

HIGHER EDUCATION, MARKETS, AND AN AUDIT CULTURE

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Abstract

The author discusses the ways in which certain elements of conservative modernization impact higher education, pointing to the growth of commodifying logics and the audit culture that accompanies them. We should not assume that these conditions can be reduced to simple formulas. We need a much more complex picture of class relations and class projects. Finally, he points that may be elements of good sense as well as bad sense in the neo-liberal and neo-conservative criticisms. The issue is not whether or not we need accountability, but the logics of accountability that tend now to guide the process of higher education. An alternative to the external imposition of targets, performance criteria and quantifiable outcomes is proposed, together with some criteria that can be used to judge it.

Keywords: Conservative modernization; Higher education; Audit culture.

Resumen

El autor analiza como ciertos elementos de la modernización conservadora impactan la educación superior, señalando el crecimiento de la lógica de la mercantilización y la cultura de las auditorías que la acompañan. Aconseja no asumir que esas condiciones puedan ser reducidas al empleo de simples fórmulas. Precisamos de un cuadro más complejo de las relaciones y proyectos de clase. Indica que las críticas neo-liberales y neo-conservadoras contienen tanto elementos positivos cuanto negativos. Lo importante no es discutir si precisamos de establecer responsabilidades, sino la lógica de esa responsabilidad, pues esa tiende a ser la nueva guía de la educación superior. Una alternativa a la imposición externa de objetivos, criterios de performance y resultados cuantificables es propuesto, juntamente con algunos criterios que pueden ser usados en juicios de valor.

Palabras clave: Modernización conservadora; Educación superior; Cultura de las auditorías.

Resumo

O autor analisa como alguns elementos da modernização conservadora impactam a educação superior, assinalando o crescimento da lógica da mercantilização e a cultura das auditorias que a acompanham. Aconselha no assumir que essas condições possam ser reduzidas ao emprego de simples fórmulas. Precisamos de um quadro mais complexo das relações e projetos de classe. Indica que as críticas neoliberais e neoconservadoras contem tanto elementos positivos quanto negativos. O importante não é discutir se precisamos estabelecer responsabilidades, mas a lógica de essa responsabilidade, pois essa tende a ser a nova guia da educação superior. Uma alternativa à imposição externa de objetivos, critérios de performance e resultados quantificáveis é proposto, juntamente com alguns critérios que podem ser usados em juízos de valor.

Palavras-chave: Modernização conservadora; Educação superior; Cultura das auditorias.

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Changing Commonsense

In a number of volumes over the past decade, I have critically analyzed the processes of “conservative modernization”—the complicated alliance behind the wave after wave of educational reforms that have centered around neo-liberal commitments to the market and a supposedly weak state, neo-conservative emphases on stronger control over curricula and values, and “new managerial” proposals to install rigorous forms of accountability in schooling at all levels (APPLE, 2006). The first set of reforms has not demonstrated much improvement in education and has marked a dangerous shift in our very idea of democracy—always a contested concept (FONER, 1998)—from “thick” collective forms to “thin” consumer driven and overly individualistic forms. The second misconstrues and then basically ignores the intense debates over whose knowledge should be taught in schools and universities and establishes a false consensus on what is supposedly common in US and British culture—and the cultures of many other nations such as Brazil and elsewhere. The third takes the position that “only that which is measurable is important” and has caused some of the most creative and critical practices that have been developed through concerted efforts in some of the most difficult settings to be threatened (MCNEIL, 2000; LIPMAN, 2004; APPLE; BEANE, 2007; SHOR, 1992; ARONOWITZ, 2000). Unfortunately, all too many of the actual effects of this assemblage of reforms have either been negligible or negative, or they have been largely rhetorical (SMITH, 2003). This is unfortunate, especially given all of the work that well-intentioned educators have devoted to some of these efforts. But reality must be faced if we are to go beyond what is currently fashionable.

The odd combination of marketization on the one hand and centralization of control on the other is not only occurring in education; nor is it only going on in the United States. This is a world-wide phenomenon. And while there are very real, and often successful, efforts to counter it, this has not meant that the basic assumptions that lie behind neo-liberal, neo-conservative, and new managerial forms have not had a major impact on our institutions throughout society and even on our commonsense.

