

Postsecondary Education and the Ideology of Capitalist Production

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Abstract

Although there is some evidence that neoliberal approaches to economic development and social policies in general have peaked, the past several decades have witnessed such a tremendous triumph for “free market” advocates that even those who seek to restore health, education and welfare programs and, perhaps, add a concern for the environment and social justice into the mix have difficult times ahead. Not only did neoliberalism win many specific battles, but it also changed the very language of politics. Public investment was deemed unaffordable; privatization was proclaimed inevitable; and, efforts to build both social and physical infrastructure were ridiculed as obsolete and ineffective. The restoration of public services and the detachment of educational programs from the corporate agenda will take an immense effort to redefine what is at stake in the struggle for better and more humane schooling. This article suggests that one place to start the process is with a critical analysis of the ideology of capitalist production, for which contemporary educational institutions serve not only in terms of the education and training of a compliant work force, but also as one of the main proponents of late capitalism on a global scale.

Key Words: neoliberalism, reduction of public services, continentalism, reduction of education to skills training

Introduction

In a process of economic transformation that is commonly said to have begun during the Thatcher and Reagan regimes in 1980s in the United Kingdom and the United States, Western liberal democracies have increasingly reduced government services, business and environmental regulations and their already modest efforts to redistribute wealth from the middle and upper classes to the working class and the poor. In Canada and the United States, this transformation from a more or less “mixed” to a dominantly “market-driven” economy is strongly associated with the implementation of domestic structural adjustments, programs, regional and bilateral trade agreements including the North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (FTAA) as well as the growing power of international institutions such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the World Bank (Panitch, 1994; Teeple, 2002). The deployment of strategies aimed at reducing public controls over economic and educational policies has been accompanied not only with arguments for the efficiency and efficacy of the private sector, but also with a rhetoric that implies and sometimes insists that the allegedly “free” market is destined to dominate human affairs and that attempts to regulate capitalist institutions are not merely undesirable but are futile.

In support of corporate interests, national, provincial or state and local governments—no matter what political party happens to be in power—have promoted neoliberal development strategies that emphasize the “invisible hand” of an unrestricted market rather than the stabilizing hand of the state as a regulator of the economy and society. Led by the policies and procedures of the United States under both Republican and Democratic leaders, Canada has been integrated into an international market that encourages unfettered economic growth, decreased spending on social programs, weakened national borders, increased foreign investment in the production of goods and services for export, diminished control over everything from natural resources to cultural “industries” including all plastic and performing arts as well as the mass media and reduced state responsibilities in such areas as environmental protection, health and safety regulations, banking and commerce and so on.

A Problem of Definition

Before proceeding, it is important to clear up one terminological ambiguity. What we refer to as “neoliberalism” is sometimes confused with or taken to be a synonym for “neoconservatism.” In fact, the two terms have much in common. Both affirm the primacy of private business corporations in the economy. Both eschew governmental “interference” in the marketplace and speak strongly against “entitlement” programs, minimum wage laws, labour laws that enhance the position of trade unions, universal health care and other issues to which clear dollar values may be attached. Especially in the United States, where “liberal” has become a term of abuse, these mainly economic concerns have been tied to other issues. The result is “neoconservatism” which combines the economic values of the private sector with a host of religious and cultural viewpoints as well. Matters such as sexual orientation, abortion, stem cell research, the tenets of fundamentalist (Christian) religion, immigration and multiculturalism, the teaching of biological evolution and a variety of topics associated with “patriotism” including the desire for an Amendment to the US Constitution to ban flag-burning all combine to constitute something commonly called “social conservatism.” Married to the economic project of “free enterprise” and the market economy, these cultural beliefs form a general political ideology that is less evident in Canada (where, for example, publicly funded medicare, same-sex marriage and an official policy of multiculturalism are, at least for the time being, the law of the land. In much of Europe and among liberal democracies elsewhere, of course, the ideological defence of capitalism does not embrace the “culture wars” that remain to be resolved in the United States and, to a lesser degree, in Canada. Accordingly, since this article mainly addresses economic and educational funding issues, we hope that readers, especially in the United States will understand that we use the term neoliberalism to mean those economic ideas and ideals that pass under the rubric of neoconservatism in the USA.

