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Audit cultures, labour, and conservative movements in the global university

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I want to use this essay – basically a commentary – as a context for some political reflections on what is happening to the governance and the labour processes at universities internationally. In the process, in addition to my critical reflections on the neoliberal impulses affecting universities, I want to do two other things. First, I shall expand the range of work and workers that need to be considered if our analyses are to be true to the range and depth of these transformations. And second, I also want to complicate the usual critical analyses of what is happening in higher education by broadening the discussion to include movements that include but go beyond the class-based models that are often employed. Thus, in a later part of this essay, I urge us to pay closer attention to conservative religious movements and institutions that are having an increasing impact on the politics of knowledge at universities in a number of countries.

Keywords: audit cultures; managerialism; higher education; home schooling

Audit cultures and neoliberal agendas

Historically, universities have never consistently performed as society's 'market-place of ideas'. Indeed, the history of higher education is also the story of struggles by multiple groups over access, cultural recognition and authority (Bourdieu 1984b, Nelson 2001). Because of both who was or was not allowed to attend universities and what kinds of knowledge and ways of knowing were part of the 'selective tradition' (Williams 1961), the sphere of higher education has been a site for the development of counter-hegemonic movements pursuing a politics of recognition (Fraser 1997). It has also been the site for the growth of neoconservative movements that have pursued a politics of cultural restoration (Buras 2008). Thus, one should never be romantic

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about a golden age where the 'pursuit of truth' reigned supreme at the institutions where many readers of this journal work.

Yet, even with this said, it is important to recognise that there is now a profound shift in what the university is for, whom it serves, how it constructs its ideal faculty and students, and what it means to work there. Much of this is the result of neoliberal impulses and economic crises of course.

Perhaps some historical data may be helpful here. At the University of Wisconsin, Madison, during the 1960s and 1970s, nearly 70% of university funding was public. Since that time, public funding support has withered radically, so much so that currently the state provides approximately 17% of university support.

This transformation of historical commitments is not only present in the USA, although it is a powerful force here. Thus, in a strange quirk of fate, I began writing this essay during one of my mandatory unpaid furlough days imposed on all state employees, including university faculty members, in Wisconsin. Yet, in another strange twist, in just a few months I shall be leaving to take up my responsibilities at a well-known university in England, a place where I also hold a professorial appointment. Each time I am in England, it becomes clearer and clearer to all those who teach at these institutions that the university is no longer able to stand apart from the managerial and rationalising logics and processes that are transforming nearly every segment of society. As Deem *et al*. (2008) and Head (2011) have insightfully shown, they have actually become one of the central foci of these logics and processes. Indeed, at the school of education at one institution in England where I regularly spend time, I was told to contact my 'line manager' if I have any questions. (Language does indeed make a difference.) And at that same school of education, redundancies are in the works, with a number of departments facing a situation where faculty members are to be let go. The same is happening at many other institutions of higher education.

It should come as no surprise that, although each has a truly exceptional reputation for research in philosophy, history and critical social science, the departments that are under the most severe threat of redundancies at the English university to which I pointed above are those that are less apt to get large amounts of grant money from private foundations and government agencies. As in many other things, at universities in many nations rationality now follows funding. This is often underpinned by the largely unexamined assumption that all of us are now living in 'knowledge economies' in which knowledge must be treated as but one more commodity that can be organised and controlled as part of a neoliberal economic project (Slaughter and Rhoades 2004, Brown and Lauder 2010, Apple 2012, Livingstone and Guile 2012).

Neoliberalism does not act alone here. In a number of recent books, I have detailed the ways in which a more complex array of forces, what I have called 'conservative modernisation', have been transforming education and all things

social not only in the USA, but as my above examples show globally as well. A new 'hegemonic bloc' has been built over the last 30 years. A tense and sometimes contradictory alliance of neoliberals, neoconservatives, authoritarian populist religious conservatives and the new managerialists of the professional-managerial middle-class are increasingly dominant in all too many spheres of social and cultural life. In the process, it has had profound effects on what counts as important knowledge, 'appropriate' teaching, good learning, indeed on what education is for and how we assess its benefits. Indeed, the global sweep of these things is quite striking (Apple 2006, 2010).[1]

However, while what is happening cannot be reduced to simply the production and reproduction of neoliberal logics in all of our institutions, there can be no doubt that neoliberal logics do exert a massive structuring influence. One indication of some of the effects of such forces is the fact that across borders the daily life of faculty members and the content of the curriculum are being steadily transformed by 'audit cultures'. The demand to constantly 'produce evidence' that one is acting correctly – in essence to act in an entrepreneurial manner – has spread within higher education (UNESCO 2004).[2] In fact, in the USA, there is now growing pressure on university faculty to enumerate the ways in which their work has 'value added' effects, with legislation mandating this form of evaluation now being considered in a number of state legislatures.