In many nations there have been attempts, often more than a little successful, to restructure state institutions (JESSOP, 2002). Among the major aims of such restructuring were: to ensure that the state served business interests; to have the state’s

internal operations model those used in business; and to “take politics out of public institutions”, which is to reduce the possibility that government institutions would be subject to political pressure from the electorate and from progressive social movements (LEYS, 2003). Chubb and Moe’s arguments about voucher plans that place educational institutions on a market mirror this latter point, for example (CHUBB; MOE, 1990).

This last point, removing politics from government institutions, is based on a less than accurate understanding not only of the state but of the market as well. While most economics textbooks may give the impression that markets are impersonal and impartial, they are instead highly political as well as inherently unstable. To this, other points need to be added. To guarantee their survival, firms must seek ways of breaking out of the boundaries that are set by state regulation. Increasingly, this has meant that the boundaries established to divide non-market parts of our lives must be pushed so that these spheres can be opened to commodification and profit-making. As Leys reminds us, this is a crucially important issue. “It threatens the destruction of non-market spheres of life on which social solidarity and active democracy have always depended” (LEYS, 2003).

It is not an easy process to transform parts of our lives and institutions that were not totally integrated into market relations so that they become part of a market. To do this, at least four significant things must be worked on.

1. The services or goods that are to be focused upon must be reconfigured so that they can indeed be bought and sold.

2. People who received these things from the state must be convinced to want to buy them.

3. The working conditions and outlook of the employees who work in this sector must be transformed from a model based on collective understandings and providing service to “the public” on the one hand to working to produce profits for owners and investors and subject to market discipline on the other.

4. When business moves into what were previously non-market fields, as much as possible their risks must be underwritten by the state.

Under these kinds of pressures, standardized and competitive labor processes begin to dominate the lives of the newly marketized workers. But this is not all. A good deal of labor is shifted to the consumer. She or he now must do much of the work of getting information, sorting through the advertising and claims, and making sense of what is often a thoroughly confusing welter of data and “products”. In

the process as well, there is a very strong tendency for needs and values that were originally generated out of collective deliberations, struggles, and compromises, and which led to the creation of state services, to be marginalized and ultimately abandoned. Once again, in Leys' words, "The facts suggest that market-driven politics can lead to a remarkably rapid erosion of democratically-determined collective values and institutions".

These arguments may seem abstract, but they speak to significant and concrete changes in our daily lives in and out of education. For more than two decades, we have witnessed coordinated and determined efforts not only to reconstruct a "liberal" market economy, but a "liberal" market society and culture. This distinction is important. In Habermas' words, the attempt is to have "system" totally colonize the "life-world" (HABERMAS, 1971). As many aspects of our lives as possible, including the state and civil society, must be merged into the economy and economic logics. Although there will always be counter-hegemonic tendencies, our daily interactions—and even our dreams and desires—must ultimately be governed by market "realities" and relations. In this scenario—and it is increasingly not only a scenario, but also a reality—a society and a culture is not to be based on trust and shared values. Rather, all aspects of that society are to be grounded in and face 'the most extreme possible exposure to market forces, with internal markets, profit centers, audits, and "bottom lines" penetrating the whole of life from hospitals to play-groups'. As Margaret Thatcher once famously put it, "The task is not to just change the economy, but to change the soul".

Interestingly, because of the focus on measurable results and central control over important decisions, the federal government's power has actually been sharply enhanced. (In the United States, the former Bush Administration's legislation concerning 'No Child Left Behind'—where schools labeled as 'failing' on standardized tests are to be subject to market competition and central sanctions—becomes a good example of this at the level of elementary and secondary schools.) This has been accompanied by a loss of local democracy. At the same time, the role of the state in dealing with the destructive rapaciousness produced by 'economically rational' decisions has been sharply reduced.

As many people have recognized, behind all educational proposals are visions of a just society and a good student. The neo-liberal reforms I have been discussing construct this in a particular way. While the defining characteristic of neo-liberalism is lar-

gely based on the central tenets of classical liberalism, in particular classic economic liberalism, there are crucial differences between classical liberalism and neo-liberalism. These differences are absolutely essential in understanding the politics of education and the transformations education is currently undergoing. Mark Olssen clearly details these differences in the following passage. It is worth quoting in its entirety.

