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**When are Universities Followers or Leaders in Society?
A Framework for a Contemporary Assessment**

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ABSTRACT

In assessing the current and future role of universities in the nation-states in which they are chartered and funded, it is useful to ask, When are universities societal leaders as societal and constructive change agents, and when are they followers, reinforcing the existing political order? As discussed in the book, [Neo-Nationalism and Universities: Populists, Autocrats and the Future of Higher Education](#), the national political history and contemporary context is the dominant factor for shaping the leadership or follower role of universities – what I call a *political determinist* interpretation. We often think of contemporary universities, and their students and faculty, as catalysts for societal progress -- the Free Speech and Civil Rights movements, Vietnam War protests, the anti-Apartheid movement, Tiananmen Square, and more recently the pro-democracy demonstrations in Hong Kong. Universities can be, and have been, the locus for not only educating enlightened future leaders, but also for opposing oppression and dictatorships. But universities have also proved over their history to be tools for serving the privileged, and reinforcing the social class divisions of a society; they also have been factories for errant theories that reinforce the worst of nationalist tendencies. Universities are both unique environments for educating and mentoring free thinkers, entrepreneurs, and citizens with, for example, a devotion to social change, or for creating conformists -- or all of the above. How might we assess whether universities are followers or leaders in their societies? This essay considers this question, offering a framework for evaluating the follower or leader role, and with particular attention to the emergence or, in some cases, re-emergence of neo-nationalist leaders and autocratic governments.

Keywords: Universities, Civil Society, Academic Freedom, Neo-Nationalism

This essay provides a framework for analyzing the current and future role of universities in the nation-states in which they are chartered and funded, formulated around the question: When are universities societal leaders and constructive change agents, and when are they followers, reinforcing the existing political order? This is an important question as universities are viewed as significant players in the social and economic life of nations, and are often viewed as real or potential change agents: for supporting social

* This essay is adopted from the book [Neo-Nationalism and Universities: Populists, Autocrats and the Future of Higher Education](#) published by Johns Hopkins University Press, available as an Open Access eBook via [Project Muse](#). [John Aubrey Douglass](#) is a Senior Research Fellow and Research Professor - Public Policy and Higher Education at the [Center for Studies in Higher Education](#) - Goldman School of Public Policy - UC Berkeley.

mobility, technological innovation and economic development, and for promoting civil liberties and a more equitable and democratic society.

As discussed in the book *Neo-Nationalism and Universities: Populists, Autocrats and the Future of Higher Education*, and based on a series of in-depth national case studies, it is apparent that national political history and contemporary context are significant and nearly dominant factors for shaping the leadership or follower role of universities.

Exploring this question of followers or leaders, or something in-between, comes at a time when there is a significant emergence of a new breed of autocrats and illiberal democracies – with consequences for universities and their multiple roles in society.

Over the past two decades, a wave of nationalism has gripped much of the world. Donald J. Trump's surprising 2016 election as president and calls for America First policies; Brexit with its elongated uncertainties; nationalist movements in France, Italy, Germany, Brazil, and India; and the rise of illiberal democracies in Hungary, Poland, and Turkey. Neo-nationalist movements in these and other nations are characterized by some combination of anti-immigrant, nativist, anti-science, anti-globalist, and protectionist sentiments.

Like right-wing populist movements in the past, neo-nationalist supporters are often reacting to their own sense of waning political power and perceived declines in social status and economic opportunity. Under autocratic regimes, like those in China and Russia, neo-nationalism has different characteristics: it is a tool for a revival of older as well as new forms of control and suppression, enabled by new technologies -- a form of nationalism redux.

To varying degrees, universities are feeling the brunt of this rise of neo-nationalist movements and governments, usually led by powerful political demagogues. For the purpose of generating populist support and solidifying authority, we have entered an era in which neo-nationalists often attack universities as hubs of dissent, symbols of global elitism, and generators of biased research; academic freedom is being more overtly suppressed, faculty and administrators fired and jailed, and university governance and management altered to ensure greater control by autocratic-leaning politicians.¹

Universities are at the forefront of both national development and global integration. They will undoubtedly continue to play this dual role. But the political and policy world in which they operate is undergoing a transition. This has an impact not just on universities within autocratic-leaning nations but on global talent mobility and the evolving global ecosystem of universities, where collaboration and exchange are key components in their success and productivity.

