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COMMODIFICATION AND THE CORPORATE TAKEOVER OF EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Education is a means for social development, democratic empowerment and advancing of the general well-being and economic development of societies. It ensures the accumulation and sharing of knowledge and cultural capital. However, in the economic debate, which emphasizes the importance of a knowledge-based economy, this definition of education is evermore contested and education has come to be understood solely as an economic factor rather than a tool for social development. Seeking to turn education into a commodity, framing it in market terms, and encouraging the entry of commercial concerns could be seen as simply an expression of neo-liberal politics in a particular state or area. However, we need to understand the nature of the forces that have pushed (or seduced) governments into adopting such policies - and it is here that we can see the process of globalization directly at work.

INTRODUCTION

In this context, Higher Education (HE) is perceived as a knowledge industry and Higher Education Institutions (HEIS) as service providers. Students are looked upon primarily as consumers of education and human capital for the labour market. They tend to focus less on active participation in higher education institutions. Many are choosing to focus only on preparation for the labour market and possibilities for maximizing personal financial returns upon graduation, which is a negative and one-sided approach. This has also led to a decrease in cooperation and solidarity between individual students and an increase in unhealthy competition or the purpose of the fulfilment of personal aims. It is thus the increasingly commercialized way in which higher education is being dealt with that is referred to as 'Commodification' of Education.

The expansion of higher education in Britain and Northern Ireland during this period, for instance, involved the restructuring of courses and programmes so that they could be marketed. This

included marketing new courses such as MBAs, modulization (to achieve economies of scale), and the increased use of part-time and distance learning programmes (to target those already in work). The introduction of student loans and course fees has raised, significantly, the direct cost placed upon students - and helped to change people's orientation to higher education away from that of participants towards being consumers. The massive increase in university enrolment was, however, less a consequence of government policy, than the impact of changing perceptions of the labour market. The surge in student numbers occurred because it became clear to large numbers of people that not having a degree disadvantaged them in the labour market.

There has also been a transformation of the labour force in UK higher education - and a growing orientation to profit generation. Salary levels have decreased significant relative to other key groupings; increased bureaucratization and pressures on universities to reduce costs have reduced the time for 'scholarship and disinterested learning' and the doubling in the numbers of students per lecturer has led to a progressive decline in the quality of teaching and the satisfaction it gives to learners and teachers (see Wolf 2002: 200-43). Similar pressures can be found at work in other areas of education.

THE DIFFERENT AREAS OF COMMODIFICATION OF EDUCATION ARE:

Financing of Higher Education (HE) and Access: The understanding of education as a public good and a public responsibility is a pre-requisite for equal access to education. Public responsibility in financing of HE and social services for students is a means of ensuring that access does not depend on the socio-economic background of learners or their families.

✦ **Commodification and tuition fees:** Charging tuition fees to students, even state subsidized fees can have effects on the outputs of Higher Education. ESIB has already discussed at length the implications of charging tuition fees to students, the arguments made amongst others on the basis of accessibility do not need to be restated here. Tuition fees have become more common as HE sectors have increased in size and the funding required to sustain them has increased. Some governments have decided that charging tuition fees or deregulating the sector is a suitable method of easing the financial pressure on the treasury. Advocates of tuition fees state this as a positive development for the students as they will now purchase a stake in their education and are accorded 'consumer' status. However, this treatment of students does not account for the damage to the societal benefits of participation in HE. To take one example from many, the student has less time to get involved in social regeneration projects and is more likely to regard their degree solely as a qualification that will allow them to progress on to a well-paid job. In this case, the commodification of education, results as a possible benefit lost both to the student and to society.

✦ **Quality and Quality assurance:** There is an increasing lobby by quality assurances agencies and governments to liberalize markets for evaluation agencies. This development endangers the quality assurance process. The assumption that a higher degree of quality will be achieved through market-type mechanisms that stimulate competition between HEIs forms the basis for an increasing trend to privatize state universities and offer HE programmes on a for-profit basis. It is furthermore based on the assumption that competition will inevitably lead to better adjustment of supply to demand and more efficiency in HE provision. This trend is one that can be witnessed globally.

