CITY OF INTELLECT

During his four years as the tenth Chancellor of Berkeley (2013–17), Nicholas B. Dirks was confronted by crises arguably more challenging than those faced by any other college administrator in the contemporary period. This thoughtfully candid book, emerging from deep reflection on his turbulent time in office, offers not just a gripping insider’s account of the febrile politics of his time as Berkeley’s leader, but also decades of nuanced reflection on the university’s true meaning (at its best, to be an aspirational “city of intellect”). Dirks wrestles with some of the most urgent questions with which educational leaders are presently having to engage: including topics such as free speech and campus safe spaces, the humanities’ contested future, and the real cost and value of liberal arts learning. His visionary intervention – part autobiography, part practical manifesto – is a passionate cri de cœur for structural changes in higher education that are both significant and profound.

Nicholas B. Dirks served as Chancellor of the University of California, Berkeley, between 2013 and 2017. He is currently President and CEO of the historic New York Academy of Sciences, founded in 1817. Previous positions he has held include Executive VP and Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at Columbia University, where he was also the Franz Boas Professor of Anthropology and History. Professor Dirks is the author of Autobiography of an Archive (2015), The Scandal of Empire (2006), Castes of Mind (2001, for which he won the Lionel Trilling Award), and The Hollow Crown (Cambridge University Press, 1987). He is a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and a senior member of the Council on Foreign Relations. In addition, he has been a MacArthur fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton and has also held a Guggenheim fellowship.
“Dirks’ lavish anecdotes about evolving from starry-eyed missionary seeking a utopia of the intellect to tough-love administrator are hugely compelling, and there is no book like it. From his uncomfortable place at the top of two of America’s most prestigious universities (Columbia and Berkeley), he gives us a brilliant, questing, at times very vulnerable story of the moral calling of the ‘city of intellect’ and its oddly conservative defense of old disciplinary pathways. His argument is troubling, invigorating, and impossible to ignore. All in all, a captivating, blow-by-blow account of the university’s inner circle.”

Timothy Brennan, Professor of Cultural Studies and Comparative Literature, University of Minnesota

“City of Intellect is a beautifully written book that combines memoir with well-researched analysis to address the current place and crisis of the American university. Dirks tells the story of his brief and controversial chancellorship at Berkeley, while offering a full-throated defense of his actions and views that will be of deep interest to the many observers who have wondered about the details of the conflict. But the book is about much more than the highly visible and contentious battles at Berkeley. Dirks’ long experience in higher education serves as the foundation for thoughtful observations about why universities are in crisis and why they seem so resistant to necessary change. He addresses, among other topics, the future of the humanities, the appropriate role of disciplines, the improvement of decision-making processes, and financial realities and possibilities. It is a call to action with a number of quite specific and useful proposals. It serves at once as a significant primary and secondary source about higher education and has important things to say.”

Drew Gilpin Faust, Arthur Kingsley Porter University Professor and President Emerita (2007–18), Harvard University
“Professor Dirks possesses both personal and professional experiences that position him to offer a unique perspective on the broad trends shaping higher education in the United States and around the world. He uses these experiences to illustrate, analyze, and address some of the most fundamental questions facing the world’s universities, both public and private. And he simultaneously contextualizes the developments he discusses within a masterfully presented history of higher education, a technique that will broaden the appeal of the volume and extend its influence. In short, this is a terrific book about which I am extremely enthusiastic.”

John Sexton, Benjamin F. Butler Professor of Law Emeritus and Emeritus President (2002–15), New York University
CITY OF INTELLECT
THE USES AND ABUSES OF THE UNIVERSITY

Nicholas B. Dirks
New York Academy of Sciences
“The twentieth century was a grand century for the cities of intellect. The century, that century, is now past, never to be replicated.”

Clark Kerr, *The Uses of the University*, p. 198
For Janaki
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PREFACE

“If we wanted home truths, we should have stayed at home.”