With the objective of providing a useful analysis of the interface of neo-nationalism and universities, there are a number of themes discussed in the book *Neo-Nationalism and Universities*, leading to a hypothesis relevant to this discussion on the "follower or leader" theme of this essay. One is that, historically, universities are essential in nation building and in shaping and being shaped by various forms of nationalism; their rise in importance and influence corresponds with the emergence of the modern nation-state. A second theme is that neo-nationalism has contemporary causes different from those of the past that have different meanings and consequences for universities in different parts of the world, depending on their academic culture and the current political context in which they must operate.

This hypothesis is what I call a *political determinist* view: the national political environment, past and present, is perhaps the most powerful influence on the mission, role, and effectiveness of universities,

and the higher education systems to which they belong -- more than internally derived academic cultures, labor market demands, or the desires of students. Further, the particular national political norms and environment largely, but not completely, determine the internal organization and academic culture of universities and their interface with the larger world. Their level of autonomy, in governance and internal academic management, for example, is to a great extent dependent on the political culture and determinants of national governments, for good and bad.

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 appears to simply reinforce the central role of the nation-state, in particular the societal controls of nationalist-leaning governments. The power and authority of national governments, right or left leaning, only increased in response to the pandemic. In many cases, autocratic governments used the crisis to expand their authority, with a direct impact on the operations of universities and the civil liberties of academics and students.

Restrictions imposed as a consequence of COVID-19 on social and political gatherings have arguably provided an improved environment for authoritarian governments to pass antidemocratic laws and to put a desired end to mass prodemocracy protests. China's imposition of its National Security Law passed in July 2020 is a case in point; it provided Beijing a path for an expanded and harsh crackdown on dissidents, including university students and faculty in Hong Kong and elsewhere.² At the same time, China's national response to the virus has boosted nationalism and the claim that its one-party autocratic system of government is superior to Western democracies, and specifically a politically chaotic and seemingly weakening United States.

The concept that the political environment is determinative in shaping the mission, organization, and academic culture of universities is not in itself a revelation. Sociologists focus on institutional theory that, in part, sees universities as significantly influenced by their environment and traditions that shape their internal "institutional logics"³; economists look at resource dependency that, in the case of public higher education, is largely furnished by the state; policy historians chronicle the essential role of governments in chartering and shaping universities to meet political ideals and perceived social and economic problems.

In my view, these various analytical approaches are inadequate in themselves in explaining the context and behaviors of universities. They tend to focus on internal universal norms of universities and not on the larger and specific political context driving their organization, mission, and national role.

At the same time, there are weaknesses in the *political determinist* viewpoint. Political culture and organizations are, after all, the sum of complex social, economic, geographic, and demographic variables over time. There is also a global trend toward organizational convergence in some aspects of university management, including the adoption of "best practices."

Yet this *political determinist* view provides an interesting starting point for assessing the meaning and impact of neo-nationalism, in its varied national forms, on universities and their role in the societies they serve. Political geography still matters.

A FOLLOWERS AND LEADERS FRAMEWORK

We often think of contemporary universities, and their students and faculty, as catalysts for societal progress -- the Free Speech and civil rights movements, Vietnam War protests, the anti-apartheid movement, Tiananmen Square, and more recently the prodemocracy demonstrations in Hong Kong. Universities can be, and have been, the locus for not only educating enlightened future leaders, but also

for opposing oppression and dictators. Universities have also proved over their history to be tools for serving the privileged and reinforcing the social class divisions of a society.⁴

The global movement toward mass higher education held the promise of universities as agents of socioeconomic mobility and societal rebirth. They are places where universities pushed the boundaries of knowledge and generated societal disruption. Universities have also been factories for errant theories that reinforce the worst of nationalist tendencies. Universities are unique environments for educating and mentoring free thinkers, entrepreneurs, and citizens with, for example, a devotion to social change, or for creating conformists -- or both.

