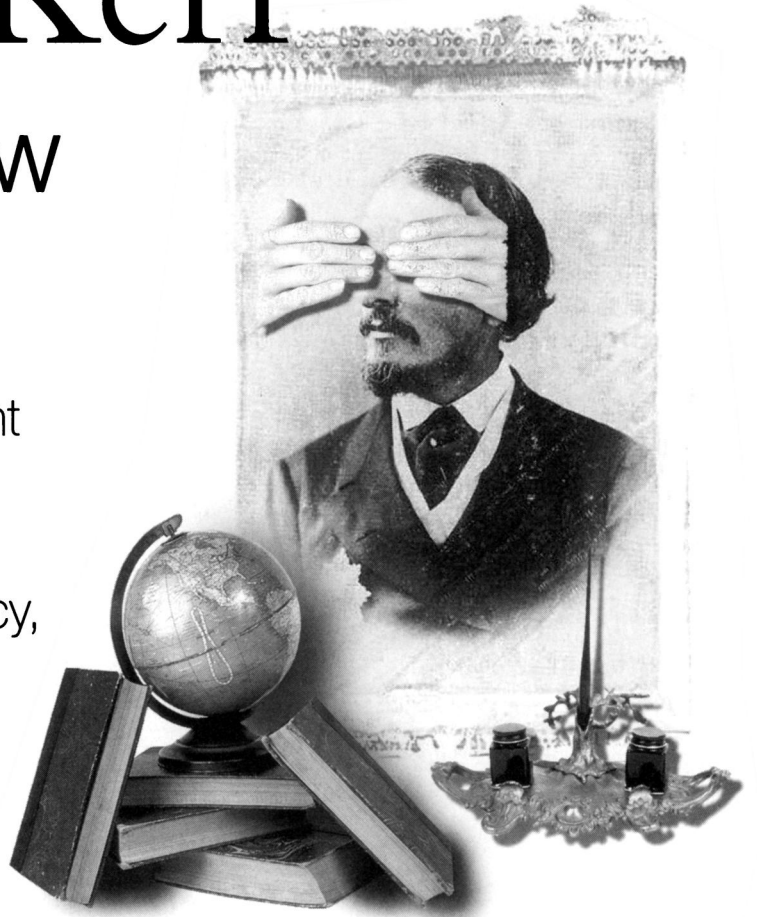


# The Mixed Legacy of Clark Kerr

## A Personal View

The death of a higher education giant unleashed a flood of eulogies. A careful reassessment of Clark Kerr's contributions to American higher education reveals a more ambiguous legacy, especially for university and college faculty.

BY JEFF LUSTIG



**T**he death of famed educator Clark Kerr last December evoked tributes and testimonials everywhere from the *New York Times* to local faculty bulletins. Architect of California's famous Master Plan of 1960, skilled labor mediator, first president of the University of California system, *bête noir* of the early student movement, and chair of the distinguished Carnegie Commission on the Future of Higher Education, Kerr captured the diverse impulses of his times with rare thoroughness while clearly defining the key questions facing American higher education.



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Absent from the eulogies, however, were evaluations of the great educator's contributions from a distinct faculty point of view. What did Kerr's visions of the multiversity mean for faculty? What did his project hold in store for people trained for professional autonomy and used to playing a central role in university governance? Most of the tributes for Kerr did not acknowledge the threats posed to faculty roles by Kerr's model of higher education, or the problems he himself came to recognize with it.

In fact, the route he mapped held more dangers than first appeared, and his times carried conflicting currents. But if faculty fail to develop an independent point of view, they will be unable to see those dangers or protect their role in an increasingly threatened institution. I offer this article, then, as one step toward a faculty perspective on Kerr's legacy from someone who has long been interested in his trajectory—from his brilliant, early economic articles, through his leadership of the University of California (and authorization of my arrest during the free speech movement), up to his late recognition of the growing crisis of his cherished university.

## The Idea of the Multiversity

It is the contradictions of the man, not the times, though, that first catch the eye. Defender of professors who earlier refused to sign California's anticommunist loyalty oath, Kerr received the AAUP's Alexander Meiklejohn Award for Academic Freedom in 1964, only weeks before igniting the free speech struggle on his flagship campus when he denied Berkeley students the right to engage in political advocacy on campus. A Quaker by conviction and a problem solver noted for his patience, Kerr was the first university authority in the nation's history to preside over a massive police presence and arrests on his campus. Witness with economist Paul Taylor and photographer Dorothea Lange to the 1933 California cotton strike memorialized in novelist John Steinbeck's *In Dubious Battle*, he later opposed campus organizing in support of the United Farm Workers. An accomplished negotiator, finally, he uncharacteristically discredited the motives of the student protestors, alleging that "49 percent of them [were] Maoists and Castroites" seeking the takeover of the university, only to have his own reputation secretly discredited by the Federal Bureau of Investigation. That calm exterior seems to have hidden a fair amount of inner turmoil.

