

Champagne *only* comes from Champagne.
Unmask the truth at www.champagne.us

Economist.com

BOOKS & ARTS

Research universities

Powerhouses

Jan 7th 2010

From The Economist print edition

The real dangers facing America's most important universities

Getty Images



The Great American University: Its Rise to Pre-eminence, Its Indispensable National Role, Why It Must Be Protected. By Jonathan R. Cole. *PublicAffairs*; 640 pages; \$35. Buy from Amazon.com

WHAT do the following have in common: the bar code, congestion charging, the cervical Pap smear and the internet? All emerged from work done at America's pre-eminent research universities. The central contention of Jonathan Cole's book is that these mighty institutions are "creative machines unlike any other that we have known in our history". They stand at the centre of America's intellectual and technological global leadership, but are now under threat as never before.

Professor Cole has worked all his life at one of these institutions, Columbia, where he was provost for 14 years from 1989 until 2003. His book is really three, each a magisterial work. First, he sets out an admirably comprehensive history of how America's great universities came into being. Then, he trawls for examples of the enriching inventiveness of these institutions, listing the extraordinary range of innovations in technology and in thinking that have sprung from their research. Finally, he outlines the forces that threaten America's research universities.

The author describes how these institutions built upon Germany's model of the 19th century, with its combination of research and teaching; how they benefited from America's early enthusiasm for mass education as a route to social mobility; and how they hit the jackpot in the 1930s, when many brilliant academics in Germany and Austria

fled to American universities (some of which had recently been purging Jews from their own academic bodies).

In the post-war era, the research universities—he reckons about 260 institutions might now claim the name, of which maybe 100 are key—became far larger and more complex. Many turned into “full service” universities, with a clutch of professional schools teaching business, medicine, law and engineering. A flood of federal and foundation funding increased the size of individual departments, bringing benefits of scale. Success bred success. In 2001, America produced a third of the world’s science and engineering articles in refereed journals, and in three of the past four years its academics received two-thirds of the Nobel prizes for science and economics. No wonder America’s great universities lure the world’s cleverest students and the finest academics, many of whom stay to enrich their new country.

Now these great factories of talent, ideas and technologies are threatened from without and within. Professor Cole makes several important points here, though his argument would have been strengthened with the addition of more statistics and tables. Increasing dependence on research funds distorts internal priorities, he says. Columbia University Medical Centre, for example, accounts for more than half of that university’s total budget, while humanities receive almost no external federal funding, and social sciences precious little.

Outside funding also breeds a sense of entitlement to interfere. Government has meddled increasingly. An especially noxious instance is the Patriot Act, passed in the aftermath of the September 11th 2001 attacks, which has had all kinds of adverse consequences for scientific researchers and librarians. Certain areas of study, such as climate change, stem-cell research and work on the Middle East, are particularly vulnerable to political pressure. Professor Cole tells how two respected scholars, Joseph Massad at Columbia and Nadia Abu El-Haj at Barnard College, were harassed by the Jewish lobby—and asks what would have happened had American universities given in to rampant institutional anti-Semitism and “resisted hiring the Jewish scientists and scholars from Nazi Germany”?

Most curious, to non-American ears, is another complaint: that the big universities are simply too big and too rich. Professor Cole frets about the growing gap between the richest (not Columbia, wealthy though it is by global standards) and the rest. The growth in Harvard’s endowment in 2006 was greater than the combined total endowment of all but the top dozen American universities. The ranking of research quality is highly correlated with the size of a university’s endowment. What if, muses Professor Cole, America ended up with four or maybe six wealthy giants with a lead so large that even the most entrepreneurial of the rest—Berkeley, say, or Chicago—struggled to compete, and became mere talent farms for the richest?

That is a worry most countries would love to have, as they see their brightest students and academics follow the money to the United States. A bigger concern should be the growing divide between research and teaching—especially undergraduate teaching—as research grows ever more complex. Professor Cole insists that one feeds the other, and so it often does. But he also notes that those hugely expensive medical schools often teach few or no undergraduate students. If the synergy between teaching and research is lost, the whole basis of America’s research universities is undermined. That, surely, is the greatest threat of all to these institutions.