Whereas classical liberalism represents a negative conception of state power in that the individual was to be taken as an object to be freed from the interventions of the state, neo-liberalism has come to represent a positive conception of the state's role in creating the appropriate market by providing the conditions, laws and institutions necessary for its operation. In classical liberalism, the individual is characterized as having an autonomous human nature and can practice freedom. In neo-liberalism the state seeks to create an individual who is an enterprising and competitive entrepreneur. In the classical model the theoretical aim of the state was to limit and minimize its role based on postulates which included universal egoism (the self-interested individual); invisible hand theory which dictated that the interests of the individual were also the interests of the society as a whole; and the political maxim of laissez-faire. In the shift from classical liberalism to neo-liberalism, then, there is a further element added, for such a shift involves a change in subject position from "homo economicus", who naturally behaves out of self-interest and is relatively detached from the state, to "manipulatable man", who is created by the state and who is continually encouraged to be perpetually responsive'. It is not that the conception of the self-interested subject is replaced or done away with by the new ideals of "neo-liberalism", but that in an age of universal welfare, the perceived possibilities of slothful indolence create necessities for new forms of vigilance, surveillance, "performance appraisal" and of forms of control generally. In this model the state has taken it upon itself to keep us all up to the mark. The state will see to it that each one makes a "continual enterprise of ourselves"...in what seems to be a process of "governing without governing" (OLSSEM, 1996).

In attempting to understand this, in *Educating the "Right" Way* I demonstrated the power of Olssen's point that neo-liberalism requires the constant production of evidence that you are doing things "efficiently" and in the "correct" way by examining the effects on the ground of the suturing together of the seemingly contradictory tendencies of neo-liberal and neo-conservative discourses and practi-

ces, for this is exactly what is happening at all levels of education, including higher education. And this is occurring at the same time as the state itself becomes increasingly subject to commercialization. This situation has given rise to what might best be called an audit culture. To get a sense of the widespread nature of such practices, it is useful here to quote from Leys, one of the most perceptive analysts of this growth:

There is a proliferation of auditing, i.e., the use of business derived concepts of independent supervision to measure and evaluate performance by public agencies and public employees, from civil servants and school teachers to university [faculty] and doctors: environmental audit, value for money audit, management audit, forensic audit, data audit, intellectual property audit, medical audit, teaching audit and technology audit emerged and, to varying degrees of institutional stability and acceptance, very few people have been left untouched by these developments.

The widespread nature of these evaluative and measurement pressures, and their ability to become parts of our commonsense, crowd out other conceptions of effectiveness and democracy.

In place of a society of citizens with the democratic power to ensure effectiveness and proper use of collective resources, and relying in large measure on trust in the public sector, there emerged a society of “auditees”, anxiously preparing for audits and inspections. A punitive culture of “league tables” developed (purporting to show the relative efficiency and inefficiency of universities or schools or hospitals). Inspection agencies were charged with “naming and shaming” “failing” individual teachers, schools, social work departments, and so on; private firms were invited to take over and run “failing” institutions.

The ultimate result of an auditing culture of this kind is not the promised de-centralization that plays such a significant role rhetorically in most neoliberal self-understandings, but what seems to be a massive re-centralization and what is best seen as a process of de-democratization. Making the state more ‘business friendly’ and importing business models directly into the core functions of the state such as hospitals and education—in combination with a rigorous and unforgiving ideology of individual accountability—these are the hallmarks of life today. Once again, the growth of for-profit ventures such as Edison Schools in the United States, the increasing standardization and technicisation of content within teacher education programs so that social reflexivity and critical understanding are nearly evacuated from courses (ZEICHNER, 1991; APPLE,

2007), the constant pressure to ‘perform’ according to imposed and often reductive standards in our institutions of higher education, and similar kinds of things are the footprints that these constantly escalating pressures have left on the terrain of education.

A key to all of this is the de-valuing of public goods and services. It takes long-term and creative ideological work, but people must be made to see anything that is public as “bad” and anything that is private as “good”. And anyone who works in these public institutions must be seen as inefficient and in need of the sobering facts of competition so that they work longer and harder (CLARKE, NEWMAN, 1997). When the people who work in public institutions fight back and argue for more respectful treatment and for a greater realization that simplistic solutions do not deal with the complexities that they face every day in the real world of schools, universities, and communities, they are labeled as recalcitrant and selfish and as uncaring. Sometimes, as in the case of former United States Secretary of Education Page’s public comments to what he thought was a sympathetic audience, they are even called “terrorists”. And these “recalcitrant, selfish, and uncaring” employees—teachers, academics, administrators, social workers, and almost all other public employees—can then have their labor externally controlled and intensified by people who criticize them mercilessly, often as in the case of major corporations while these same businesses are shedding their own social responsibilities by paying little or no taxes.