Clifford Geertz¹

In my first semester of college, I signed up for a freshman seminar – one in a series of team-taught courses drawing faculty from different disciplines – called “Free Will and Necessity.” Taught by a professor of religion and a professor of behavioral psychology, it was an eye-opening experience. For the first time, I saw how two intelligent and serious people could disagree about fundamental questions, in this case concerning human nature. Professor Crites, with a full beard, a cherubic face – his mouth invariably clamping down on a sizzling pipe – began by asking us to read Ernst Cassirer’s *Essay on Man*, a nearly impenetrable text that was a distillation of Cassirer’s three-volume work on the philosophy of symbolic forms. Cassirer was both an intellectual historian and philosopher, whose focus on symbolic forms was part of his more general effort to capture the ways in which humans – especially in an age of advancing science – construed the world. Crites used Cassirer to introduce us to the foundational importance of European thinkers like Kant and Hegel and to stake the claim that human agency

was primarily about the quest to find and make meaning. Professor Leaf – thin, with a wry smile and a persistent look of consternation – regaled us with stories of experiments and examples used by his teacher, B.F. Skinner, most of which were about pigeons. The upshot for him was that our behavioral patterns were conditioned by training, incentives, and discrete outcomes – nothing transcendental. Human agency, in this view, was neither free nor fixed; behavior was always circumstantial. We could be trained to do different things, rather than thinking we as humans were the product of abstract thought, ethical principles, or moral predispositions.

Even before class, I knew I was going to side with Crites. I liked the way he focused on the various components of human culture as critical factors in our humanity. I too was hailed by the importance of the creative and imaginative arts, and distrustful of what I took to be reductionist arguments that sought to explain human activity through biological or behavioral drives or imperatives. But what struck me most of all was how each of these professors made compelling cases for their view of the world. I did not know at the time how rare such amiable if impassioned debate really was, not just in the world at large but even in the university.

As the professors debated the basic premises of human nature, we not only read extensively from Skinner, we also read works written by Reinhold Niebuhr, Martin Buber, William James, Herbert Marcuse, and Jean-Paul Sartre. And as I look through my student papers, I can see now what I had actually forgotten in the years since, how during my freshman year of college I continued to use a Christian frame of reference for my budding interest
in philosophy that hearkened back to my childhood religious faith. I was struck by how Niebuhr saw God’s revelation in terms so different than the fundamentalist preachers I had listened to as a boy, as conveyed in large part through “the catastrophic events of history .... As the source and center of the created world against which the pride of man destroys itself.” For me, this was a new and compelling way to invoke the Christian message, to link revelation with the study of history and man’s folly, but to do so with a sense of hope and perhaps even faith that the future would be not just a place of freedom but of progress, achievement, and social justice.

I had come a long way since the Sunday when my mother bundled me, along with my two brothers and sister, into a station wagon to attend a service in a Plymouth Brethren Assembly in Hamden, CT, near where I grew up. I must have been eight or nine at the time, and until then we had all attended a Presbyterian Church, the denomination in which my father had been ordained and in which my mother had herself been raised. My mother had grown up in Chicago, daughter of a corporate lawyer who saw church as an extension of his social aspirations, though he himself had grown up in a small Illinois town, the son of a buggy maker. When she was thirteen, she had begun attending a camp, and then a church, that was avowedly fundamentalist, and for most of her teenage years rebelled against her somewhat staid upbringing by spending as much time as possible in a community of born-again Christians. These churchgoers not only

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believed in the centrality of individual salvation, they were much more demonstrative about their faith and its life-altering significance than the Presbyterians. My mother clearly found this most compelling.

