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Higher Education in the Era of Illusions:

Neoliberal Narratives, Capitalistic Realities, and the Need for Critical Praxis



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The modern U.S. university is witnessing radical changes that are both structural and global. Such changes are reshaping the terrain of higher education, remolding its structures, mechanisms, and very identity. While few of these changes are reflective of the rhetorical language of economic freedom, liberty, choice, and rights used in promoting the neoliberal state project, many others are clear indications of the re-coronation of a capitalistic class and the reinstatement of its class supremacy through the exploitation of society. In the first section of this article, rising free market trends in today's U.S. university are described. The second section describes evolving capitalistic tendencies in the modern U.S. university. The third section provides a historical mapping of the rise neoliberalism in U.S. culture

and its university. In the last section, and using the work of John Dewey, an outline of a pragmatist pedagogy of embodiment in various higher education contexts is elaborated.

The Neoliberal University

Neoliberalization. A dominant narrative in today's U.S. higher education is that of neoliberalism, a reflection of wider political and economic changes that has been taking place in the U.S. and other parts of the world since the early 1980's. Today we speak of an established "academic capitalism" in higher education where different actors (faculty, students, administrators, and academic professionals) use state resources to "create new circuits

of knowledge that links higher education institutions to the new economy” (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004, p. 1). While the university the 1970s and the 1980s served both technical vocational needs as well as other wider societal goals (democracy, citizenship, critical thinking, political participation, cultural critique), today’s university’s center of gravity is the free market economy and its ever shifting cycles of supply and demand.

Deregulation. One major reason for this neoliberalization of the university is the rise of the deregulated, neoliberal, nation state, one which major function is to guard an economy in which it makes sure not to be a player.

Marketization. Today’s university is more conscious than ever before of the economic presence and needs of the free market. One of its major missions is to help students to secure employability and to travel successful career paths. To do so, the new university emphasizes degrees in vocational and professional fields, popular with big industries and dominant service sectors. Another major mission of the new university is the production of commodifiable research that is sellable in the free market, and this university is no stranger to the language of patents and licensing, copyrights and royalties, and corporate start-ups.

Corporatization. Forcing a change in the university’s mission, the neoliberal economicization of the university has automatically forced a deeper change in its structural identity. A basic entity of any free market economy is the corporation, an entity that today’s university is forced to emulate. The new university is one of standardization, whether of vision, mission, structures, processes, or outcomes. It is also one of strategic planning, continuous system-wide data collection and analysis, and standards-based accountability. The ultimate goal of today’s university, like any other aspiring free market corporation, is to increase profit, and this can be done by either reducing costs or increasing revenues. To reduce costs, the new university refers to measures of fiscal austerity, including the outsourcing of services to cheaper providers and the hiring of cheapest “labor” possible. To increase revenues, the new university may refer to philanthropic fundraising and the profitable business of non-educational commodities. Yet another way to increase profit is to pursue aggressive commercialization, branding, and marketization.

Privatization. Beyond corporatization, today’s university is witnessing deep changes in its institutional environment. Little by little, the new university is moving from a bureaucratic institutional environment controlled by local, state, and federal authority to a free market institutional environment where the corporate university is expanding its ties to other free market corporate entities. One way to connect to the new corporate environment is through triple helixes (university, government, and industry partnerships). Another way to become a strong knot in the corporate web of the free market is simply to detach altogether from the bureaucratic clutch, to become one of the many rising private for-profit providers. Historically, such privatization of higher education has been coupled with the rise of online education (Stokes, 2011).



Globalization. A major assumption of neoliberalism is the ability of both producers and consumers to compare various brands of goods and services across the market for the purposes of valuing, ordering, and exchange, an assumption that led to the elaboration of sophisticated and massive global ranking data tools and systems, a trend that has been mirrored in higher education. Another dimension of neoliberalism is its global nature. The free market is literally free, seeking all geographies and taking advantage of the “the compression of market transactions in space and time” (Harvey, 2005, p. 4). Hence we see in today’s higher education a rising discourse of internationalization and globalization.

The Capitalistic University

Classism. Wearing the mask of neoliberalism, an authoritarian global economic oligarchy is today thriving as



Image by Brenna Donegan

“the incredible concentrations of wealth and power that now exist in the upper echelons of capitalism have not been seen since the 1920s” (Harvey, 2005, p. 119). While today’s university carry in it some shards of neoliberalism sprinkled here and there, its core substance is nothing but a replication of such a rising new capitalism and its second gilded age. Consciously or not, the new university is inseparable from capitalistic economic stratification and economic classism. So what are some of the classist tendencies in the new university?

Students’ exploitation. To many students today, higher education is becoming more and more expensive and less and less affordable. The phenomenon of rising tuitions is coupled with a variety of neoliberal deregulating efforts targeting for example need-based institutional grants and affirmative action policies. Rising tuitions and deregulation efforts coupled with selective marketization of some higher tier universities and biased admission mostly against students of color means that the cost of the state cuts in higher education is passed on to the nation’s most vulnerable students, poor students of color.

Two consequences of such difficulties with access to higher education follow. The first is that many students—mostly high risk (low socio-economic status, student of color, single parents, and poor academic achievement)—end up either “flooding low tuition, open-access, two- and four-year institutions” (Georgetown Public Policy Institute, 2013) or joining covetous private for-profit diploma mills. The second consequence is that many of these students earn their degree with an insoluble amount of debt. The net effect such difficulties with access is that the average new university’s student does not earn a good quality education and ends up lacking the tools to climb the economic ladder and achieve social mobility, resulting in intensifying never ending cycles of economic stratification and reproduction.