The Internationalization of Capitalism in North America

Returning to the main theme, it is important to understand that the trend toward regional associations such as the European Union, and even global associations such as those monitored by the World Bank and the World Trade Organization are nothing new. With

respect to the economic integration of North America, for example, “continentalization” has been a work in progress since the “reciprocity agreements” between Canada and the United States in the mid-19th century. It is true that a solid stream of resistance to this trend endured well into the 20th century and that there was even a robust opposition to the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement in the late 1980s. Such efforts, however, seem to have become moribund as the language of globalization appears to have become the language of political economy, with all dissent marginalized and debate over particulars duly contained. According to the analysis proffered by Kari Levitt over thirty-five years ago (1970: 58-70), the effective American takeover of major parts of the Canadian manufacturing sector was effectively completed by 1914 and was soon underway in other sectors following World War I. The economic realities gave rise, in the late 1960s and early 1970s to a series of government documents authored by academics and parliamentarians alike that amply, if belatedly, testified to the US corporate takeover of Canadian business and industry. Well documented studies of foreign investment (Canada, 1968; Canada, 1972) and more specific inquiries into cultural issues such as control of the print and broadcast media (Canada, 1970) were commissioned, produced and subsequently ignored by senior policy makers. There was, it is true, a haphazard attempt to control foreign ownership through the creation of the Foreign Investment Review Agency (FIRA) that was imposed on the minority government of Pierre Elliot Trudeau by the New Democratic Party which temporarily held the balance of power in Ottawa, but it failed even as a stop-gap measure and was eventually replaced by Conservative Prime Minister Brian Mulroney with a government department (Investment Canada), which was explicitly mandated not to regulate but openly to encourage foreign investment and followed Mulroney’s mantra “Canada is open for business again!” (). Since the negotiation of the FTA, the vision of Canadian economic independence faded from view as even more radical notions of globalization and a new world order accelerated the neoliberal agenda.

In terms of social services, the decline of the regulatory foundation and the attachment of the funding framework (crucial components of a “social safety net” for health, education and welfare), all levels of government have actively pursued the privatization of public services and have effectively given private transnational firms access to potentially valuable economic activity. The implications for education are clear. Ideologically, the corporate agenda and its attendant rhetoric including calls for educational accountability, precise learning outcomes, skill sets appropriate for a competitive global market, the privileging of business and entrepreneurial training over the humanities and social sciences and the growing link between funding formulae and expressed levels of satisfaction by employers and graduating students, all contribute to a climate of frenzied enthusiasm for a corporate model in the style and substance of teaching and learning. Under the aegis of globalization and the market mentality, rapid and profound changes have taken place which are transforming public education from pre-school programs to post-graduate studies. Again, concerns have been raised by nationalist and leftist scholars (cf. Tudiver, 1999; Cormier, 2004).

Both the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the World Bank treat education as they do other industries and increasingly urge (by intellectual property rights and other means)

that educational policy should be defined at the national and international level (World Bank, 1994; Jarzabkowski, 2002). At the same time, they encourage the downloading responsibility for the provision of services to lower levels of government and encourage “private-public partnerships” to emerge in postsecondary educational institutions as a way to meet educational needs within very limited budgets (Canadian Union of Public Employees, 2000: 6). Globalization and market liberalization served to displace the concept of education as the social provision of basic needs and human rights in favour of viewing education as just another commodity (albeit an ideologically important one) in the marketplace. Increasingly, educational structures have been dismantled and replaced by new policies and procedures aimed at restructuring postsecondary education to follow a global trend toward corporatization and to create a “market responsive” sector. As a result, the delivery of high quality educational services has become more problematic, with the burden of adjustment shifted from the state to the individual in the form of increasing tuition fees and decreasing services.