My father was born on an Iowa farm where the local German Presbyterian church was the centerpiece for the social life of the local German community, most of whom continued to speak a dialect of low German. He only left because he was born with a hole in his heart, making it impossible for him to take over the farming chores from his father. Although he wanted to go to the University of Iowa, he was only allowed to go to a local Presbyterian college when he promised his father that he would enter the ministry. He returned to his local church for his ordination but then went on to earn a PhD in philosophy at Columbia, where he studied with Niebuhr, Paul Tillich, a German philosopher and theologian who advocated for a solely symbolic – rather than literal – interpretation of the Christian message, and several of John Dewey’s most illustrious students. My father later sought permission from his father to take his ministry to the university rather than be pastor of a congregation; his father assented, and he taught at the Yale Divinity School during the years I went from kindergarten up to my senior year in high school.

My mother returned to the Presbyterians when she married my father – then a guest pastor in a small Illinois church while he was studying in a divinity school in Chicago – but rebelled against the Presbyterians again ten years later when she had four young children and he was off traveling the world learning about the efforts of Christian academics in places as various as India, Japan, and Chile. While my father engaged in global dialogues
about secularization and decolonization, my mother migrated back to the Plymouth Brethren and the kind of faith and community that had given her solace years before. It was because of this that I was baptized twice, first as an infant in a Presbyterian church just outside Chicago, next as a thirteen-year-old who had been persuaded to believe he needed to proclaim his faith through public immersion in the waters of the church. Although I was always troubled that I never had a clear narrative of conversion – as far as I could tell, I had always been a Christian – I was haunted by the fiery rhetoric of preachers who painted pictures of hell worthy of a twentieth-century American suburban Dante. It was only after that second baptism that I began to rebel myself, this time against the narrow-mindedness of the Plymouth Brethren, who rejected scientific understandings of evolution and seemed to distrust even the Christian credentials of my father for being too liberal. By the time I was about to go to college, I only attended church when I could accompany my father to the Yale chapel to listen to its eloquent activist chaplain, William Sloane Coffin. I had begun to resent my mother’s decision to take us off to the fundamentalists, though by this time she had rejoined the Presbyterians in a progressive and politically active church in St. Louis Missouri where she had just moved. She told me later in life she found this last church the most satisfying of all she attended across her lifetime, a source of great relief to me.

At first, because of the clear continuities between my own spiritual journey and the course work I encountered, I thought perhaps that I should major in religious studies or philosophy. I also wanted to learn more about India,
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where I spent a magical year as a twelve-year-old. In the winter, I signed up for a course on the “Religions of India” with James Helfer, a stark but playful man with short hair and a well-trimmed mustache who was known as much for his quirkiness as for his brilliance. He dutifully taught some basic texts about ancient India and Hinduism, but made clear early on that he thought the essence of India’s wisdom was to be found in Buddhism, especially in the work of the philosopher Nagarjuna, who was credited with establishing the Madhyamika school (or middle path) of Mahayana Buddhism. Helfer was taken by its emphasis on “emptiness,” which he saw as the core of Buddhist thought. The Buddha had only obtained enlightenment after experiencing and then contemplating the enormous suffering in the world, which he realized was based on attachment to things that did not last: thus the emphasis on impermanence. The radical thought of Nagarjuna, Helfer argued, took up and extended the Buddha’s insistence on the non-existence of self, directing us to shed the illusion that there was an enduring and ultimate principle of being in the world.

This was the spring of 1969, and there were students in the class who had come to learn about Hinduism and Buddhism as counter-cultural vehicles to fashion an alternative to the materialist preoccupations of American bourgeois life in the fifties and sixties, while imbibing the hip underpinnings of meditation and yoga. A student on the cusp of graduating sat quietly in the corner, responding to leading questions from Helfer to analogize Hindu and Buddhist thought to elements of European philosophy. He turned out to be John Perry Barlow, who at the time, despite having grown up on a ranch in Wyoming
and later becoming a lyricist for the Grateful Dead and a leading theorist of the open internet, appeared more like a graduate teaching assistant than the countercultural hero he would later become. Barlow was especially interested in phenomenology, and through their exchanges I learned that Helfer himself viewed Nagarjuna through the lens of European phenomenological thinking, especially the work of Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

