

Lisa Anderson on the Therapeutic Turn in American Universities

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SPEAKERS

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You are listening to the Hopkins Press Podcast. My name is Rahne Alexander and I'm the Senior Publicist for the Hopkins Press Journals Program. On today's episode, I'm talking with Lisa Anderson, who is the special lecturer and James T. Shotwell Professor of International Relations Emerita and Dean Emerita at the Columbia University School of International and Public Affairs.

Dr. Anderson served as provost and president of the American University in Cairo from 2008 to 2016 as well. Today we're talking with Dr. Anderson about her new article in *Social Research*, which is called "From Pursuing Truth to Managing Stress, The Costs and Consequences of the Therapeutic Turn in American Universities." Now this article is part of a phenomenal and timely special issue of social research devoted to exploring The Embattled University and we've made Dr. Anderson's article free on Project MUSE through the end of September so you can read while you listen or before or after. It was a true pleasure to meet Dr. Anderson and I hope you enjoy our chat about the therapeutic turn in American universities.

Lisa Anderson, thank you for joining us today on the Hopkins Press Podcast.

You have a new article in *Social Research*, which is called "From Pursuing Truth to Managing Stress, the Costs and Consequences of Therapeutic Turn in American Universities." It's a really great article. How did you get involved with *Social Research* for this particular article?

Lisa Anderson

Well, thank you for having me. I think the origin was probably a long-standing set of discussions I've been having with a variety of people about the nature of higher education, probably since I was in Cairo. So, some of the background is that I was provost and then president of the American University in Cairo. So, I had a perspective on the development of American universities that was somewhat unusual. It was, if you will, at a distance. And so, I could see trends in higher education globally and the extent to which the American model was clearly being exported, adopted with some enthusiasm around the rest of the world, warts and all. And so I'd been thinking about this and writing a little bit about it for some time. And then Arien Mack approached me about doing a piece for this issue, I think expecting, as we all did at the time, that the framing of many of these kinds of issues would be around the issues of academic

freedom that came up in the last few years on American campuses. But I actually took the opportunity to step back a little bit and think about the context in which some of these debates were taking place and some of the controversies were taking place because I don't think that, you know, we can fully understand why they seemed so fraught without understanding some of this background about the direction in which universities had begun to go far earlier than that.

Rahne Alexander

Yeah, I think it's a question on a lot of people's minds. How did we get here? How did we arrive at this moment?

Lisa Anderson

Exactly.

Rahne Alexander

So your article hinges on what you call "the therapeutic turn" in American universities. What do you mean by "the therapeutic turn"?

Lisa Anderson

Well, this is an expression that's certainly not unique to me. And it really is an effort to capture something that has happened, I think, in other disciplines and domains. But again, obviously, I'm interested in the university world, where increasingly there's a concern with ensuring the health and well-being of students as opposed to their education.

Now the two things don't have to be mutually exclusive, but neither are they the same thing. And if a university is intended at bottom to be an educational institution, the increasing emphasis over the last, I would say, 20, 25 years on well-being and mental health services and sort of allied wrap around advising for students and so forth and so on, has shifted the emphasis and I think shifted the experience of students and shifted the expectation of parents and so forth. So that there's much more concern about whether the students dormitories are comfortable, whether the mental health and other health services are easily available and whether the students are reporting that they're too stressed out and what should we do about stress and so forth and so on. All of which I think is not intrinsically undesirable but for the fact that it distracts attention, resources and focus from education which is really [laughter] presumably what these institutions are supposed to be doing.

Rahne Alexander

Yeah, it's an interesting shift.

Lisa Anderson

Well, I mean, what's interesting to me is that, you know, the idea that students should be comfortable, I think is one that's relatively recent and actually quite subversive of the idea of exposing students to ideas that are new to them and so forth. So in some important respects, the accent on, you know, being stress free and comfortable and so forth and so on means that students are less challenged, don't expect to be challenged in the way that educators think they

should. And that creates its own kind of tension because in the classroom, if you don't challenge your students, if you decide that everybody's above average, if you will, that does interfere in a learning process, I think most teachers would tell you. And so, the concern then is not so much that we're deliberately trying to make our students miserable, but that being miserable may be part of learning.