The process also involves the replication of capitalist relations of production in the academy. Worker productivity is measured in terms of the distribution of grades. Students are viewed as “clients” when they are admitted and as “products” when they graduate and seek employment. Quantitative measures are universally adopted to determine the relative success of educational institutions. And, throughout college and university systems, a new word has entered our vocabulary: the “edupreneur,” a highly motivated huckster who is skilled in the art of “selling” a course of study and securing funding from a diverse range of sources, especially including the private sector. Edupreneurs are especially gifted in packaging educational experiences for private companies who can contract out on-the-job training to teachers who will design programs with tailor-made “learning outcomes” according to the needs and facilities available. In especially fortunate cases, these classes will result in some sort of institutional certification that attests to “mastery” of the subject matter presented.

The literature also points to the fact (commonly called the “dirty little secret”) that a large proportion of Canadian college faculty are employed part-time. In Ontario, for example, colleges currently employ 6,462 (44.4%) full-time faculty and 8,104 (55.6%) part-time teachers (Wall, 2006); in the universities, of course, the bulk of undergraduate teaching has fallen to Graduate Teaching Assistants who rely on such poorly paid work to meet their minimal survival needs. Where not supplied by cheap labour, teaching has been turned over to information technology (technologically enhanced education). Meanwhile, full-time faculty face higher workloads, mounting restrictions on academic freedom, increased stress, and reduced job satisfaction and morale (Buchbinder and Newson, 1990; Fischer and Ruberson, 1998).

The Natural Laws of Capitalism

In Volume One of *Capital*, Marx argued that “the advance of capitalist production develops a working class which by education, tradition and habit looks upon the requirements of that mode of production as self-evident natural laws” (1977: 688). A habitual tradition which uses the language and concepts of economic markets for the

purpose of defining and describing the educational objectives, teaching methodologies and course content of educational institutions has been a common practice in North American postsecondary schools for several decades. Educational institutions are regarded primarily as sites for providing training in those specific skills required for the occupations needed in the global marketplace. There has been a shift from acquiring knowledge, seen as inclusive of culture and social relations, to obtaining information, with an emphasis on gaining access to ahistorical, context-free data.

Accompanying this market rhetoric is the promotion of a “self-evident” belief in the declining market value of courses in philosophy, politics, history, literature and languages. Students are encouraged to demand and select vocationally relevant courses of study such as financial management, computer studies and business administration or in technical skills such as might be required in engineering. If sociology and psychology are included, they find their preferred place in marketing strategies and management techniques; if language development is deemed worthy, it is in the form of corporate communications and technical report writing, not literature.

Historically, both conservatives and radicals have vigorously criticized the overwhelming emphasis placed on vocational training and the subservience of educational institutions to the perceived needs of the marketplace and corporate ideology. Benefits flow preferentially from such market-oriented policies that pay little attention to social, cultural or environmental costs or their impact on educational communities and services. As a direct result of government policy intended to create an atmosphere for international compliance that is driven by corporate-led structures, teaching and research that may once have been used to benefit the common good now increasingly benefit private interests and promote consumerism over citizenship.

Both Adam Smith (1723-1790) the alleged godfather of neoclassical economics and Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) a co-founder of the Italian Communist Party were, for their own reasons, appalled by the conditions of work in capitalist societies. Adam Smith, in *The Wealth of Nations*, introduced his concept of the division of labour as the key to increasing worker productivity (1776). The traditional craft worker, according to Smith, spent too much time and effort performing a variety of simple repetitive physical motions or tasks. These tasks could be performed by anyone since they only involved ordinary manual dexterity. Accordingly, by determining the number of such motions—for example, repetitive physical motions in producing pins—assigning these tasks to individual specialized workers, and determining by experiment the logical sequence of tasks to maximize output, Smith helped establish the theoretical foundation for increasing profit through mass production. In practice, the resulting deskilling of work and workers increases productivity, justifies lower wages, and produces higher profits.