As I have shown in *Educating the 'Right' Way* (Apple 2006), in order to more fully understand what is happening and why, these tendencies need to be connected to the emerging literature on the relatively autonomous influences of the new professional and managerial middle-class configuration of managerialism within the state that stands behind these changes both in the daily life of the academy but also in the identities that are associated with it (Clarke and Newman 1997, Leys 2003, Apple 2005).

These kinds of managerial movements have a rather interesting history, going back as far as the introduction of Taylorism in factories and offices during the early years of the twentieth century. This history once again points to the importance of locating institutional transformations not only in the massive structural force of capitalist dynamics, but also in the relatively autonomous interests of class fractions within the middle class as well (Bernstein 1977, Wright 1985, 1989).

For example, as David Noble demonstrates in his elegant and detailed histories of Taylorism and the techniques of labour control associated with it, Taylorism originates in the efforts of newly emerging professionalising movements within engineering in their attempts to raise the status of engineering and provide new identities for engineers. As engineering moved from something that was associated with craft work on the shop floor to a more university-based discipline, the struggle over status and respect became crucial. Newly professionalised engineers had to work hard to convince business and industry that they had expertise that was essential for competition, for the control of

labour, and to increase productivity (Noble 1979, 1984). Only by gaining respect for new kinds of managerial knowledge could that knowledge be used as cultural capital in the conversion strategies so necessary for a professionalising project (Bourdieu 1984a).

Given this history, the current transformations in the governance, working conditions and administration we are experiencing in higher education in so many countries are best thought of as representing another instance of newly emerging 'managerial class fractions' engaged in carving out spheres of authority within institutions where their expertise needs once again to be made into 'essential tools'. The focus now is not on the terrain of the factory or the business sector, but on the university itself so that it mirrors what has happened in these other sectors. In the process, an emerging group of class actors with specific technical skills in auditing carves out a sphere of employment and influence within the state and the university (Slaughter and Leslie 1997, Slaughter and Rhoades 2004, Apple 2012). As Sandler and I document, this is grounded in both a class-based and epistemological set of movements that are changing the very grounds of what it means to be 'effective' (Sandler and Apple 2010).

These are not simply procedural transformations. Let us remember that behind all educational proposals are visions of a just society, a 'good' teacher and a 'good' student. The neoliberal and managerial 'reforms' to which I have pointed construct these identities in particular ways, ways that signify deep alterations in our common sense and that challenge fundamental understandings of citizenship and democracy. While the defining characteristic of neoliberalism is largely based on the central tenets of classical liberalism, in particular classical economic liberalism, there are crucial differences between classical liberalism and neoliberalism.[3] 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.' (Olssen 1996, p. 340)

Olssen's theoretical account maps onto reality in quite telling ways. I can think of few better descriptions of the situation that so many faculty members at institutions of higher education in many nations face today. Much of this is being contested individually and collectively in our institutions, in our classrooms, and in our speaking, research and writing at all levels of the education system (Apple *et al.* 2009, 2010). But it would be foolish to deny the power of what is happening.

Of course, at times, complex theoretical, historical and empirical resources are required to do justice to these global realities (Slaughter and Rhoades 2004, Rhoads and Torres 2006). This is the case not only for Olssen's thoughtful rendering of the transformations we are experiencing, but also for instance with Pierre Bourdieu's insightful work on the ways in which, say, French academic institutions and hierarchies of knowledge and people remain inflected by and reproduce class relations (Bourdieu 1984b). However, and this is important to the rest of my arguments here, at other times the realities are much easier to understand. In order to understand the depth of what is happening, in the next section of this essay I want to both turn to specific instances of the changes that are occurring and widen our focus so that it includes groups of people who are not usually included in our critical discussions of this situation.