How might we assess whether universities are followers or leaders in their societies?

Here I propose a number of variables when considering this question for higher education institutions in a particular country, and the role of a particular university.

1. The first relates to the institution as *a vehicle for socioeconomic mobility*, which is vital in countries with moderate to very high levels of income inequality -- in other words, nearly all nations. This mobility is meant to be inclusive, providing access for a broad range of ethnic and racial groups and genders, within a nation or region.
2. The second variable is *the role of universities in regional and national, and global, research related to social problems* like poverty, health, and pollution. This includes basic research related to, for example, disease and water quality, or social science-based studies on school districts and urban planning, with the expectation of generating practical solutions.
3. The third variable are a university's *impact on technological innovation and economic development*.
4. A fourth is *educating a talented labor force and educated citizenry* that includes entrepreneurs and those devoted to government and nonprofit employment. We can add to this educating students to be global citizens, in part understanding that it is increasingly important for employability and also because the process of globalization ties all of us to common ideas and problems, such as global warming.
5. The *public service role of universities* is a fifth variable, including the engagement of students and faculty with and in support of largely public institutions and services, such as local schools, hospitals, and local and national governments. University-run hospitals provide perhaps the best example of the intersection of teaching, research, and public service. This role can also include university-run art museums, performance facilities, libraries, and other facilities and forms of engagement with local communities.
6. A sixth variable relates to *the preservation and study of the art, history, and culture of a university's nation or region*. This has been one of the central roles of universities, including faculty-led research and writing, but also the collection and organization of archives and, related to public service, university- or community-operated historical museums. The overt effort of past and current authoritarian leaders and governments to control the historical narrative poses challenges for this vital role of universities.
7. A seventh variable relates to *a university's global engagement*. This can include research collaborations with foreign universities and their faculty and students, but more importantly it relates to the exchange of academic talent. The number of international students who are enrolled as regular students at the undergraduate and graduate level -- as opposed to short-term programs that are often segregated from the main campus curriculum -- is one marker of international engagement. Another is the number of foreign nationals on the faculty or in other capacities, like research. To some degree, the presence of foreign nationals strengthens the global perspective of the home campus and can, depending on national policies, add significant diversity of talent to local, regional, and national labor

pools. Global collaborative research can, in fact, function as global communities that transcend national political identities. The COVID-19 pandemic is a great example of universities generating the foundational science and a collaborative global science community that generated therapies and vaccines and facilitating their distribution.

8. Finally, the eighth variable is *the vital role of universities, and their students and faculty, as informed and constructive critics of society*. Critical analysis of the social and political problems of society is, arguably, one of the most important roles for a university and its academic community. Conceptually, academic freedom relates to the right of faculty to voice sometimes controversial research findings or views that broadly relate to their academic field or discipline. But it also includes the right of faculty and students to voice, for instance, criticism of government policies or the behaviors of politicians as citizens.

One can also extend this framework to the departmental level and to consider the varied roles of more regionally focused institutions that exist in, for example, the United States – including institutions without major research profiles or doctoral programs, some that are more vocational in orientation.

Focusing on major national universities, there are conundrums in assessing a university's leader versus follower role: for example, university research has an association with national security that offers conflicting uses by national governments.

On the one hand, universities are positively engaged in efforts to improve cybersecurity for the purpose of protecting the economic life of the nation and the personal security of its citizens; on the other hand, academic science is currently bolstering spying and surveillance capabilities of national governments that are Orwellian -- China's widespread use of facial recognition technology to monitor the behavior of its citizens is a case in point.

WHAT IS MOST IMPORTANT?

If universities are to be evaluated according to their leadership or follower role, we must engage in some sort of weighting of the above factors to help understand a university's full impact on the society that it serves. Only a few universities in the world may claim that they are truly and exclusively global enterprises, with no national or regional constituency. Hence, national and regional service and impact is the paradigm for understanding the leadership or follower title.