I noted earlier that it is not just the labor of state employees that is radically altered; so too is the labor of “consumers”. When services such as hospitals and schools are commodified, a good deal of the work that was formerly done by state employees is shifted onto those using the service. Examples of labor being shifted to the “consumer” include on-line banking, airline ticketing and check-in, supermarket self-checkouts, and similar things. Each of these is advertised as enhancing “choice” and each comes with a system of incentives and disincentives. Thus, one can get airline miles for checking in on one’s computer. Or as some banks are now doing, there is an extra charge if you want to see a real live bank teller rather than using an ATM machine (which itself often now has an extra charge for using it).

The effects of such changes may be hidden but that does not make them any less real. Some of these are clearly economic: the closing of bank branches; the laying off of large numbers of workers, including in higher education; the intensification

of the work-load of the fewer workers who remain. Some are hidden in their effects on consumers: exporting all of the work and the necessary commitment of time onto those people who are now purchasing the service; searching for information that was once given by the government; doing one's banking and airline work oneself; bagging and checking out at supermarkets. The classed and raced specificities of this are crucial, since the ability to do such electronic searching and education for example is dependent on the availability of computers and especially time to engage in such actions. It requires resources—both temporal and financial, to say nothing of emotional—that are differentially distributed.

This all may seem so trivial. But when each “trivial” instance is added up, the massiveness of the transformation in which labor is transferred to the consumer is striking. For it to be successful, our commonsense must be changed so that we see the world only as individual consumers and we see ourselves as surrounded by a world in which everything is potentially a commodity for sale. To speak more theoretically, the subject position on offer is the de-raced, de-classed, and de-gendered “possessive individual”, an economically rational actor who is constructed by and constructs a reality in which democracy is no longer a political concept but is reduced to an economic one (BALL, 1994).

Mark Fowler, Ronald Reagan's Chair of the Federal Communications Commission, once publicly stated that television is simply a toaster with pictures. A conservative media mogul in England seemed to agree, when he said that there is no difference between a television program and a cigarette lighter. Both positions are based on an assumption that cultural form and content and the processes of distribution are indeed commodities. There are few more important mechanisms of cultural selection and distribution than schools and universities. And under this kind of logic, one might say that educational institutions are simply toasters with students. There is something deeply disturbing about this position not only in its vision of education, but profoundly in its understanding of the lives of the people who actually work in such institutions and in the often under-funded, under-staffed, and difficult conditions now being experienced there. While it would be too reductive to see educational work merely in labor process terms, the intensification that has resulted from the conditions associated with this assemblage of assumptions has become rather pronounced (APPLE, 1995). However, many of us may be apt to see such things as relatively humorous or innocuous. Aren't market-based proposals for

such things as schools, universities, health care and others just another, but supposedly more efficient, way of making services available? But not only are these ideologically driven “reforms” not all that efficient, the process of privatization is strikingly different than public ownership and control. For example, in order to market something like education, it must first be transformed into a commodity, a “product”. The product is then there to serve different ends. Thus, rather than schooling being aimed at creating critically democratic citizenship as its ultimate goal (although we should never romanticize an Edenic past when this was actually the case; schooling has always been a site of struggle over what its functions would actually be, with the working class and many women and people of color being constructed as “not quite citizens”) (APPLE, 1983), the entire process can slowly become aimed instead at the generation of profit for shareholders or a site whose hidden purpose is to document the efficiency of newly empowered managerial forms within the reconstituted state.

The fact that such things as the for-profit Edison Schools in the United States have not generated the significant profits that their investors had dreamed of means that the process of commodification is, at least partly, being rejected. For many people in all walks of life, the idea of “selling” our schools and our children is somehow disturbing, as the continuing controversy over Channel One, the for-profit television station with advertising now being broadcast in 43% of all public and private middle and secondary schools in the United States, amply demonstrates. These intuitions demonstrate that in our everyday lives there remains a sense that there is something very wrong with our current and still too uncritical fascination with markets and audits. However, this optimism needs to be immediately balanced by the immense growth of for-profit online universities such as the University of Phoenix, an institution that exemplifies the transformation of education into a saleable commodity.