Helfer was a captivating classroom professor, and he recruited some of his students to join an experimental residential hall called West College, where I lived for the next three years. Helfer was the faculty advisor, and that is where he taught a course on phenomenology the next year. He fashioned himself as a kind of hybrid guru, one part Buddhist and the other part existentialist, a stern presence with a flamboyant flair, often wearing only black, chain-smoking unfiltered Pall Mall cigarettes, and bringing two pint-sized cans of beer with him to afternoon seminars where he said that the class would go on as long as it took him to finish the beer. The more we talked, the more he would drink and the sooner it would all be over. These were different times.

We spent much of the semester reading Husserl’s major work, *Ideas*, in which he elaborated the philosophical underpinnings of his project. Helfer explained that phenomenology was best captured through what Husserl meant by the concept of “eidetic reduction,” an epistemological exercise – likened by Helfer to the peeling away of layer after layer of an onion – to understand nothing less than consciousness itself. The onion was the metaphor of choice because it expressed Husserl’s fundamental conviction that consciousness by, or for, itself, did not exist,
no more than there was a core fruit inside an onion. What Nagarjuna meant by the self, Helfer implied, was also the case for the idea of consciousness. Helfer made such an impression on me that one of the few books I took with me to India when I was doing my “study abroad” project was Merleau-Ponty’s *The Phenomenology of Perception*, a hefty tome I luggered around with me for six months and read during long evenings under a mosquito net in a cheap hotel in the temple town of Madurai.

Some years before, my father had taken our family to India for a year because he had a Fulbright grant to spend the year in a small Christian college not far outside the city of Madras, where in addition to teaching he worked with the college’s Principal to redesign the curriculum for a postcolonial and secular age. I was enchanted by a world far removed from the suburban comfort of Connecticut, going for the year to a local high school affiliated with the college, and roaming around the jungle terrain behind the college campus that was inhabited by leopard cats and cobras. Twice a week I left the school and traveled by bus to the back streets of Madras near the Mylapore temple, where I sat cross-legged to learn to play the mridangam, the south Indian drum, with a Tamil maestro who spoke no English and taught me Carnatic rhythms with Tamil syllables. I visited some of the great temples of south India, from Mahabalipuram to Madurai, and traveled with my parents across vast swaths of the subcontinent. It was a time when I began to ask questions about my Christian faith, in large part because I could not believe that devout Hindus – or Buddhists or Jains – should go to hell because they were brought up in different religious traditions. I became fascinated by India’s culture and history and after
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I returned to my school in the US I did a series of special term papers and research projects on Indian themes. This was why I had gravitated to courses in college on India, and ultimately decided to do a senior thesis on questions related to Gandhi’s political entanglements with the non-Brahman movements that warred with all-India nationalism during the years leading up to independence.

In the first weeks of my time at Wesleyan I had gone to the campus church on occasional Sunday mornings. Stripped of the fervor of the Plymouth Brethren, and without a charismatic pastor like Bill Coffin whose sermons were all about civil rights and the war in Vietnam, the services seemed lifeless. Even as my studies seemed in some ways extensions of my religious quests and doubts, they also made me feel the growing irrelevance of the church. I continued to sense the force of religious faith, though it resided now in the questions and concerns that emerged out of my other intellectual pursuits and interests, not in the church. But I steadily turned away from religion, and then from religious studies, migrating instead to the study of history, politics, and economics.

I decided to enter an interdisciplinary program in Asian and African Studies that would sponsor a return to India. There was a war raging in Vietnam, and because I had spent such a meaningful year of my life already in India, I decided to turn to its study in a serious way.