Rahne Alexander

[Laughter] I definitely can't argue with that. I think I've learned so many things when I've been miserable.

Lisa Anderson

You're uncomfortable, you're exposed to things that you haven't thought of before. You're off balance. That's part of the point. That's part of what happens. That's how you absorb new ideas, how you come to be more creative.

Rahne Alexander

Yeah, and as I'm thinking aloud, universities have always had residential life programs, student affairs, those kinds of things. And it seems those responsibilities for the therapeutic would be on their shoulders more, so than on the actual educators, right?

Lisa Anderson

Well, then you start looking at institutional investments. And one of the things that people on the faculty side of things have been complaining about for years is that there are more and more people who are administrators and fewer and fewer proportionally faculty. Why is that? Well, then you end up getting the deans of who are in charge of these sort of residential life or health services or support services and so forth and so on. All that kind of thing is run by people who actually are trained to run it, but they are not faculty. And so, you're beginning to put real resources into things that are presumably intended to be an adjunct to, but not the main circus ring.

So I think that the concern is ensuring that students are comfortable all the time or expecting students to be comfortable all the time leads them to, to expect an experience that's not really what the faculty have in mind. What does it subvert education in some respects. It does divert resources in some respects from the core mission, which is the real experience of learning things you didn't know before.

Rahne Alexander

In your article, you make a lot of interesting observations that kind of provide a background of how, how we got here. And one of the more interesting observations that you made is that we're in this moment where a lot of existing university leaders are being ousted from their positions, university presidents being compelled to resign. And you notice that a lot of their immediate replacements are trained as health care professionals. What do you make of that?

Lisa Anderson

I actually was surprised when I began to explore that because I didn't anticipate it. I think it is a reflection of the zeitgeist more than it is a deliberate, you know, trustees saying we're going to look for somebody with this experience. But I do think it reflects trustees being concerned that that is a vocabulary, it's a orientation, it's a stance that would be appropriate in these circumstances where students are saying they're uncomfortable, they're feeling harassed, they're feeling misunderstood, they're feeling all sorts of *feelings*. Whereas, you know, again, if the intent was education, they might be feeling ignorant, but then you would have a different vocabulary to address that. But if they're feeling distressed, then you're going to have a vocabulary that just, you know, addresses that. And I think these kinds of university leaders provided that vocabulary, could talk about the distress of the students in a way that, you know, people who are philosophy professors or you know, computer science professors probably can't.

Rahne Alexander

Another thing that you notice, that you talk at length about is the financialization of the university. And you highlight some of the ways that universities have begun to resemble hedge funds, private equity. And that's been criticized across the political spectrum. You definitely talk about that in the article. But how do you see the financialization side impacting this therapeutic turn? Is it in conflict? Is there tension? Or is there some kind of harmony there?

Lisa Anderson

Well, I think, again, part of the problem is that what, what a faculty member would describe as the core mission of an institution like this, which is creating and, and disseminating new knowledge, whether it's by teaching for individual students or by discovery in laboratories and research programs, that for much of the last 40 years or so, the people who have been managing universities have accented instead other kinds of purposes. So for example, when you have a lot of people who are in fact finance professionals who have become trustees because, of course they're wealthy and they can support the university and the absence of public support, those Trustees begin to apply their own skill set to the management of the university and what they see is, you know, a need to enhance revenues and their own expertise is to do that through investments and so forth. So pretty soon the important part of what the trustees are paying attention to is how the endowment is doing rather than whether the educational mission of the institution is being fulfilled.

It's partly diversionary. Now we're going to have students who — we don't want them to be unhappy because they're going to be paying a lot more money. We don't want them to be unhappy because we can fund, you know, trustees will pay for enhancing dormitories and athletic equipment and so forth and so on, in a way that is obvious and easy for them without getting very close to the classroom itself.