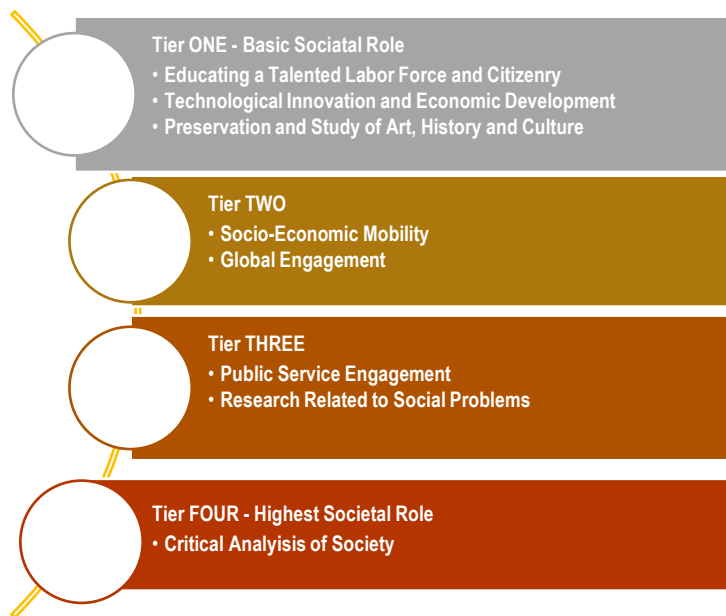
Educating a talented labor force and contributing to technological innovation and economic development in a nation or region are all base activities that, in some form, all universities are engaged in, no matter the political context. Similarly, the preservation and study of art, history, and culture has a basic role for every university -- although, as noted, autocratic governments often seek to control and subvert the narrative of a nation's history to support their own, often golden age, nationalist myth narrative.

More aspirational is the objective of promoting socioeconomic mobility -- a more complex role that depends on the demographics and politics of a nation-state. And among the highest leadership roles: the concept of universities as social change agents, including research related to social problems, public service, and, in my view, most importantly, critical analysis of society.

Hence, in Figure 1 the seven variables are tiered (one being important but base or lower-order forms of societal leadership, and four being the highest order), understanding that this model is simply a conceptual sketch and not meant to fully gauge the extent of university activities. It is designed to assist in the assessment of the leadership role of universities in their particular nation or region.

Note that I do not use or refer to global rankings of universities or the infatuation of many ministries with its close relative, the world-class university (WCU) model. The most influential global rankings focus on research production and related markers of prestige, like Nobel prizes. Doing well in rankings, and in particular citation analysis that favors the sciences and journals published in English, or the number of patents generated (which can be an imperfect marker of economic impact), can be important and desirable only as a narrow indicator of prestige and influence.⁵

Figure 1 Universities and Followers or Leaders: Variables and Tiers



But the ranking and WCU infatuation arguably generates a larger detrimental influence on the leadership role of institutions -- devaluing teaching and student learning and driving academic work toward research production goals focused on subjects attractive to journals but not necessarily toward regional social problems.⁶ In a conference on the theme of this book that I organized on the Berkeley campus, Christine Musselin at SciencesPo worried that the singular concern of many universities with various global rankings was driving them to neglect one of their most important roles in society: developing educated citizens who, in turn, might be a foil for extreme forms of nationalism, whether right or left wing.⁷

I again return to my earlier hypothesis: The past and current national political environment is perhaps the most powerful influence on the mission, role, and effectiveness of universities and the higher education system to which they belong. The national political environment, arguably, has a determining influence on whether universities are leaders or followers -- or something in-between.