While my reading of philosophical texts had opened up my sense of religious possibility, I worried that this kind of phenomenological philosophizing was a dead end, providing the basis neither for faith and hope nor for political action. I hung on to the idea that there must be ultimate meaning associated with some idea of God that implied a
theory of being. But life in those days necessitated taking political stands, and I felt that continuing to study philosophy and religion would be too self-indulgent. I was also struggling to understand how America had become embroiled in such an unjust neo-colonial war. While I sought to embrace an ecumenical idea of religious sensibility, I worried about the absence of a recognizable ethics in world views that I thought focused too much on renunciation or, for that matter, a rejection both of the world and of being in the world.

As much as I reacted against the fundamentalist world view, I must have been searching to find some other source of meaningfulness. My loss of faith felt at first to be the loss of a firm ground for finding meaning of any kind. Vietnam loomed large during those same years of awakening, with the recurrent nightmare of being sent to war for a crusade in Asia to fight a war that I deplored. I was convinced that American power was born both of hubris and ignorance. I wanted to counter both. As I was rethinking my relationship to God, religion, and faith, while also trying to reconcile my new preoccupation with Asian history and politics with other interests, I was also waiting to deal with a much more immediate specter. A great weight was lifted when my draft number – low enough to make me vulnerable at first – gave me a pass just the year I graduated from college. When I then went to graduate school in Chicago, I turned to the university as a place where I could not only pursue these ideas, but where I could follow a vocation, find a community, pursue a career, and live fully rather than face possible death. Chicago turned out to be the perfect university for one looking for a new secular faith. When I arrived in Hyde
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Park in September of 1972, I found it to be a place where people seemed to worship ideas. I followed a path that had been well charted throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by others who had sought in critical ways to make the university into their new church. Significantly for me, my father had been one of those.

I followed – without for a long time fully acknowledging it – the example of my father, who came to adopt the university as his new church, literally. I did not have to negotiate with him as he did with his father, as he approved of my growing sense that the university was an oasis that could help me reframe my childhood religious faith as the basis for a lifelong intellectual journey. This transplantation of religious faith onto the values of the liberal arts was in some ways a metonym of the larger effects of secularization on the modern university, a history that was as much a personal point of reference as it was a theme of my long university career. The university was also the place where my childhood experience of spending a critical year in India could lead to a life of reading and research about South Asia, an opportunity ironically created by the cold war and America’s postwar global hegemony. But at the time I was simply grateful that I received funding to return time and time again to India to do research on the history of kingship, the development of the caste system under different political regimes, the rise of democratic political movements in the context of British imperial rule, and ultimately the overweening significance of European colonial history both for many of our traditional understandings of India and for our contingent convictions about the triumphant character of western civilization itself.
When in recent years I began thinking anew about the different trajectories that led me to and then through the university – as student, faculty, dean, and chancellor – I went back to peruse my father’s papers. I realized that despite all the reasons that propelled him away from Iowa during his life, he had carried that Iowan village church with him. He had been part of a group of mostly Protestant theologians and academics who had been committed to making the university into a new kind of church, an institution devoted to education and research that could also fulfill what they saw as a uniquely Christian vocation. During the two decades after the Second World War, these religious leaders tried to counter the threat of secularization not by contesting it directly but rather by infusing university debates and institutional spaces with moral concerns and religiously based projects. They accepted and even celebrated the secularizing trends of the previous century, although they did not wish to evacuate the university of all connection with ethical preoccupations and debates over meaning. My father had worked out the rationale for why his own deep religious faith required the open inquiry of the university; and he had worked with colleagues around the world to help facilitate a global conversation about the relationship of secularization and decolonization. Once I pieced this together, my father’s life seemed far less meandering than he had suggested in his short but poignant memoir that he wrote shortly before his death.