Kerr was a practical man, but there was a theory of sorts behind his practice. His 1963 book, *The Uses of the University*, explained what it was. As he saw it, the federal-grant university, the new educational complex that was displacing the old land-grant college, was destined to become the core site for "knowledge production and consumption" in the emerging knowledge-based economy. The new multiversity, as he named the complex, was also being transformed into a knowledge industry. It "and segments of industry are becoming more alike," he explained. As surely as form followed function, that meant the university was also becoming more of a bureaucracy than a community—"a mechanism held together by administrative rules and powered by money" (and, in his most prescient bon mot, united by "a common grievance over parking").

This model of the university and Kerr's subsequent elaborations of it will be his lasting legacy, and not, for example, the oft-cited California Master Plan. That plan was a more mixed accomplishment than education policy makers usually like to admit. It established a statewide tracking system in higher education in which the University of California drew from the top eighth of California's high school graduates, the state colleges from the top third, and the junior colleges from the rest. The plan failed to provide a college education for all who wanted it, despite familiar claims, because it contained no funding mechanism for that purpose. And it secured a near monopoly over the granting of PhDs to Kerr's own system. That a state with 20 million residents and nine public PhD-granting institutions in 1970 should, in 2004, with 35 million residents and a "tidal wave" of new students (Kerr's term), still have only the same nine public PhD-granting universities and growing obstacles to student access to its lower-track institutions is partly the result of that plan.

To return to Kerr's main contribution, however, his model for the new university wasn't universally embraced at the time

he proposed it. Students and many leading educators protested the model's transformation of the university into a "knowledge factory," the loss of community it proposed, and its willingness to permit the university to play the service station to "leadership groups in society."

Kerr characteristically admitted the truth of many of these charges and went his critics even better. With a candor now rare at the top, he predicted that administrators and academic entrepreneurs would eventually pre-empt the authority of teachers in the brave new university, many faculty would "shift their identification and loyalty" to outside funding sources and become "tenants rather than owners" of the institution, and power would "move from inside to outside the original community."

Still, he and many others applauded the rise of this new institution. All these costs were acceptable, they proposed, because the new university was "productive." It was useful. In an outlook harkening back to economic theorist James Burnham's *Managerial Revolution*, Kerr assured readers that the new elites would direct federal and private resources in the public interest. He thus presented new rationales for both U.S. higher education and the new managerial class of which he was chief prophet and ornament.

## The New Liberalism

With Kerr's model of the multiversity in mind, it is easier to understand the significance of the free speech struggle at Berkeley and the deeper rift it revealed in the times. A gap was opening up between the old liberalism and a new. When students organized on campus to support the civil rights movement and persisted in their efforts despite Kerr's directives to stop—when they pitted "free speech," that is, against "the normal functioning of the university"—they focused attention on the deeper conflict. The conflict was between the liberalism of democratic involvement and that of bureaucratic management, between the university as a public sphere and as an adjunct to private industry, and ultimately between commitments to the methods of public reason and to those of administrative rationality.

And when Kerr consented to call police onto campus to quash the challenge of the free speech demonstrators, he inadvertently revealed the rigidity of the administrative model. For despite its claims of openness and tolerance, it was, and remains, ill equipped for real argument and debate. It is not set up for such things. It requires standardized procedures and coded phrases for its operation, and regards the acceptance of such procedures and newspeak as the precondition for its functioning, not the outcome of debate. Questions about its what and why therefore gave way as a matter of course to more mundane questions of how and how much. The new administrative liberalism revealed less a new politics than a plan to do away with the internal politics of the university altogether.

As the twentieth century drew to a close, the idea of the multiversity proved to have additional problems, even for Kerr. With plummeting federal and state revenues, campuses began to be thrown to the tender mercies of businesses and business-based foundations, the former of which persisted in being profit oriented despite the managerialists' predictions of

a “postindustrial” society. Reports mounted of partnership agreements that privatized pieces of the knowledge commons, courseware that denatured learning, and profit-making schemes that transformed the university into a direct site of capital accumulation.