Whose labour?

For example, while much of the critical literature on the realities of neoliberalism and managerialism in higher education has been very articulate about what is happening to full-time faculty and part-time contingent faculty members in higher education and especially in the humanities (Aronowitz 2006, Schrecker 2010), and shows what the implications of these changes are on the curriculum and for students, somewhat surprisingly nearly all of this literature does not include other employees at these same institutions. Clerical workers, building maintenance and food preparation staff, security personnel and other employees are currently facing ever worsening conditions as well, with their conditions of labour intensified, positions lost, cuts in pay, and many other truly lamentable effects.

Let me give two simple examples. At my own university, the University of Wisconsin, Madison, all but the main entrance doors of classroom and office buildings on campus now have to be locked at 4:30 each afternoon. The

fiscal crisis at the university has meant that the now smaller staff of building security people does not have the time to check whether all building doors are locked at night at the end of the instructional day. Another small example is that office trash is now picked up only once a week.

These are seemingly minor things. But they speak to the fact that there are many fewer people doing some of the most important 'hidden labour' that keeps the university functioning than there were before. At many universities, their work has often been outsourced, pay lowered, benefits cut, their 'productivity' constantly monitored, and much more work has to be done as they must compensate for other workers who have lost their jobs. The fact that this labour is done by poorly paid working class, immigrant and diasporic people demonstrates an unfortunate tendency among even many progressive academics – their failure to recognise both their continuing *debt* to such people and the realities of the relationship among 'empire', diasporic populations, and the hidden labour that enables academics to do their teaching (Apple 2010). Thus, while a good deal of the critical literature in many nations is eloquent and very correct to call for more solidarity among faculty in higher education, it all too often misses an opportunity to remind us of the need to expand these concerns to others who work at these same institutions. Audits and 'performativity' are experienced powerfully by a much wider swathe of people, many of whom remain invisible in our critical analyses of the historical changes that are occurring in higher education.

The issue of a wider range of labour and of who does the labour at universities raises another question, one that I can only note briefly here. We need to be cautious about assuming that we can fully understand these movements and tendencies only in class terms. Managerialism may have part of its history in a longer trajectory of bureaucratic control of labour and in the procedural technologies of performance, audits and evidence. But it is also grounded in a set of gendered logics.

As Kathleen Lynch and her colleagues have shown in a series of detailed studies (Lynch *et al*. 2009, 2012), the logics and technologies that emerge from neoliberal apparatuses evacuate concerns for 'affective equality', for the values of care, love and solidarity that are central elements in educational work and commitments. Indeed, as I argue in *Can Education Change Society?*, no substantive progressive transformations in and of educational institutions are possible without taking the elements of care, love and solidarity as 'structuring structures', as truly constitutive of any fundamental change (Apple 2013).

Authoritarian populism and the new realities of higher education

So far, I have been detailing some of the more significant transformations that have been affecting higher education, transformations that are increasingly visible not only in the USA but elsewhere as well. I have connected these changes to a managerial class project and to neoliberal agendas. Given the

severity of the economic crisis as it works its way through the higher education sector, we can expect that these effects will deepen and worsen globally (Rhoads and Torres 2006). Yet to focus only on these ideological and economic movements is not sufficient, since there are other substantive challenges to higher education and to its content and practices that are occurring underneath the surface of our usual attention. This concerns one of the elements of conservative modernisation that I noted earlier – authoritarian populist religious conservatives. While this set of movements may not be present in all nations, it has become increasingly powerful not only in what we (sometimes all too arrogantly) call the 'developing world' and in nations where religious tensions are powerful, but also in places that we tend to see as at the 'centre' of higher education reform such as the USA.

Let me give an example of what I mean here. Another increasingly visible movement that will have profound effects on higher education is that surrounding home schooling. This is one of the most rapidly growing educational movements internationally, in part as a result of the resurgence of conservative social and especially religious movements and sentiments in large sections of the world. Nearly two million children are currently being home schooled in the USA. Although the home schooling movement is varied, a very large proportion of the parents engaged in it are doing so for conservative ideological and religious reasons. I mention this because these conservative parents, and especially very conservative religious parents, are now demanding that their children be given credit for college and university admission for science courses that deny evolution and the big bang theory and that teach science 'in a biblical way' (Apple 2006). There are currently court cases working their way through the legal system in the USA that challenge the right of universities to deny credit for such content in 'science' taught by ultra-conservative homeschoolers and Christian academies.

