

Ethan Ris. *Other People's Colleges: The Origins of Higher Education Reform*

Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2022. 368 pp.

Emily J. Levine

Stanford University, Stanford, CA

Email: elevine@stanford.edu

The achievements of Ethan Ris's first book, *Other People's Colleges: The Origins of Higher Education Reform*, are numerous. Rare among histories of higher education, he brings together two distinct fields, sociology and history, to contribute to three different conversations regarding (1) the history of American higher education; (2) the study of philanthropy and civil society; and (3) the history of what has been called "American Political Development."¹ As a result, he does something even rarer—he not only offers snapshots of interesting moments in higher education that have transcended their time and place, but also presents an original theory of institutional change.

Ris's methodological innovation is to tackle a classic sociological problem—that of stratification and inequality—by using historical methodologies and archival sources. His approach is reminiscent of David Labaree's but with a crucial difference. Labaree examined the combination of factors—including the absence of a strong state, the presence of a strong market, and decentralization—that contributed to the success and stratification of the American education system.² Ris, in contrast, begins from archival sources to identify causation in a uniquely historical way to chart the evolution of that system over time.

The result of Ris's strategic exaptation is that he *historicizes* debates over policy or the directions of institutions *before* their path was clear. This has two important effects. The first is methodological. Unlike much historical sociology of education, including the excellent work of Labaree's, Ris's work awards agency to individuals who pull the levers of change and catalyze institutional development. Second, by providing insight into the moment before those decisions were made, he forces the reader to ponder the contingency of those paths and critically appraise concepts and institutions that often go unquestioned.

The most advantageous feature of this approach is that it illuminates the paths *not* taken. Indeed, a number of stories, including that of the American "national university" that never came to be, emanate a counterfactual, and the failed realizations of certain visions helps to shed light on some of the shortcomings of our current system, including, in particular, its stratification.

¹For an exemplar of American Political Development (or APD), see Christopher P. Loss, *Between Citizens and the State: The Politics of American Higher Education in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).

²See, for example, David F. Labaree, *A Perfect Mess: The Unlikely Ascendancy of American Higher Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

There is, however, a potential obstacle in the emphasis on individuals as agents of change. As Ris persuasively argues, well before 1915, as is commonly thought, educationalists—or “academic engineers,” in Ris’s formulation—such as Henry Pritchett and Abraham Flexner promoted policies of stratification and presented a coherent ideology or a set of ideas that justified these policy reforms. Yet individuals don’t always get what they want. This is an alarming contradiction. On one hand, *Other People’s Colleges* rightly attributes agency to overlooked actors—itsself an important corrective to a particular institutional historiography that views institutions as having a life of their own.³ On the other hand, it’s not the purest version of those ideas that are implemented, but the reluctant compromises among educationalists of their ideas. Ultimately, institutional hybrids persist that are never a true expression of the original ethos. Attuned to this tension, Ris writes, “Top-down design is not destiny” (p. 11).

Ris returns to this contradiction in the conclusion: “This was not the system that the academic engineers set out to create in 1905. But, amazingly, it was a system that nevertheless fulfilled their long-term goals. They envisioned a United States where society was stratified by occupational status, where power would accumulate in New York and Washington, and where the nation’s economic, military, and technological sectors, among others, would become the envy of the world.... Each of those things happened. What they got wrong was that a tightly coupled system, dictated by ‘experts’ in a foundation office, was never going to deliver all of that” (p. 299). That is, they succeeded by leaving behind their system, which became the envy of the world, if not their ethos of expertise.

This is a surprising conclusion and a creative framework, but it poses yet another question that Ris’s book doesn’t entirely resolve: What are the optimal conditions for excellence?

Ris sets out to describe the reformer ethos of system builders at the beginning of the twentieth century, which was modeled on Europe but only half fulfilled. Instead there was a reaction against that ethos, a shift Ris cleverly calls the “counter reformation” (p. 195). If the system builders were top-down, the counter-reformers were anti-top-down—though it would be hard to call such elite professors as Arthur Lovejoy, John Dewey, and James Cattell “grassroots” figures. But some of these in the latter group were more focused on the democratic uplift of society, or what we might call today “access.” The result was a system that had an opaque hierarchy, which when paired with the ethos of democratic uplift, has contributed to the American Dream.

The dilemma is reminiscent of Joseph Ben-David’s classic 1972 essay “Science and the University System,” in which he aimed to identify the cause of Germany’s higher education excellence. For Ben-David, it was *despite* rather than *because* of Prussia’s top-town efforts at centralization that fragmentation continued, thus fostering competition and ultimately excellence. What emerged was a kind of accidental innovation.⁴ Is this

³See, for example, David John Frank and John W. Meyer, *The University and the Global Knowledge Society* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020).

⁴Joseph Ben-David, “Science and the University System,” in “The Notion of Modern Educational Sociology / Der Begriff der Modernen Erziehungssoziologie / La notion contemporaine de sociologie de l’éducation,” special issue, *International Review of Education / Internationale Zeitschrift für Erziehungswissenschaft / Revue Internationale de l’Éducation* 18, no. 1 (1972): 44–60, here 49.

also what happened in the US? Are Germany and the US closer than Flexner (and Ris) would have us believe?

A latent theme in *Other People's Colleges* is the academic engineers' enduring admiration and emulation of Germany. At every turn, they fashioned their ethos based on what they *believed* the German model was and what they *believed* was the secret sauce of Germany's success. When they looked across the ocean, they saw many similarities: a relatively new nation; strong regional centers; and what Ben-David called a "center-periphery dynamic." In both America and Germany, leaders used higher education as a mechanism for nationalization and cultural revival. But ultimately any comparison was limited by differences that were incommensurable. For example, the *Gymnasium*, or German secondary school, was more akin to the American liberal arts college in its curriculum than the high school, a distinction that made assuring adequate preparation for university in America nearly impossible. Few academic engineers understood this, and those who did, like Flexner, still tried to turn the envied Germanic apples into oranges stateside—that is, to wedge an elite and hierarchical system into a democracy.

In the end Ris never really tells us what that competitive emulation's role is in the story, nor what a comparison among the systems and their development might reveal today, though what he implies is that the maladaptation of the German system in the US is one of the reasons for the academic engineers' downfall. What Ris captures so well is the uniquely American public-private institutions that step in to do what the federal government cannot or will not do, including providing faculty pensions and attempting institutional mergers to standardize the industry.

Ris's story ends with the hybrid system whose legacy we have inherited—one of opaque hierarchy and the democratic ethos. Germany would make an interesting comparison since, in contrast, it retains a hierarchical system that tracks students from a young age, but who, in turn, can use their vocational training from a lower tier to succeed in a robust labor market. In America, in contrast, we enjoy the ethos of the American Dream where all individuals can succeed if they reach their full potential. Or do we? Work by such scholars as Mike Rose has shown how tracking in America is barely beneath the surface of most American high schools, which divert average students to undervalued trade programs.⁵ Yet since America doesn't *formally* have tracking, our system doesn't do a good job of providing alternatives to those individuals that don't lift themselves up. That seems like the most insidious outcome of the academic engineers' half-success, and Ris's excellent history shows how it never had to be this way.

doi:10.1017/heq.2023.19

⁵See, for example, Mike Rose, *Why School? Reclaiming Education for all of Us* (New York: The New Press, 2014).