✦ **Recognition:** Different standards and procedures in quality assurance or the lack thereof lead to a high level of uncertainty at the global level about qualifications and degrees provided by HEIs and the

programmes offered by them. This negatively affects international recognition of qualifications and degrees by public authorities, HEIs or the labour market, leaving the individual in a situation of uncertainty.

Higher education is becoming a marketing commodity. It is a multi-billion dollar business. Foreign universities are trying to have a share of Indian educational markets, and have prepared for this during the last decade or more. This shift from education as a social good to marketable commodity is against the Indian culture, and sufferers in these changes will be poor and disadvantaged people of India

CORPORATE TAKEOVER OF EDUCATION:

What is the purpose of education? Over the years, educational policymakers have utilized a language of economics, masked under the rubric of culture, promote the idea that schools should prepare their students to compete in the world marketplace. While this topic has been explored in the past, there is renewed interest in the role of business in education, particularly in light of "choice" plans and federal policies affecting national standards and testing. Supported by research on "corporate culture" - such as Terrence Deal and A. A. Kennedy's *Corporate Culture: The Rites and Rituals of Corporate Life* and T. J. Peters and R. H. Waterman's *In Search of Excellence* - educational policymakers point to empirical studies showing increased efficiency and effectiveness within business settings. Thus, management schemes which reflect business attitudes toward success and accountability have become the focus of educational reform.

Defining "Corporate Culture": Management theorists, like W. G. Dyer, Jr., in *Culture in Organization: A Case Study*, argue that corporate culture consists of a pattern of behaviors, beliefs, rituals, symbols, and myths which help to stimulate members of an organization toward success. Success, in turn, is defined by those individuals who shape the culture of the organization. Deal and Kennedy contend that companies which generate their identities by "shaping values, making heroes, spelling out rites and rituals, and acknowledging the cultural network have an edge." Part of this edge, they contend, is in having heroes whom workers can imitate.

To understand "corporate culture" ideology, one must first understand its functionalist and behaviorist foundations. These foundations best serve business interests in two major ways: by satisfying their proclivity for control and by allowing for generalized standards of accountability.

For more than a decade conservatives have been organizing around school reform, tapping into parents' and teachers' real concern with the lack of educational options. Corporations have seized on the opening provided by educators' and families' frustration with the lack of school resources. Parents, teachers and students can roll back the corporate takeover of education, but only if they offer an alternative vision. One in which corporations pay taxes instead of getting free advertising and tax write-offs for donated promotional materials; one in which school systems do not abandon students to for-profit companies, and one in which educational choice is a basic right for all families, not just a few.

We have also seen some very significant movements towards corporatization in schooling and non-formal education. In the 1980s and early 1990s this was initially carried forward by the rise of managerialism in many 'western' education systems. Those in authority were encouraged and trained to see themselves as managers, and to reframe the problems of education as exercises in delivering the right outcomes. The language and disposition of management also quickly moved into the classroom via initiatives such as the UK national curriculum. There has also been the wholesale strengthening of the market in many education systems. Schools have to compete for students in order to sustain and

extend their funding. This, in turn, has meant that they have had to market their activities and to develop their own 'brands'. They have had to sell 'the learning experience' and the particular qualities of their institution. To do this complex processes have to be reduced to easily identified packages; philosophies to sound bites; and students and their parents become 'consumers'. As Stewart demonstrated some time ago there is a fundamental problem with the way that such business models have been applied to educational and welfare agencies.

The result has been a drive towards to the achievement of specified outcomes and the adoption of standardized teaching models. The emphasis is less on community and equity, and rather more on individual advancement and the need to satisfy investors and influential consumers. Education has come to resemble a private, rather than public, good.

As might be expected, such marketization and commodification has led to a significant privatization of education in a number of countries. In the United States, for example, schooling, higher education and training have been seen as lucrative markets to be in.

Seeking to turn education into a commodity, framing it in market terms, and encouraging the entry of commercial concerns could be seen as simply an expression of neo-liberal politics in a particular state or area. However, we need to understand the nature of the forces that have pushed (or seduced) governments into adopting such policies - and it is here that we can see the process of globalization directly at work.

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