Knowledge Exchange and Modern Universities

Allies and Rivals: German-American Exchange and the Rise of the Modern Research University, by Levine, Emily J. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021. 384 pp. $35.00 cloth. ISBN: 9780226341811

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There are several ways to read Emily J. Levine’s extensive new history of German and American research universities. One temptation, of course, is to read it as the triumph of one particular system, the American system. It is quite tempting to read it with hindsight that American higher education overtook Germans with imitation first but eventual innovation to create the world’s best system. This story is linear and straightforward. It has often been reinforced by a desire for progression. Many people are quick to dismiss the relevance of German institutions in today’s global landscape of higher learning institutions. However, such a narrative misses the point. The pre-ordained history misses the opportunity of seeing failed experiments, unreciprocated ideas, reluctant actors, and original practices on both sides. More importantly, this narrative is insufficient to explain how institutions change. The exchange is not one way.

The second way of reading is to focus on the men and women on both sides of the Atlantic. There are numerous aspiring figures in the story. Levine’s excellent account of people such as Daniel Coit Gilman, Abraham Flexner, Adolf von Harnack, and Felix Klein shows the importance of great leaders. There are also figures unfamiliar to Chinese readers, such as Martha Carey Thomas, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Bauhaus Albers. But to focus on these great men and women...
also missed the point, for Levine has a higher goal. Her account is built on the idea of competitive emulation (p. 4, especially FN12 on p. 261). It is the competition, cooperation, and borrowing at local, national, and international levels that resulted in institutional hybridization.

These great men and women of ideas and action are individuals who broker academic social contracts (p. 19); another concept that Levine uses to describe the act of balancing imperatives of nations, markets, and local needs. As Levine clearly articulated (p. 247ff), these social contracts are not static. Instead, they iterated over time. One of the central challenges of modern research universities is to forge and sustain such contract in a changing world.

A third way to read this book is to ask: What is missing from the story? This is the question currently puzzling me. America’s great achievement hinged on the excellence of its institutions. To understand various institutional trajectories, one should view them as intertwined rather than isolated. When Charles Eliot championed professional education in 1904, he inadvertently took away some of the opportunities U.S. high schools could have. It is true that law, medical, and business education capitalized on this opportunity to professionalize, but engineers and teachers took a different route. The situation is not quite the same in Germany, as we learned from Konrad Jarausch’s history of German professions (Jarausch, 1990). The degree of the enmeshment of universities into the modern societies is perhaps too complex to be analyzed in isolation.

But for readers on this side of the Pacific, another question lingers: What can be learned from the past to inform the present? How does a place evolve from being a receiver of knowledge to a producer of it? Committed students and original scholars are an obvious answer. But they only flourish inside the institution. One insight from Levine’s account is that the social contract between universities and society is key. Successful educational leaders are those who can manage these two interacting systems (p. 253) to architect an institutional home for scholars and students.

For Chinese readers, the idea of “life cycles” of knowledge is definitely worth noting. The vicissitudes of knowledge centers have not been studied systematically inside Chinese academia. The logic that governs the rise and fall of knowledge centers is different from those of nations and markets. This book certainly draws the readers’ attention to the issue. Historical accounts can be complemented by additional analysis. American institutions were able to innovate not only because of its far-sighted leaders but also because of the unique structural opportunities created under the coalescence of conjunctural forces and policies. For example, all major American social sciences professional organizations were formed during the period of 1884–1905 (Abbott, 2001, p. 132). They were young and growing just before World War I when German scholars started looking for new academic homes. Another structural opportunity is the GI Bill. It sent two million American veterans to college (p. 249), thus invigorating the entire system for the following decades. There are social structural underpinnings of the American story.
So a reader looking for a serious and rigorous treatment of this historical period can expect a good one from this book. It contains invaluable sources and references. It also features insightful quotes from visionary educational leaders. Most of all, Levine presented a compelling account of the modern research universities, with the traveling of ideas at its core. I also hope this book can be translated into Chinese very soon. Chinese readers would surely enjoy this book.

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