And so I think part of it really is just a drift away from the mission of education, of research and education, on the part of the people who manage it, and a drift toward things that seem more accessible. And finally, if you conceive of the university as a business, your customers, the students, have to be happy. And in the long run, I think most alumni of most universities from 40

years ago are pretty happy with the education they got, but they may not have reported at the time being happy. They didn't expect to be happy. It wasn't part of what the arrangement was, but once you see this as a business and you see it as customers, then you start saying we have to have, you know, good enrollment numbers. We have to be competitive. So the whole shift of universities as competitive. *What does that even mean?* Universities aren't necessarily, I mean there's nothing intrinsic about the way a university operates that it's supposed to be competitive, but it's going to compete for, you know, having the best endowment returns, it's going to compete for having the lowest admit rate, it's going to have all sorts of criteria or standards by which it, you know, the quantitative indicators of how competitive they are.

There's no reason to be competitive at all, actually. There's plenty of seats for plenty of students and plenty of students who want to come to universities and so forth. But you've begun to see the institution that way. So that induces a sort of anxiety within the institution that can be dealt with through this therapeutic turn. And I think the therapeutic turn is also a little bit of a kind of diversion from the fact that we're not paying attention to education anymore.

Rahne Alexander

Well, in the light of all this, what do you think is now the responsible move for the universities and its various constituents? Do you see us moving beyond this therapeutic turn?

Lisa Anderson

Well, it's interesting because I think it is, you know, again, you know, partly zeitgeist. I think it's not something that, you know, any particular university can sort of say, OK, we're going to go back to being, you know, porridge in the dining halls and [laughter] you know, hammocks for, it's just that's not going to happen. And I think at this point, other kind of challenges have clearly intervened in a way that represent other kinds of existential dilemmas for university leaders, one of which is clearly the Trump administration's decisions to erode institutional autonomy. And that does mean that the kinds of maneuvering room that institutional leaders have, trustees or presidents and so forth and so on, is probably going to be considerably constrained, at least for the foreseeable future. So that's a separate and somewhat different challenge. And the other separate and somewhat different challenge is how you think about education in the world of artificial intelligence.

And so neither of those were issues that I addressed in my piece because neither of them had risen to the prominence they have now. Trump had not been reelected when I completed the piece. But I do think what you see is universities are really not particularly well equipped to address either of those kinds of challenges in part because this loss of focus on mission critical investments of paying attention to education, paying attention to educating people about what education is for. So parents are better equipped to have students come home and say, you know, I don't think my professor likes me. That kind of thing is important that parents don't be led to believe that their students are always gonna be happy. That students don't be led to believe that public affairs is something that they should be stressed by as opposed to participate in and be involved in and so forth and so on. The sense that the universities were already sort of wobbly, if you will, not really particularly well governed, well organized, communicating their

mission particularly well and so forth and so on, I think has meant that these sorts of challenges have been much more difficult for them.

Rahne Alexander

Yeah, definitely more precarious than many of us expected, I think.

Lisa Anderson

Exactly, exactly.

Rahne Alexander

Well, this is great. I'm really excited to put this out into the world and let people read this article and observe it. We'll make it free for everybody to read for a time. Is there anything else you'd like to add? And would you like to talk about anything else you're currently working on?

Lisa Anderson

No, I don't think so. I'm working on several different, very different kinds of projects at this point. You know, I suppose where I did to draw any lessons from the piece itself and the work I did for it is that I really do think the core mission of the American university and its expressions globally of educating citizens and discovering new knowledge is something we just have to keep central in everything we think about because there isn't any point in having a lot of money, you know, having a big endowment if that's not what you're doing. And there isn't really a lot of point in having a government that's willing to underwrite what you're doing if that's not what you're doing. So I think the crucial question here is how to ensure that, that's what trustees and university presidents and deans and faculty and so forth think about every morning when they get up.

Rahne Alexander

Wow, well thank you for your time. I'm really, really hoping people can read this and get something useful out of it.

Lisa Anderson

Right. Thank you very much.

Rahne Alexander

Thank you for listening to the Hopkins Press Podcast. We hope you've enjoyed this discussion and if you have, please rate us and subscribe and make sure to read Dr. Anderson's article in social research over at Project Muse. And we hope you'll tune in again next time to the Hopkins Press Podcast.