We need to watch these things closely, especially when, for example, Texas has officially ruled that the Institute for Creation Research in Dallas – an institute dedicated to rejecting evolution – can offer teaching credentials in science. Thus, not only the humanities, but science itself is being subjected to attacks from conservative religious movements. The fact that teachers for our public (i.e. state-supported) schools can now be certified to teach science while denying many of the fundamental tenets of evolution and physics – including now such issues as climate change – and that an increasing number of the students that faculty members will face at public and many private higher education institutions will come to them with these same sets of strongly held beliefs will also have a profound set of effects on what counts as legitimate knowledge and as legitimate holders of that knowledge.

The issues concerning the growing power of rightist movements and their possible lasting effects on higher education that I am raising here go well beyond some of the recent literature's clear presentation of the neoliberal and neoconservative attacks on both the content and the faculty at universities

(Schrecker 2010). Aside from such massive for-profit distance education entities as the University of Phoenix and its imitators, among the fastest growing sectors of higher education institutions are conservative evangelical Christian ones. These employ thousands of faculty members and often have very close economic and ideological connections with large conservative corporations such as Wal-Mart (Moreton 2009, Apple 2013).

Thus, while the worries that are so rightly expressed about the attacks on the humanities and about neoliberal and neoconservative agendas in general must be taken very seriously, going further into them requires that we deal with a much larger array of institutions and conservative ideological tendencies than we are apt to do. To not take these movements more seriously means that we are ignoring fundamental transformations in identities among millions of people both here and elsewhere. How these religious movements and identities are sutured into an alliance with neoliberal economic reconstructions is not inconsequential (Kintz 1997).[4]

Therefore, no matter how crucial it undoubtedly is, I would also urge us to extend our critical attention beyond the globalising reach of both neoliberalisms' (the plural is actually important here) fundamental reconstruction of the ends and means of the university and the influence of mangerialism as a class-specific project. We need as well to include a significant focus on the growing importance of conservative populist religious identities, epistemologies and institutions. When the 'reform' initiatives that focus on audits, economically useful knowledge, entrepreneurialism and an 'ethic' of consumer choice that positions students and parents as 'customers' meet the bottom-up politics of populist religious impulses and identities with their own rearticulation of these discourses and institutional demands (Apple 2006, 2013), the realities of university life for many of those who work in these institutions will be transformed even further.

Conclusion

In this brief set of comments, like many others, I have argued that what counts as important knowledge, the cultural and social visions to which it is attached, what it means to successfully do our jobs, and the identities that all this produces are being reconstructed. Given the length of essays of this type, I have had to limit myself to some simple everyday examples and have only been able to outline a set of broader concerns, each of which deserves considerably more attention: audit cultures and the ideological and class configuration that partly lies behind them; the changes from liberalism to neoliberalism that accompany this configuration; the negative effects of these changes on a wider range of labour than some of us seem to consider in our public treatments of what is happening to higher education; and finally, the growing significance of authoritarian populist movements and institutions and their current and future implications for a number of the questions about knowledge and teaching that are at the core of our pedagogical and epistemological work.

Much more could be said about each of these issues and questions – and about what they mean for a critically democratic set of educational institutions, policies and practices. I fear that answers to these pressing issues and questions will not be found through your contacts with your 'line manager'.

Notes

1. The term 'conservative modernization' was first introduced by Roger Dale. See Dale (1989–1990).
2. This mirrors as well the growing spread of 'evidence-based practices' in social and educational policy in general. It is deeply problematic both epistemologically and in terms of its effects. For a detailed examination of evidence-based practices, see Sandler and Apple (2010).
3. It is important to note here that liberalism, and I would argue crucial parts of neo-liberalism as well, is also based on a *racial contract*. As Charles Mills reminds us, the rational individual that lies at the heart of liberalism requires a constitutive outside, an Other, who does not possess inherent rationality. The 'polluting Other' historically maps onto the construction of the racial subject. See Mills (1997).
4. See also my discussion of the international linkages between conservative religious institutions of education and neoliberal corporate entities and foundations in Apple (2013).

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