Nation-states with a history of authoritarian rule have sustained higher education systems to reinforce the social structure and political position of the government. In this environment, universities do not have significant autonomy or develop an academic culture openly critical of political leaders. Few have any significant statement or policy related to academic freedom; academic freedom is defined exclusively by the state. Many universities, and hence academics, are also focused on the sciences and engineering, and may consider discussion of significant social and even many scientific problems (e.g., chronic pollution) that reflect poorly on the existing political regime not simply dangerous but unnecessary and probably ineffectual.

Universities and academics functioning in societies with a stronger liberal tradition (e.g., free elections, recognized civil rights, relatively low levels of corruption) have a stronger likelihood of being engaged in critical analysis of society and instilling these values in their teaching, research, and public service activities. Universities also provide a public space for social and political movements that can be progressive or regressive, and sometime extremely disruptive of the institution itself. Examples include the student riots in Paris in the 1960s, the civil rights movement and protests on US campuses, and the recent right-wing speakers at places like Berkeley that generate violence from extreme left-wing groups.

Again, depending on the national context, there is great nuance in how universities actually operate. We might conjecture that many reside in an intermediate sector: exuding elements of both followership and leadership. Further, universities that operate in repressive political environments may foster potent political protests demanding greater civil liberties, often led by students, with a variety of outcomes.

In South Africa, portions of the academic community fomented opposition to apartheid that, in turn, generated support from students and faculty, and governments, throughout the world, contributing to a global trend of divestment from businesses in South Africa and political pressure that contributed to the end of apartheid. But in China, student-led demonstrations in April and May 1989 led to a military massacre and more repressive policies imposed by the Chinese government. Hong Kong may, unfortunately, suffer a similar fate.⁸

There are at least two external variables for considering the leader versus follower role of universities. For one, budgets matter. Nation-states with robust and growing economies can invest and provide the means for universities to be more productive in teaching and research, in public engagement and in their global reach. Economies in decline, or that are developing, often mean significant financial restraints on the services and innovations a university can engage in as societal followers or leaders. And two, universities are part of larger national systems of higher education with differentiated missions within the sector.

Often, nation-states historically designated one or more institutions, often in national and regional capitals, as favored in prestige and funding. Often, they are allowed to operate outside the ministerial norms for other universities. Most are older institutions, providers of education to a social and political elite. These institutions also have greater flexibility, even within more autocratic nations, to act as leaders.

EVOLUTION AND DEVOLUTION

Are universities leaders or followers or intermediators in China? In Russia? How about in South Africa, or Brazil, or Chile? In the years leading to Brexit in the United Kingdom? Or in America during or after Trump's presidency? How about in Belarus, or in Kazakhstan? Or Nicaragua where the autocrat Daniel Ortega has recently taken over university management at both public and private universities, attacked student protestors and is crushing all dissent.⁹

Are there universities that play a leadership role as defined in some fashion in this essay despite a difficult political environment, like in China? [There has been much discussion about a "Chinese way" or model of the university, noting the productivity level in research output in STEM fields, for example; but in my opinion, the China way is simply meeting only part of the requirements for being a leading university, while devoid of a number of the essential roles offered in follower or leader model. Are Chinese universities leaders when they are increasingly subject to harsh limits on free speech and academic research into societal problems?]

There are other questions to contemplate: for example, what is the relationship between the longevity of a university and its role as leader or follower?; for example, are universities established for centuries more likely to be leaders or followers, and what have been the conditions for their longevity?

Any careful consideration of these questions requires reflection on the historical role of universities in nation building -- political geography still matters.¹⁰ It is also important to stress that the various forms of nationalism we see today are not, of course, entirely new. In Russia, but more so in China, a nationalist revival can be viewed as an historical continuum where all universities, and the economy more generally, remain under one-party governmental control, and where autocratic leaders make the rules. In yet another variation, in Hungary or Poland, recovery from Soviet domination was followed by post-Cold War freedoms but also economic uncertainties, followed by neo-nationalist movements.

Neo-nationalism, and its role and impact on universities, is also in a process of evolution and devolution. Its power and strength are related to a set of global and national variables, including economic transitions, demographic shifts, new technologies, and broader social factors, including political movements related to race and religion -- witness the shift toward Islamic fundamentalism in nations such as Indonesia. This essay is an attempt at a snapshot of today's interaction of national politics and policy with universities that may help us peer a bit into the future.

