

**C.M.A. Deer**

**Higher Education in England and France Since the 1980s**

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North America has no monopoly on large university systems. Post secondary enrolments are rising around the globe, as many nations shift from “elite” to “mass” systems, with some forecasting “near-universal” systems in the coming decades. Deer’s book is a follow-up to Margaret Archer’s 1979 study of the educational histories of England, France, the U.S., and Germany. The author examines changes in English and French higher education since 1980, comparing the interactions of their political elites, interest groups, and universities. She originally set out to contrast how the different structural origins of French versus English education shape their responses to change, but she instead often emphasizes their growing similarities, not their enduring differences. Central governments in both countries, especially in England, want post secondary institutions to not only grow and specialize, but to become leaner, meaner, and more business-like.

The value of this effort lies in its substantive content, not its theory or style. It offers a detailed narrative of changing policy, not a theory-driven investigation, despite promises to the contrary. At the outset Deer declares an allegiance to abstract European systems theory, and occasionally drops names like Luhmann, Habermas, and Giddens, but theory rarely penetrates her thick policy description, and is instead relegated to the occasional summary statement. Another unfortunate shortcoming is found in the book’s eccentric organization. Lengthy recounts of educational politics are sandwiched between a one-page introduction and a two page conclusion. Lying in between is a hefty historical narrative, a little sociological analysis, and lots of inelegant prose. I found myself too often wading through turgid sentences, such as this: “Certain academics have sought to oppose their rationality and deontology to external/economic criteria but the period has shown that the worth of their expertise as a particular positioning resource could only be as great as reciprocal recognition from the polity and external interest groups has allowed it to be (e.g. sociology)” (p175). To be fair, Deer is likely a French national writing in her adopted language, but nonetheless the monograph has a first draft feel, with several typos and countless awkward phrases. This opaqueness is a pity, because it masks her impressive knowledge of higher education.

Deer describes how French and British governments are re-defining the goals of higher education, regulating universities with performance indicators in the hope of making them more financially autonomous, competitive, and economically streamlined. An emerging mandate to boost enrolments while competing for tuition fee revenues is colliding with longstanding goals of academic rigour. On the positive side, this mandate is sensitizing universities to the realities of student life. In England, the recruitment of female and minority students is receiving more attention, while a French priority is to boost access in outlying regions, since the older universities were overwhelmingly based in and around Paris. Further, high rates of dropping out of university are now being scrutinized, and are increasingly deemed to be wasteful and inefficient. This comes as a particular shock to French academics, to whom student attrition has been a longstanding indicator of program quality.

But there is of course a downside to these revenue-conscious practices. Notions of faculty autonomy and collegiality are being eroded by external inspection and assessment. Student unions have been transformed from political movements to service providers, helping a membership that is no longer elite or mostly privileged. Plans to raise tuition threaten the very access that governments have pledged. Foreign students are now eyed mainly for their ability to fork over high fees, whereas in the past universities had more cultural goals when recruiting internationally. Top universities are packaging their curricula with the hope of exporting it to eager overseas customers. Overall, Deer describes an emerging landscape in which new policy entrepreneurs have little patience for venerable ideals of academic integrity, prize research mostly for its wealth-creating potential, and view equity largely through the lens of customer satisfaction.

Are there any lessons here for Canadian sociologists? I doubt that we will be confronted with the same aggressive managerialism that has eroded tenure and salaries for so many British academics, while raising their class sizes and workloads. We will, however, probably see administrators attempt to re-shape sociology departments with an ever-more economizing logic. Our universities are poised to further expand in the coming years, and revenue-minded administrators tend to view sociology as a cash-cow that can house masses of undergraduates. To further fill lecture halls, some may opt to dilute sociology programs, having been easily persuaded to go with a more post-modernist curriculum. Options include hiring humanities sessionals, who, knowing little sociology, offer “cultural studies” (itself an enterprising British export) to replace courses on Durkheim or survey methods or organizations with those on TV shows or fanzines or David Beckham. Who cares if undergraduates learn little substantive sociology as long as such courses are fun, undemanding, and lucrative? In terms of research, more administrators only value activities that can meet a bottom line of hauling in monies. Some are leveraging departments to become narrow health and society units, forsaking core practices to exploit the largesse available in medical research. Not an encouraging series of scenarios, to be sure. Maybe these are fleeting trends, and perhaps sociologists shouldn’t overreact. But if Deer’s take on trends in European higher education holds true, we will need to navigate this new era carefully. Perhaps a Canadian sociologist could do a similar study of our changing policies, matching Deer’s formidable grasp of higher education, while offering a sounder theoretical analysis and more accessible prose.

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Scott Davies has written on different aspects of post secondary education, and is currently researching varying forms of privatization in Canadian schooling. He has previously reviewed for *CJS Online*: in 1999, Mark Holmes, *The Reformation of Canada’s Schools: Breaking the Barriers to Parental Choice*, and in 2000, R.D. Gidney, *From Hope to Harris: The Reshaping of Ontario’s Schools*. His 1998 book with Neil Guppy, *Education in Canada: Recent Trends and Future Challenges* was reviewed in *CJS Online* in May 1999.

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