

Neoliberal and the Degradation of ISM



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Established in 1977 at the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Carleton University, *Alternate Routes* is committed to creating outlets for critical social research and interdisciplinary inquiry. *Alternate Routes* works closely with scholars, labour, community and social justice researchers to promote the publication of heterodox critical social research in all its forms, as well as provocative and progressive analyses that may not find a forum in conventional academic venues. *Alternate Routes* seeks to be a public academic journal and encourages works that advance or challenge theoretical, historical and contemporary socio-political, economic and cultural issues. In addition to full-length articles, we welcome review essays sparked by previously published material, interviews, commentaries, book reviews as well as poetry, drawings and photo-essays.

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Articles

Editorial Introduction

Capitalism in the Classroom: The Commodification of Education

Education policy and politics reflect, as so few other areas of social policy do, the role of the state not just in capitalist economic development but also in constructing a working class to fit the needs required for that development. Education, at least at the primary level, emerged as among the first public services concerned with human resource development. The industrialization and urbanization of 19th century capitalism required that its working class be numerate and literate. This link to capitalist relations of production and economic development was organic and necessary. Education not only provided workers with skills but socialized children into understanding their role as disciplined workers. And that link has been continuous. The confluence of post-war prosperity and the Cold War expanded the need for a still more broadly educated workforce capable of undertaking professional and quasi-professional work within the expanding private and public sector organizations, and to contribute to scientific research and development which was largely centred on military strategy.

Consequently, post-secondary education (PSE) underwent an unprecedented expansion and one largely funded by the state. At an ideological level, a new social contract emerged which wove liberal democratic citizenship, state-subsidized research and innovation, and increasing rates of productivity and capital accumulation into a virtuous cycle of mutual social, political and economic gains. Such was the Golden Age of capitalism! Today, into the fourth decade of neoliberalism, another new social contract is in the process of being written, and within this new regime of class relations, contemporary education policy and practice corresponds to and reproduces the new balance of class power expressed by this 'variety' of capitalism.

The contributions presented in this volume deal with a range of foci in education but all illustrate from their own perspective the "new brutalism" (Giroux) in education. All, to some degree, are concerned with the role of the state in neoliberalizing education. However, two (Cosar and Ergul; Bocking) are explicitly centred on the politics of public policy in enabling neoliberalization. Others are centred around the resistance, uneven though it is, of education workers and students to this process

(Potter; Nelson and Dobson; Hewitt-White; and Orłowski). Still others take a more labour process and ideational framing approach where the focus is on how professions are ideologically reconstructed (Macias) and how the critical centre-place of employability and entrepreneurship in post-secondary education have served to displace, if not destroy, the role of the university as a space for a broad range of perspectives, including critical ones, to incubate and engage with the larger society. Instead the only incubation is that of likely-to-fail business ventures. And entrepreneurship is an ideological carrier serving to prepare students for a life of precarity (Newstadt; Noonan and Coral; Mirrlees). And informing all of this is the corporate penetration and occupation of the university. The result is an astonishing tale of transformation, de-democratization and a narrowing of vision and therefore of purpose (Brownlee).

The issues and critiques raised here reflect and respond to the assault of fundamentalist neoliberals, who view education as a commodity to be bought and sold like any other, while the market is presumed to effectively (i.e. profitably) allocate scarce resources. Approaching some \$3 trillion in market opportunities, the education sector has come to be seen as a major source of untapped privatization. Indeed, along with health care, education is a significant dimension in the public services privatization and marketization 'gold rush' (Huws, 2008). As performance-based evaluations become more prevalent, testing and assessment niche markets are expected to continue growing.

A recent (and astonishing for its forthrightness) example of fundamentalist neoliberalism is found in the pages of *Rebuilding America's Middle Class: Prosperity Requires Capitalism in the Classroom*. This report from Southern Methodist University's School of Business, O'Neil Center for Global Markets and Freedom, reads as a revisionist history of US capitalism that trumpets the virtues of further marketizing education in all its forms. For instance, Dean of the School, Albert W. Niemi, contends "...only more competition will improve education," while Chairman of the O'Neil Center's Advisory Board Jerry Fulinwider, lamenting his distrust of big government, calls the "Wagner Act, a New Deal labor law...unfair, un-American." The target, in both respects, is the US's allegedly "centralized, bureaucratic public school system" and the unions "fighting to protect their own interests, not students' well-being."