CANARY IN THE COAL MINE?

And this leads me to a final exploratory question: Are universities, and more specifically their follower or leadership roles, good indicators for understanding the political nature and trajectory of nations? I think they are and for the following reasons.

Universities are unique social organizations within nation-states. Universities, for example, provide a clear window into the extent of civil liberties allowed in a nation-state. The composition of their student bodies reflects the socioeconomic stratification of society.

Their utilitarian role as the primary source of skilled labor and often as a significant player in applied and basic research, provides insights into the composition and future of economic development. Their governance and management structure, including their level of autonomy and legal authority to manage their affairs, offers a glimpse into the relationship of a government with other public and private organizations and businesses.

The extent of their global engagement -- their ability to attract and retain international talent (students, faculty, and staff), their participation in collaborative research across borders, or the freedom of academics to travel -- offers a glimpse into political priorities and the fears and opportunities perceived by national leaders and governments.

Global events, like the COVID-19 pandemic, create a more complicated picture of the future. But it seems that the pandemic only reinforces the concept that universities are a barometer of the socioeconomic health of nation-states. Universities, in effect, are a proverbial canary in the coalmine.

ENDNOTES

¹ John Aubrey Douglass, *Neo-Nationalism and Universities: Populists, Autocrats and the Future of Higher Education* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021): see chapter 2 for the outline of varied impacts on universities.

² Amnesty International, "Hong Kong's National Security Law: 20 Things You Need to Know," July 17, 2020. The wording of the Hong Kong national security law asserts jurisdiction over people who are not residents of Hong

Kong and have never even set foot there. This means anyone on earth, regardless of nationality or location, can technically be deemed to have violated this law and face arrest and prosecution if they are in a Chinese jurisdiction, even for transit. Accused foreign nationals who don't permanently reside in Hong Kong can be deported even before trial or verdict.

- ³ Over the past decade of research in organizational sociology has moved towards the idea that institutional logics, change, and must be politically, historically, and geographically contextualized Suddaby, R., Foster, W. M., & Mills, A. J. (2013). Historical Institutionalism. In M. Bucheli & R. D. Wadhvani (Eds.), *Organizations in time: History, theory, methods* (pp. 100–123). Oxford University Press; Sakai, K. (2020). Institutional change as historical confluence. In M. Maclean, S. R. Clegg, R. Suddaby, & C. Harvey (Eds.), *Historical Organization Studies* (1st ed., pp. 188–206). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003033592-11>; Seitzl, L., & Emmenegger, P. (2019). How agents change institutions: Coalitional dynamics and the reform of commercial training in Switzerland. *Business and Politics*, 21(2), 145–171. <https://doi.org/10.1017/bap.2018.21>
- ⁴ See Douglass, *Neo-Nationalism and Universities*, op cited.
- ⁵ See John Aubrey Douglass, *The New Flagship University: Changing the Paradigm from Global Ranking to National Relevancy* (London: Palgrave Macmillan).
- ⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁷ “New Nationalism and Universities,” conference held at the University of California, Berkeley, November 16-17, 2019, organized by the Center for Studies in Higher Education, Goldman School of Public Policy.
- ⁸ Bryan E. Penprase and John Aubrey Douglass, “[Two Citi-States in the Long Shadow of China: The Future of Universities in Hong Kong and Singapore](#),” Center for Studies in Higher Education, Research and Occasional Paper Series: CSHE 10.21 (September 2021).
- ⁹ Yubelka Mendoza and Maria Abi-Habib, “[Nicaragua Seizes Universities, Inching Toward Dictatorship](#),” *New York Times*, February 14, 2022.
- ¹⁰ John Aubrey Douglass, “[All Globalization Is Local: Countervailing Forces and the Influence on Higher Education Markets](#),” Center for Studies in Higher Education, Research & Occasional Paper Series: CSHE.1.05 (January 2005).