The Critique of the Corporation: Adam Smith

At the same time, Smith acknowledged that the psychological and social costs of this new division of labour are enormous and advocated publicly funded education to prevent the “drowsy stupidity” systematically produced in the workplace:

In the progress of the division of labour, the employment of the greater part of those who live by labour, that is, the great body of the people, comes to be confined to a very few simple operations, frequently to one or two. But the understandings of the greater part of men are necessarily formed by their ordinary employments. The man, whose life is spent in performing a few simple operations, of which the effects too are, perhaps, always the same, or very nearly the same, has no occasion to exert his understanding, or to exercise his invention in finding out expedients for removing difficulties which never occur. He naturally loses, therefore, the habit of such exertion, and generally becomes as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become. The torpor of his mind renders him not only incapable of relishing or bearing a part in any rational conversation, but of conceiving any generous, noble or tender sentiment, and consequently performing any just judgment concerning many even of the ordinary duties of private life. ... But in every improved and civilized society this is the state into which the labouring poor, that is, the majority of people must necessarily fall, unless government takes some pains to prevent it (Smith, 1951: 340-341).

That government should take such pains was patently obvious to Smith (no neoliberal free marketer). It is apparent that “dumbing down” is certainly no merely contemporary phenomenon, and Smith did not endorse it. For him, publicly funded education, even for the masses, had “to do with the ideas of civic humanism and the extent to which modern ‘man’ could attain something approaching the classical concept of citizenship (Skinner, 1995: 87). Education is not simply for the dissemination of “skills, training and entrepreneurship to do business in the global economy,” and government must make funding available where “the profit motive is likely to prove inadequate” (Skinner, 1995: 95).

For Adam Smith, the marketplace provided no magical solution for social problems, and more effective participation in the market was certainly not the only goal of education—especially higher education. Public works for the benefit of society, such as publicly funded education, were not to be left to the “invisible hand” that is said to direct production and consumption in the private individual quest for profit. In fact, Smith was opposed to the very institution of privately owned corporations, which allowed merchants and manufacturers to dominate the economy to the detriment of society. The corporation, he contended, corrupted free enterprise by concentrating capital in a few hands and distorting market relations as a result. In retrospect, it may be possible to dismiss Smith as naïve in thinking that a modern society could grow and develop based on the work of yeoman farmers and small artisans. It should, however, be remembered that his work was produced well in advance of the industrial revolution and that his antipathy to corporations was based on their limited entry into the economy in the years prior to the American, to say nothing of the French revolution.

From Smith's perspective, public works and institutions were not likely to be profitable for individual investors, and were not intended to be. "The direct object of Smith's attack was not government policy but private invested interests" (Lubacz, 1995: 53) that distorted public initiatives for their own gain. This may come as news to business leaders and corporate gurus who invoke the name of Adam Smith, but who refrain from reading what he actually wrote. Thus, those who argue for the supremacy of the free competitive market, those who advocate the supposedly cost-efficient privatization of public services, and those who would reduce education to vocational training and studies of entrepreneurship have made Adam Smith and *The Wealth of Nations* "part of the sales pitch" (Lubacz, 1995: 67) by twisting his words and warping his meaning. Karl Marx came closer to the mark when he commented that "for preventing the complete deterioration of the great mass of people which arises from the division of labour, Adam Smith recommended education of the people by the state but in prudently homeopathic doses" (Marx, 1977: 484). While radicals like Marx accepted Smith's analysis, they saw it as limited and palliative; they did, however, agree on the importance of formal publicly funded education (especially in the areas of the humanities and social sciences) for the development of a critical, informed and responsible citizenry. Likewise, they agreed with Smith that education was not exclusively of economic interest but of broadly humane importance.

The Critique of Education: Antonio Gramsci

Antonio Gramsci argued against the reduction of education of the masses to skills training. Writing in *Avanti* in December 1917, he contended that

the proletariat needs a free school ... not a school of slavery and mechanization ... Professional schools must not become incubators of little monsters, who are aridly educated for a job, without general ideas and a general culture, without spirit and with only a sharp eye and a strong hand (quoted in Welton, 1980: 1).

