensable to the success of an institution in fulfilling its obligations to its students and to society.” See <http://www.aaup.org/report/1940-statement-principles-academic-freedom-and-tenure>.

²¹ In both our times and then, trustees and regents have urged that universities adopt the business world’s practices of labor “flexibility” and “efficiency.” But the discovery and acquisition of knowledge and wisdom, like democracy, are intrinsically not amenable to efficiency, and efficiency is far from being the only virtue we should value. Tenure, as the essential means for guaranteeing academic freedom and excellence, is every bit as necessary today as in 1915, as reports of the national A.A.U.P. make clear every year. It has always been a

our country are Research universities.²² Few Americans have ever understood their purpose. Most have continued to assume that the most important – or even the only function – of faculty is and should be to teach undergraduates. Because research is so important to human civilization, we must not give in to the always-present, sometimes intense, sometimes waning, pressure to reorient what we do at the University of Iowa to what the other 94% of institutions that are *not* research intensive offer.

long-term investment, and has always been “less convenient” for those who manage budgets and “less flexible” than short-term, badly paid faculty appointments.

²² Cole, *The Great American University* (New York: 2009), p. 6.