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Whither European Universities?

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Universities are under attack in many countries. They are often presented as potentially another form of business governed by the principles of the market. Universities are being encouraged to undergo a transformation to foster "entrepreneurship" and prepare people for jobs. And yet we would expect these institutions to serve much wider purposes than simply those of the economy and employment and to contribute to the generation of a healthy and genuinely democratic public environment.

Harmonization measures, adopted throughout the European Union as part of the Bologna process, carry with them a series of bureaucratic procedures. This has shifted the balance of power between academia and administration decidedly in favour of the latter. Measurement becomes a very important aspect of this situation. As a result, quality is judged primarily through the translation of complex processes into quantitative indicators - easily measured outcomes.

Courses once lauded for their length and depth of analysis have been shortened in a form of segmentation of knowledge and 'competences.' They are 'outcomes based.' Academics are meant to be made 'accountable' through compliance with time-consuming bureaucratic procedures. Furthermore, most funded research takes the form of R&D and is often evaluated through the amount of money it manages to attract.

Community work is frowned upon or is confined to second- or third-class institutions in a proposed diversified system intended to classify higher education institutions into different leagues: a league of 'world class' research universities, a lower tier of 'teaching universities' with regional universities straddling their borders. There is the danger of a possible separation between teaching and research. Privatization is encouraged, and the distinction between private and public is blurred as public funds are often siphoned for private ends.

Overburdening with teaching can result in few research opportunities for certain academics. Time for non-rewarded but publicly useful commitments is denied. Departments often become little more than appendages to companies and ministries that provide the funding

There is talk of "internationalization" - the ability to attract students from outside the EU. These students can pay high fees and, therefore, help raise university revenue. The onset of private universities in many countries, including Turkey and new EU member states, such as Cyprus, Estonia, Hungary, renders the bottom line Higher Education's key feature. Universities are hindered in attempts to contribute to a democratic public sphere. They serve as "training agencies" in a system which fails to provide jobs and yet turns this 'jobs crisis' into a 'skills crisis.'

Areas without an immediate utilitarian purpose suffer, and the relevant departments have to reinvent themselves in "employability" terms. When the bottom line becomes the key factor, especially in private universities (or local institutions serving as franchise agencies for them), with many of them benefiting from indirect state funding (e.g. scholarships for students or stipends in our case, tax deductions and rebates), then the emphasis is on 'teaching to the test' rather than on striking a balance between teaching and research.

While access to higher education is encouraged, the much coveted 'middle class jobs' are hardly available. University graduates therefore become *déclassé* in many parts of the world. 'Employability', after all, does not mean *actual employment*. As an Austrian student once put it to me: "We will have higher educational degrees than our parents, but we will never attain their standard of living."

Academics, students and the population at large need to engage in a struggle for a rethink and renewal of HE as a vital public space within a democracy. Education is important not for simply 'employability' but also for the development of a genuinely democratic public environment. This is where students and academics are called upon to join forces with others, as was the case in Vienna with university students and academics joining kindergarten teachers in the "Unibrennt" (University Burns) actions. Outside Europe, this brings to mind the recent student-initiated protests in Chile (students joined forces with trade unions and other movements), not only focusing on universities but also clamouring for the right to a free education in general (state schools charge fees in Chile as part of Pinochet's Neoliberal legacy). We had similar protests in Quebec.

The coming together of various forces around Higher Education and the fallacy of the 'learn to earn' slogan was presumably also the case with the "debtocracy" protests of the *indignados* where higher education was, together with many other issues, the cause of popular indignation.

The neoliberal reform of universities has offered a splendid opportunity for academics and students to continue to join forces as "public intellectuals" and not only denounce university neoliberal reform, but also turn what is already a public issue - education as a public good - into a broader all-encompassing public concern. Students in Austria, Hungary, Croatia, London and elsewhere joined forces with academics in not only protesting but also creating experimental alternative university settings (e.g. Tent City University in 'Occupy London'). The mobilization often becomes international, as with protesting Hungarian students blocking a train of Higher

Education experts trying to make it to Vienna for a meeting, as students in both countries coordinated their protest efforts.

The protestors connected critiques of this reform with the broader critiques of the neoliberal reforms intended to turn the world into one large marketplace. Neoliberal reforms and developments lead to public spaces being turned into commodities, to be bought and sold - spaces that are encroached by corporate forces, the very same forces that ushered in one of the deepest economic and social crises in the history of humanity.

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