Over time I came to realize that I maintained my own relationship – however muted – with the legacy of the Protestant renaissance in which my father had played an important role. I believed that a serious moral
commitment, both in teaching and in learning, was a fundamental element not just of my disciplinary commitments but of the university itself. Coming of age during protests about civil rights and the war in Vietnam, and then becoming a scholar of colonial history, my sense of “values” came to be cast in the shadow of the overhang of “power” – whether rooted in empire, politics, economic relations, cultural capital, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, etc. Now, however, I see a definite line from my father’s emphasis on the moral dimensions of learning to my own persistent interest in understanding the larger uses of the intellectual life. Although I never thought of my own commitment to the liberal arts as in any formal way linked to religion, I confess I see the connection now, even as I would acknowledge that the secular can – even must – take up questions that do, after all, hearken back to and then in turn transform religious debates, commitments, and institutional histories into the stuff of genuine intellectual awakening. I became convinced that the encounters I had with different ways of understanding the world, and my place in it, encapsulated the significance of an education in the liberal arts.

Writing this book, I’ve come to accept that my meandering too was hardly accidental. My turn from the church to the university was more abrupt than it was for my father, but far less of a surprise. I had grown up in the shadow of the university, which was always there, even as it became the vehicle that allowed me to transition seamlessly away from my fundamentalist days. Once I made the move, it became a large measure of my life, though I was never content to stay in my lanes, either the ones constituted by the disciplines, or those typical for faculty
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who disdain the administrative life. I have always been inspired by seeing the university as a place where lives are changed, where knowledge is not only developed and transmitted, but transfused with the continuous quest to make sense of our humanity, to find meaning in life, to embrace our engagement in the world, and in doing so to decry injustice, call out the workings of power, and argue about how we might attempt to add real value to the world we share. I see this still despite all the contemporary crises around the university – and the accompanying – and very real – worry that the university is less and less the “city of intellect” Clark Kerr invoked as an ideal and saw as unable to survive the journey from the twentieth to the twenty-first century.

My invocation of the city of intellect as the title of this book may itself seem an impossible gesture of utopian folly. What I mean by this choice is to put at the forefront of my exploration of the uses and abuses of the university the intellectual values that must undergird and guide all the other things we encounter and discuss when we think about the university today. I am not joining the chorus of laments about how the university has lost its soul – whether or not they explicitly invoke the Christian origins of western universities or for that matter the place of moral education in the debates over the past, present, and future of humanistic learning. Although I tell my own personal history of losing my faith alongside the larger history of secularization, I have come to see the ever-changing intellectual dimensions and aspirations of university life not just as fundamental, but as perpetually threatened by attacks on the university from almost every side. Warranted though some of these attacks may be, it
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is the image of the city of intellect that helps me identify and define the basic mission and justification of the university.

And yet my account of the university is one in which it never lived up to the utopian ideals I projected onto it. How could it have? And, arguably, while I should never have engaged in this kind of institutional transference, I was far too critical ever to be fully satisfied, even setting aside how much the world has changed over the last five decades. When I was in college, I saw how impossible, and undesirable, it was for the university to seal itself off from a world that impinged with its full force on the intellectual capacities and ambitions of its students. The struggles over civil rights and America’s war in Vietnam were hardly epiphenomenal; they were central to everything I did and studied during my college years. My early experience in India offered the basis for what seemed a necessary counterpoint to my American suburban upbringing, anchoring both my intellectual curiosity about the world outside and my growing desire to fashion a life inside the academy. When I went to graduate school, I was able to maintain and develop that connection, but I also encountered the fundamental limits of academic life, as the locus of some displaced spiritual journey, as tied to institutions that professed values and yet maintained old and sometimes rigid hierarchies, privileges, and exclusions, and as an expression of the peculiar need to assert a kind of professional authority over a place and set of issues that always and inevitably outpaced whatever I – or any of us – could learn in our education and research. The university could no more seal itself off from the world than master it through knowledge. And the preoccupation with the
professionalized trappings of disciplinary knowledge only made the university less intellectually adventurous than it should, and could, have been.