David Marquand summarizes the worrisome tendencies I have been describing in the following way:

The public domain of citizenship and service should be safeguarded from incursions by the market domain of buying and selling...The goods of the public domain—health care, crime prevention, and education—should not be treated as commodities or proxy commodities. The language of buyer and seller, producer and consumer, does not belong in the public domain; nor do the relationships which

that language implies. Doctors and nurses do not “sell” medical services; students are not “customers” of their teachers; policemen and policewomen do not “produce” public order. The attempt to force these relationships into a market model undermines the service ethic, degrades the institutions that embody it and robs the notion of common citizenship of part of its meaning (MARQUAND, 2000, p.212-213).

I agree. In my mind, public institutions are the defining features of a caring and democratic society. The market relations that are sponsored by capitalism should exist to pay for these institutions, not the other way around. Thus, markets are to be subordinate to the aim of producing a fuller and thicker participatory democratic polity and daily life (SKOCPOL, 2003). It should be clear by now that a cynical conception of democracy that is “on sale” to voters and manipulated and marketed by political and economic elites does not adequately provide for goods such as general and higher education, objective information, media and new forms of communication that are universally accessible, well-maintained public libraries for all, public health, and universal health care. At best, markets provide these things in radically unequal ways, with class, gender, and especially race being extremely powerful markers of these inequalities. If that is the case—even if the definitions of the “public” were and often still are based on the construction of gendered and raced spaces—the very idea of public institutions is under concerted attack. They need to be provided—and defended—collectively. Such things are anything but secondary. They are the defining characteristics of what it means to be a just society.

Unfortunately, the language of privatization, marketization, and constant evaluation has increasingly saturated public discourse. In many ways, it has become commonsense—and the critical intuitions—that something may be wrong with all of this may slowly wither. Yet, in many nations where conditions are even worse, this has not necessarily happened, as the growth of participatory budgeting, “Citizen Schools”, close relations between teacher education programs and the construction of more socially responsive and critical curricular and pedagogical initiatives in Porto Alegre, Brazil, and elsewhere, documents. We can learn from these nations’ experiences and we can relearn what it means to reconstitute the civic in our lives. Education has a fundamental role to play in doing exactly that. But it can only do so if it is protected from those

who see it as one more product to be consumed as we measure it and who interpret the intellectual and emotional labor of those who are engaged in educational work through the lenses of standardization, rationalization, and auditing.

Having said this, however, interrupting conservative modernization requires that we have a more adequate understanding of both some fundamental dynamics and its social functions and roots. I want to turn to this now.

New Managerialism in Class Terms

Throughout this essay, I have been broadly describing particular kinds of tendencies that are reconstructing what counts as legitimate knowledge, legitimate education, legitimate evidence, and legitimate labor. Yet, we need to be cautious about reductive analyses in understanding where these ideological movements come from. It would be too easy to simply say that these are the predictable effects of competitive globalization, of capital in crisis and its accompanying fiscal crisis of the state, or in more Foucauldian terms, of the micro-politics of governmentality and normalization, although there is some truth to all of these. These tendencies underpinning “conservative modernization” are also “solutions” that are generated by particular actors, and here we need to be more specific about class relations inside and outside of higher education.

As Basil Bernstein has reminded us and as I have argued at much greater depth elsewhere, a good deal of the genesis of and support for the policies of conservative modernization, and especially of the constant need for audits, the production of “evidence”, rationalization, and standardization of both labor and knowledge comes not only from capital and its neo-liberal allies in government, but from a particular fraction of the professional and managerial new middle class (BERNSTEIN, 1996). This fraction of the professional new middle class gains its own mobility within the state and within the economy based on the use of technical expertise. These are people with backgrounds in management and efficiency techniques who provide the technical and “professional” support for accountability, measurement, ‘product control’, and assessment that is required by the proponents of neo-liberal policies of marketization and neo-conservative policies of tighter central control in education.

Members of this fraction of the upwardly mobile professional and managerial new middle class do not necessarily believe in the ideological positions

that underpin all aspects of the conservative alliance. In fact in other aspects of their lives they may be considerably more moderate and even “liberal” politically. However, as experts in efficiency, management, testing, and accountability, they provide the technical expertise to put in place the policies of conservative modernization. Their own mobility depends on the expansion of both such expertise and the professional ideologies of control, measurement, and efficiency that accompany it. Thus, they often support such policies as “neutral instrumentalities” even when these policies may be used for purposes other than the supposedly neutral ends this class fraction is committed to.