De-democratization. To ensure hegemony, capitalism promotes its own cultural pedagogy and pedagogical culture (Gramsci, 1971). The primary enemy of hegemony is of course a critical democracy that centers a conversation about inquiry, critique, praxis, conflict, power, oppression, politics, ethics, community, and justice. The role of the U.S. university as a pioneering democratic institution with a democratic vision and mission, and a commitment to the public good, social justice, and cultural critique is nowadays under serious attack. Instead, the new university is promoted as an economic bit of and in an economic machine.

One way to marginalize democracy in higher education is to deemphasize teaching and researching academic disciplines interested in the art of human togetherness, including critical versions of the humanities and social sciences. Another way is to target its democratic structures and processes including academic freedom, the institution of tenure, faculty governance, professional institutional autonomy, and faculty unionization. A third way is to promote the rising authoritarian grip of university bureaucrats over curriculum, pedagogy, and research. Yet a fourth way is to open the doors of higher education to the direct influence of market forces which control over curriculum, pedagogy, and research has been on the rise.

Mythification. Capitalism of the new university is an antidemocratic ideology that cannot survive without the art of illusionary narratives, narratives which function is the alienation of the cultural actor from her oppressive reality. Mythical stories told to students about the content and processes of knowledge (curriculum), the possibility of social mobility, the free will of the average cultural actor, the authenticity of existing forms of democratic governance, the unconditional freedom of the rational consumer, the naturalness of amusement, and the warmth of communities made from bricks of logos, brands, and cheerleaders, are nothing but hegemonic tools of a classist order. Of course the most controlling of these narratives is that the neoliberal potentials of global knowers in a global knowledge economy of limitless possibilities.

Narratives in an Era of Illusions

The cultural history of the United States has always been an arena of ferocious struggle between two competing

contradictory cultural currents: from one side radically participative forms of democracy and from the other a variety of material and cultural agendas of stratification and subjugation. While the civil rights movement era has made public and conscious the structural oppressive tendencies in U.S. culture and has made many considerable steps forward, the fight for the spirit of U.S. democracy was not totally won, and the battle is today far from over. Because of the long lasting victories made by the civil rights movement, the oppressive agenda in U.S. culture lost its familiar lexicon of naturalized racism and classism. An oppressive public language, through democratic cultural resistance, was more or less lost, and new linguistic carriers of the segregation agenda had to emerge. Today, these carriers detach discourse from reality altogether, centralizing the first with the purpose of camouflaging the second.

Back to our problem, neoliberalism is the central linguistic carrier of illusion in U.S. higher education. Such a carrier is nothing but an illusory myth, an anti-scientific ideology which historical sociopolitical function has always been the coronation of a dominant economic class and the reinstatement of its class supremacy. While neoliberalism in higher education has always promised freedom, autonomy, agency, choice, rights, privacy, possibility, creativity, success, prosperity, happiness, and a better quality of life, the reality for all but top ranking universities is strikingly different. It is a reality of ethnic, racial, gender, political, national, linguistic, religious, geographical, and economic hierarchies doomed by exploitation, inequality, dehumanization, immiseration, marginalization, exclusion, social immobility, economic reproduction, hegemony, and never ending cycles of economic reproduction, let alone the conscious efforts to de/un/mis-educate in the democratic tradition.

Since masking is illusory, critical unmasking should not only attend to the structural cruelties of capitalism but also deconstruct the illusory nature of the neoliberal discourse in higher education. Such neoliberal

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discourse may appear to be illusory but its occupation of reality is nothing less than actual. The struggle for the spirit of radical democracy should address both the structural macroscopic ills of capitalism and the subjective microscopic embodiment of illusions, including those of neoliberalism. As the coin has two sides, so should the fight. Such a deconstructive project becomes even more crucial when knowing that an already vulnerable student population in higher education has been on the rise for some time now. It is in the critical embodied consciousness of such students that the promise of radical democracy endures. That said it is also these same students that may be most easily bewitched by the emotive oratories of cruelties.

A Pedagogy of Embodiment

The battle over the body of democracy is at heart educational. Culture is pedagogical and a material of pedagogy. While oppressive versions of cultural education are invested in disciplinary teaching, learning, and authorship, more democratic ones are an expression of voice, participation, and improvising. Between the doctrinaire and the palimpsested oscillates the cultural text, a text that is becoming under the new capitalism more and more positive and alienated from the democratic needs and potentials of the common and their realities.

Reclaiming democratic higher education requires then the elaboration of a democratic theory of cultural pedagogy, one of embodiment. Perhaps no thinker in the U.S. intellectual tradition devoted his life to such a project more than did John Dewey. In its generic form, Deweyan Pragmatism is the democratic theory of cultural pedagogy par excellence (Dewey, 1916, 1920, 1925, 1927, 1929, 1939; Dewey & Bentley 1949).

In its core, Deweyan cultural pedagogy is a call for a scientific, democratic, public, educational, and critical inquiry into, criticism of, then action on a problematic cultural text resulting in its progressive reconstruction, transformation, and reorganization. A scientific pedagogy is dedicated to the phenomenological and hermeneutical study of human experience. A democratic pedagogy is pluralistic, participative, and communal. A public pedagogy is organic and bottom up. An educational pedagogy allows the continuous intelligent reconstruction, transformation, and reorganization of the social environment by the social actor. A critical pedagogy is inseparable from power and politics, the ethic of care and social justice, and the ideal of the public good. Although not the only tool that could be deployed in the resistance of the oppression of capitalism, the peculiar advantage of a pedagogy of embodiment is in its continuous insistence that change happens only through experiential action and that action is performable only in the here and now and by specific communities of praxis positioned against specific material and cultural realities.