Kerr’s third epilogue to *Uses*, published in 1995, revealed he was aware of much of this. He admitted that some of his earlier claims had been overly optimistic. He warned, as he had since heading the Carnegie Commission on the Future of Higher Education in the 1970s, that the institutional autonomy necessary for a genuine university was under attack.

But autonomy, unfortunately, was not a quality for which his model was well suited. A university that welcomes the externalization of governance and loss of intellectual detachment must have a hard time also maintaining independence. To implement an autonomous course of action, moreover, an institution has to be able to take its own members’ counsel and set its own course. But the political activity necessary to develop that counsel fits poorly into the bureaucratic mold, designed as it is to execute others’ mandates with maximum efficiency and minimum discussion.

Kerr declared in the same epilogue that there is more to a university than can be provided by the marketplace. But here again, the two sentences he expended on this point, though important, were too little to offset the contrary implications of the by-now widely accepted business model.

Historian Jaroslav Pelikan clarified what Kerr probably meant by “knowledge production” when he identified four central functions of the modern university in his 1992 book, *The Idea of the University: A Reexamination*. The institution exists in this view to provide for the advancement of knowledge through research, transmission of knowledge through teaching, preservation of knowledge through libraries and records, and diffusion of knowledge through publication. The list captures Kerr’s sense of “uses” nicely. But it also helps to reveal what Kerr’s project leaves out. Having deemphasized teaching, the activity that people traditionally have considered the heart of higher education, it entirely leaves out (with its idea of “transmission”) any liberal arts conception of that task.

### Need for Liberal Learning

That is no small loss. In the 1850s, John Henry Cardinal Newman identified liberal learning as the necessary process for “the cultivation of the intellect.” Educational philosopher John Dewey and social theorist Paul Goodman saw it as the means that enabled students to discover “their own best powers.” A whole line of social thinkers from Thomas Jefferson to social theorist C. Wright Mills emphasized a third, political, purpose in a liberal arts education. They saw training in this form of discourse and thought as necessary

for the formation of democratic citizens. And philosopher Immanuel Kant saw it as necessary to develop a university capable of fulfilling its mandate to speak “reason . . . publicly” to society.


What goes on in the classroom between teachers and students is at the core of the university. Its other functions and responsibilities are ancillary and supportive. (“If its object were scientific and philosophical discovery,” Newman noted with impeccable logic, “I do not see why a University should have students.”) No matter how large its student body or how immense its budget, a university that sacrifices its obligation to foster individual growth and cultivate cultural and political sensibilities in order to train students for jobs, or even undertake research, is a stunted institution. But Kerr’s *Uses*, in addition to posing a threat for professional autonomy, lacked a firm commitment to liberal arts teaching.

I do not mean here to reduce Kerr to the dimensions of his theory. His was a large presence, and his course, again, ran through conflicted times. The contrast he provides with many current academic managers, moreover, is clear. Where he hoped for a postindustrial society, they openly look for

“business leadership.” Where he was a proven scholar and writer, many of them seek higher status by simple force of salary accretion. Where Kerr eagerly debated his ideas with colleagues, many leaders today have grown more manipulative, the former chancellor of my own system writing of the need for “leverage and constraint mechanisms . . . to effect change and improve client orientation in response to consumer and patron expectations.”

Yet Clark Kerr played a major role clearing the path to where we now find ourselves. That merits attention from those who recognize the threats to higher education posed by the corporate university. And it also accounts for a certain pathos in Kerr’s own career, unremarked in the recent eulogies. His tone, from the heights, was always of mastery. But his underlying message was ultimately drift. I was surprised when I first found running as a subtext through his famous book allusions to

courtesans, profitable liaisons, and the “young lady from Kent/who . . . knew what it meant—but she went.” But with his trademark lucidity, Kerr refused to dodge the implications of his approach, alluding to the world’s oldest wage workers in an effort to reconcile his colleagues to becoming wage thinkers.

Both trades, among other things, wait upon the bidding of others. And Kerr’s final advice in *Uses* unfortunately confirmed the point: “The process cannot be stopped. The results cannot be foreseen. It remains to adapt.” Those who would honor the man’s larger objectives and reclaim the university’s rightful roles will have to find a different route, a bolder vision, and a more independent counsel than those that Kerr, for all his gifts, provided. 

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