Because of this, it is important to realize that a good deal of the current emphasis on audits and more rigorous forms of accountability, on tighter control, and a vision that competition will lead to greater efficiency is not totally reducible to the needs of neo-liberals and neo-conservatives. Rather, part of the pressure for these policies comes from educational managers and bureaucratic offices, who fully believe that such control is warranted and “good”. Not only do these forms of control have an extremely long history in education, but tighter control, high stakes testing, and (reductive) accountability methods provide more dynamic roles for such managers.

Let me briefly say more about this, since this is significant in terms of the self-understanding of class actors within the administrative apparatus of the state. The decades of attacks on state employees have not only had the predictable effects of lost employment and worsening working conditions, although these kinds of things are continuing within higher education and elsewhere. These attacks have also had profound effects on identities and have produced a crisis among many state employees and managers about doubts to their expertise and their ability to “help” the public. New identities that are centered around enhanced technical proficiency and a set of assumptions that deep-seated problems in education and the entire social sphere can be provided with, by enhancing efficiency and holding people more rigorously accountable for their actions, have developed over time, sponsored in part by neo-liberal discourses that have opened spaces within the state for such expertise. This enables those class fractions with technical forms of cultural capital focused on accountability and managerial efficiency to occupy these spaces and to guarantee a place for the uses of their knowledge. This is an ideal situation for the professional and managerial new middle class. They can see themselves as engaging in a moral crusade—seeing themselves as being endless-

sly responsive to “clients” and “consumers” in such a way that they are participating in the creation of a newly reconstituted and more efficient set of institutions that will “help everyone”—and at the same time enhancing the status of their own expertise. In Bourdieu’s terms, this allows for particular kinds of conversion strategies, ones in which their cultural capital (technical and managerial expertise) can be converted into economic capital (positions and mobility within higher education and the state).

This needs to be situated in the ways in which such cultural markets and conversion strategies operate in the larger set of class relations, in which such new middle class actors participate. My claims here are complicated and I can only outline a wider set of arguments. However, the implications of these arguments are serious if we are to fully understand why all of education, including higher education and those taking part in it or not, seems to be experiencing a number of the restructurings I have earlier discussed.

This is a time when competition for credentials and cultural capital is intense. The increasing power of mechanisms of re-stratification, such as the return of high levels of mandatory standardization, more testing more often, and constant auditing of results, also provides mechanisms—and an insistent logic—that enhance the chances that the children of the professional and managerial new middle class will have less competition from other students. Thus, the introduction of devices to re-stratify a population—for this is what much of it is—enhances the value of the credentials that the new middle class is more likely to accumulate, given the stock of cultural capital it already possesses (BOURDIEU, 1988; 1996). I am not claiming that this is necessarily intentional, but it does function to increase the chances for mobility by middle class children who depend not on economic capital but on cultural capital for advancement (POWER et al, 2003; BALL, 2003). The effects of such policies and procedures on working class students and on students of oppressed minorities is more than a little visible in an entire series of detailed and insightful studies (GILLBORN; YODELL, 2000).

I want to stress the importance of this element within conservative modernization, not only because it already occupies considerable power within the state. It is crucial to focus on these groups as well because, in the situation I have described, I believe that this group is not immune to ideological shifts to the Right. Thus, they may not be as able to be self-conscious about the role they may be playing in the restructuring of educational and social policies I have been discussing in this arti-

cle. Given the fear generated by the attacks on the state and on the public sphere by both neo-liberals and neo-conservatives, this class fraction is decidedly worried about the future mobility of its children in an uncertain economic world. Thus, they may be drawn even more overtly to parts of the conservative alliance's positions, especially those coming from the neo-conservative elements, which stress greater attention to traditional "high status" content, greater attention to testing, and a greater emphasis on schooling (and the entire university system) as a stratifying mechanism. This can be seen in a number of states in the United States, for example, where parents of this class fraction are supporting charter schools that will stress academic achievement in traditional subjects and traditional teaching practices.

It remains to be seen where the majority of members of this class grouping will align, in the future, in the debates over policy. Given their contradictory ideological tendencies, it is possible that the Right will be able to mobilize them under conditions of fear for the future of their jobs and children, even when they still vote for, say, New Labour or social democratic (and sometimes even leftist) parties in electoral terms. At the very least, it would be romantic to assume that they will be responsive to the claims from those people who are employed in institutions of higher education and in education in general, that the conditions under which they are increasingly working are damaging, and that they are creating an education that is less and less worthy of its name.