Education primarily based on job skills allows the ruling class to manufacture conformity and consent among the masses. For Gramsci, any successful challenge to the power and ideology of the ruling capitalist class requires the working classes to become consciously aware of their own culture, history and politics. This, he maintained, requires knowledge of traditional culture, history and politics and of their role in dominating the masses. The danger of fascism in Italy was its introduction of vocational training under the slogan of "child-centred progressiveness for the working classes." This type of ahistorical, apolitical education effectively reduced "the historical memory of the working class." Even though couched in conservative values, the traditional Italian school system, through its emphasis on history, literature and languages, encouraged disciplined study and critical analysis: "Fascists," observed Gramsci, "found their allies in the schoolmasters who encouraged spontaneity and autodidacticism and not in those who functioned as agents of cultural transmission by requiring students to learn the 'facts' of history, geography or science" (Welton, 1980: 9).

For Gramsci, a disciplined study of culture, history and politics is necessary for the struggle of workers against capitalism, and schooling should be hard work requiring concentration, persistence and self-control. The facile vocationalization of mass education reinforces the inequalities of the social class system; in the alternative, Gramsci argued that the comprehensive education of the ruling classes should be extended to the children of the proletariat because academic work is relevant to understanding the real world of capitalist cultural, economic and political exploitation. It is worthy of note in this regard that, in Canada, the Liberal provincial government is currently reorganizing “general education” in Ontario colleges condensing and reducing education in the liberal arts but taking the added step of deleting entirely from the curriculum the critical study of “work and the economy,” arguably the most vital part of students’ non-vocational education. In its place are studies of the media and popular culture which serve mainly as educational filler and academic distraction from a critical analysis of the society in which the students will work and live. Similar to education under Mussolini, current student-centred educational practices are easily compatible with ruling-class cultural and ideological hegemony. Adam Smith’s informed citizen and Gramsci’s educated radical are not easily suppressed or impressed by the friction-free rhetoric of the advocates of vocationalism, entrepreneurship and business studies directly related to the job market. On the other hand, the logic and practice of this approach seems firmly entrenched in postsecondary institutions in North America, especially in community colleges, junior colleges and technical institutes.

The politically manufactured fiscal crisis in education is also being used to create a corporatist system of postsecondary education. In order to maintain and extend access to education (despite massive increases in tuition fees), colleges and universities are being compelled to become more cost efficient, job oriented and committed to the corporate mentality of the “bottom line.” Corporate-college “partnerships” and significant fund-raising activities are encouraged to supplement public funds at the cost of surrendering public control. Adam Smith, many forget, was not a professional economist but a professor of moral philosophy; his primary interest was not in producing propaganda for a rapacious economic elite, but in understanding how wealth was produced and distributed so that societies would learn not only how to produce more quantitatively but also how to distribute goods and services more equitably.

Adam Smith’s commitment to the common weal, however, has been studiously ignored by those who claim him as their intellectual patriarch. As a result, no matter what price is to be paid in social civility, “the campus,” in Neimark’s words, “is becoming virtually indistinguishable from the marketplace, and both universities (and colleges) and their faculties are becoming entrepreneurs.” In addition, the “liberal arts are strikingly absent from this framework for public education” (1999: 24, 29). The devaluing of the humanities and social sciences as irrelevant to the careers of students is leading to the underdevelopment of critically thoughtful citizens who understand the role of political and economic power. It encourages only narrow vocational knowledge and “skill sets” and, thus, the “drowsy stupidity” essential for the corporate domination of postsecondary education.

While corporate capitalism speaks in the language of progress, market relevance and vocational education, it is a capitalist ideology of class relations as “self-evident laws” of economic and political exploitation that is being promoted. Depoliticized education in the guise of educational choice is no substitute for a painstaking and protracted education in the politics of economic exploitation. The ruling class has a vested interest in encouraging the ideology of the “self-evident natural laws” of free markets as history, economics, politics and psychology in postsecondary educational institutions. Corporate capitalism clearly hopes that this indoctrination will produce a docile working class, populated by compliant consumers and submissive citizens especially among the graduates of colleges and universities in North America. In the absence of energetic, enlightened and innovative alternatives, the ongoing program of indoctrination will surely succeed.

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