Getting a job out of graduate school, at Caltech no less, was the realization of a dream, but during those same years I saw many talented colleagues lose out and leave the field. I also watched the egregious behavior of some senior mentors who wielded enormous influence over my future, a reminder of the indignities of academic hierarchy and a distillation of the vagaries of the many academic judgments on which any academic’s future in the university invariably depends. Once I had tenure, I felt as if I had been set free. My time at Michigan thereafter was the most satisfying stretch of my intellectual life as a newly licensed academic. Even as I later felt I needed to move on from Michigan, away from a failed marriage and to a major city, I took to administrative work primarily to expand both my institutional and intellectual life. One thing led to another, though never in an uncomplicated way. I saw how intellectual commitment and camaraderie were by no means sufficient to overcome the slights and anxieties of university life; and later how a move into senior administration further expanded but then complicated my fundamental relationship to the university and the communities I had built there.

As I came to see the university in a more synoptic way, with the incredibly good fortune to work in leadership roles with colleagues in a succession of preeminent universities across an expansive array of disciplines and perspectives, I also came to see the limits, the constraints that institutional constituents and commitments as well as ideological passions and principles imposed on efforts
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to sustain the city of intellect. That collision took place in a far more intense way as chancellor of a great, if imperiled, public university. I came to realize the need for an increasingly expanding sense of the public good. I also ran up against the limits of state funding, the recalcitrance of public university governance, the self-enclosed worlds of faculty colleagues, and the skepticism of the public itself, among much else. I confronted the limits of institutional work, the ineluctable disappointments of projecting too many of my own ideals and ambitions onto the political realities of the contemporary university.

While tempted at times to plot this story of the university as one of decline and fall, that would be to forget the early origins of my own relationship with the university. What began for me in the fall of 1968 with confusion, skepticism, and critique continues to unsettle me, and that is as it should be. Besides, as I make clear in this book, I continue to believe in the need for change, even when it might war with the personal nostalgia that inevitably flowers over the years. At the same time, I’m no fan of the easy talk of disruption, the certainty among so many that the university has outlived its uses in our new world. While I’ve become critical of some parts of the history of an institution to which I’ve dedicated most of my life, I’ve also realized that the very survival of what is most important about the university will certainly require serious self-critique, and along with it the capacity to let go of the past, while rethinking and reimagining altogether new futures. But I would be the last to advocate abandonment. The university still stands for that capacity to believe in the liberatory potential of new knowledge: new to students who learn, and new to scholars.
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and researchers who engage in the quest to tackle new problems, understand new ideas, ask new questions, and disagree about them all. As we detach our sense of the future uses of the university from the history of the actual university, I have no doubt that the past will live on, in good ways as well as bad.

I am far from alone in thinking of the university as a sometime utopia, or at least as a place that still affords the hope one can work towards utopian goals, however contradictory, evanescent, and disappointing that may be. I tell many stories here, and most of them draw their sustenance from this idea, nurtured by a rich and varied history, that even though the university will always fall short, it will continue to be a vital and lasting institution in our future world. But I revert now to my scholarly position as critic and observer, returning from the fray to my academic vocation to share my reflections about both the world and my experiences in it. The archive I use in this book – like that of my earlier books as well – is anthropological and historical, a proliferation of narratives, texts and documents that are as much about the experiences I’ve had across the different roles I have held in universities as any historical and analytic accounts I’ve consulted. Although the book that results reads in places like memoir, the intention is to use personal struggles to animate my description and evaluation of the present crisis of the university and to connect my reflections and commentary to the different ways I’ve lived in the university over many years. If my narrative sounds at times defensive, I mean it less about myself than about the institution that enabled both my education and my intellectual life. Throughout this book I talk about the need for change, and in the
final chapter I make specific recommendations for what in some cases are major changes. I confess that some of these changes would not be entirely comfortable for me, even as I’ve come to acknowledge the necessity to think differently about the future than we think about the past. And yet, I necessarily leave it to others to decide whether the proposals I make here are remotely adequate for the future survival of the university, leave alone to ensure the flourishing of the city of intellect it represents.