On Possibilities

would this reconstitution be integrated into what Fraser calls a politics of redistribution and a politics of recognition? In more everyday words, given the criticisms that have been made of the ways in which the public sphere in general, and universities, in particular, have actually operated over time, what needs to change to take account of these criticisms?

What we should not be doing is defending all of the actually existing practices of the university, since many of these may be discriminatory, racist, or have a history that is based on elitism. Instead, we must ask what specifically do we wish to defend? In asking this question, as I mentioned above, we may need to recognize that there are elements of good sense as well as bad sense in the criticisms that are made about universities. The space of criticism has been taken up by neoliberal claims and managerial impulses. But this does not mean that

higher education did not need to change or that a simple return to the previous form and content of higher education is anywhere near a sufficient set of policies.

Let us be honest. If a simple return to past practices is neither possible nor wise, it is hard to specify, in advance, other than in broad strokes, the exact character of the kinds of models of structures, practices, and deliberative agency that should guide public life inside and outside of higher education. As Raymond Williams reminded us, the "common" has to be continuously built, since what counts as the common is the never-ending process of critical deliberation over the very question of the common itself (WILLIAMS, 1989). This more critical understanding is evacuated under the aegis of the logics of markets and audits, since we do know that what is currently being built/imposed is often destructive, even in its own terms of assuming that establishing markets and audits will restore responsiveness and even trust.

Stuart Ranson summarizes these arguments in the following way. This neo-liberal regime cannot realize its purpose of institutional achievement and public trust. Achievement grows out of the internal goods of motivation to improve (which follows recognition and the mutual deliberation of purpose) rather than emerging from the external imposition of quantifiable targets, while public trust follows deliberation of common purpose out of difference and discord, rather than pursuing the forces of competition that only create a hierarchy of class advantage and exclusion.

Ranson is not sanguine about the possibility of building a public sphere that both challenges the neo-liberal and neo-conservative construction of an audit culture and goes beyond the limits of older versions of what counts as the public sphere. However, he does articulate a sense of what is required to do so. A reconstituted vision of the public and a set of practices and structures that support it are grounded in the following.

Trust and achievement can only emerge in a framework of public accountability that enables different accounts of public purpose and practice to be deliberated in a democratic public sphere: constituted to include difference, enable participation, voice and dissent, through to collective judgment and decision, that is, in turn, accountable to the public.

Such a vision is not simply utopian. Indeed, the history of higher education—from early mechanics institutes, to "people's universities", to the many attempts at creating closer cooperative connections between universities and culturally, politically, and economically dispossessed groups—suggests that there

is a rich storehouse of knowledge on possibilities for doing this. But this requires the restoration of memory. Thus, historical work is absolutely essential if we are to go forward. Here I do not mean a nostalgic longing for an imagined past; but an honest appraisal of the limits and possibilities of what has been done before.

The task is not only historical, however. Undoubtedly, within each and every institution of higher education, within the crevices and cracks so to speak, there are counter-hegemonic practices being built and defended. But they are too often isolated from each other and never get organized into coherent movements and strategies. Part of the task is to make public the successes in contesting the control over curricula, pedagogy, and evaluation—over all of our work. While public “story-telling” may not be sufficient, it performs an important function. It keeps alive and reminds ourselves of the very possibility of difference in an age of audits and disrespect.

We have successful models for doing this, such as the book *Democratic Schools*. In that book, James Beane and I saw our role as researchers very differently. We acted as “secretaries” for socially critical educators and made public their stories of building curricula and pedagogies that expressly embodied Ranson’s vision of a reconstituted public sphere based on difference, participation, voice, and dissent. The book went on to sell hundreds of thousands of copies in multiple languages. While *Democratic Schools* was about primary, middle, and secondary schools, it does point to the ways in which such strategic interruptions can proceed in other institutional contexts.

This, then, is another task. Can we too act as secretaries for some of our colleagues in higher education, making public their partial, but still successful, resistances to the regime of regulation that we are currently experiencing? The narratives of their (our) political/pedagogic lives can bear witness to the possibility of taking steps toward building a reconstituted public sphere within the spaces in which we live and work.

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