Contending that US public schools have become a fiefdom for unionized workers and government waste, the author's of the report, W. Michael Cox and Richard Alm (2012, 11), argue: "The superiority of

the private sector over government arises from choice and competition... Government fails because it replaces choice and competition with the 'take it or leave it' diktat of politicians and bureaucrats. They decide what people ought to have – one size fits all. Government wallows in red tape, resists change and protects entrenched interests." Part populism and part right-wing propaganda, the report is soft on comparative data lacking both methodological rigour and theoretical clarity of comprehension. Rather, exaggerated rhetoric and repetitive ideological tropes dominate: "The impediment is a government-run school system resistant to innovation, indifferent to student needs and mired in mediocrity. We won't improve our school's until we get government out of the way." Bemoaning unions and their political meddling as obstacles, in a vain attempt at comparative analysis the authors then go on to make the case that the education sector should be run more like Apple as opposed to a fictitious government telecommunications company, or more like Federal Express as opposed to the United States Postal Service; both companies with well-documented exploitative labour practices, tax avoidance schemes and significant public subsidies which simultaneously go to fund their anti-corporate tax and social security fighting politicking.

Further, in a twist of methodological manipulation, Cox and Alm (2012, 10-13) aim to eliminate "demographic bias" by "adjusting each state's data to reflect the national mix of major ethnic groups in public schools: 59.2 percent whites, 24.6 percent Hispanics and 16.2 percent blacks." This seemingly benign method, while on the face of it incorporating ethno-racial oppressions, in fact does the opposite; it homogenizes state-level demographic differences in math, reading and science to demonstrate the apparent coincidence that students from predominantly white, higher-income earning states outperform their Hispanic and Black counterparts. Drawing on Friedman's *Capitalism and Freedom*, the authors argue that public school systems should be run more like restaurants providing bare minimum standards. "Government penalizes individual success with higher taxes...failure often gets rewarded with a bigger subsidy" (ibid). They make a case for the total privatization of the educational sector, which includes vouchers, charter schools, tax deductions, credits, online learning and home schooling, without a mention of how such measures exacerbate ethno-racial and class-based oppressions or increase women's share of unpaid socially reproductive labour.

Their report reaches its culmination when Cox and Alm (2012, 16) claim:

“Students will be better serviced in private schools run like a business. There’s no reason to shy away from what this means: operating for profit, replacing principles with CEO’s, paying good teachers more, firing bad teachers, giving schools freedom to innovate in instruction methods and curriculum, letting new schools enter the market, allowing bad ones to fail, encouraging successful schools to takeover unsuccessful ones, getting rid of unions that protect bad teachers and stifle change.”

Without a glimmer of critical engagement, the authors assert that the market, god-like, simply knows best; but education policy should never be left to faith alone, especially in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary. Yet, in a recurring set of narratives, the O’Neil Centre is less concerned with improving education in the sense of enhanced democratic capacities, public engagement and social justice, but in a purely profit motivated sense. As one of the Centre’s keynote speakers held at a conference organized on “The Future of Economic Freedom” expressed: “Very curiously, despite the tremendous success of capitalism, it has what I call a very serious branding problem. Business isn’t seen as good. Instead business is mostly seen as selfish, greedy, exploitative, fundamentally unethical” (John Mackey in Cox and Alm, 2012, 21). Rather than continuing this promising line of inquiry, however, Mackey proposes “conscious capitalism” – a branding exercise to ideologically imbue notions of ‘responsible capitalism’ and counter criticisms of capitalist class power or deficiencies in policymaking outcomes.

In line with neoliberalism’s most vocal expositors seeking to transform the role of the state in the provision of social services, Veronique de Rugy argued: “I want government to compete with each other as ferociously as possible.” In an attempt to draw attention to the global benefits of neoliberal policies in raising living standards, Benjamin Powell, Director of the Free Market Institute at Texas Tech, added: “..outlawing sweatshops would just make workers in poor countries worse off. Sweatshop workers feel fortunate to have their jobs because garment factories offer better pay and working conditions than the most likely alternatives – subsistence farming, begging, scavenging and informal service sector jobs” (cited in Cox and Alm, 2012, 22). Other conference participants such as Distinguished Professor of Capitalism, Edward Lopez, and a host of others, went on to make similar arguments proclaiming the value of consolidating capitalism in the classroom. In an unrelated but growing choir, *The Economist* (2013) praised Small Heath Secondary

School in Birmingham, England, for their recent change to a business-friendly curriculum that welcomes “capitalists in the classroom.”

Unfortunately, many Canadian universities have been steadily emulating the US model of privatized post-secondary education.¹ The user-fee model, which assumes private, post-graduation returns by charging up-front fees borrowed against expected future earnings, as the articles in this volume argue, has shown itself to be a fundamentally flawed model that has reinforced ethno-racial, gender and class-based oppressions (Giroux, this volume; Ravitch, this volume). In Canada, this signifies a considerable movement away from a publicly funded post-secondary education system financed through a broad range of progressive taxes which, considered historically, have increased equality as measured by social mobility rates, enhanced working conditions, decreased student debt loads and provided a measure of insulation against corporate directed research and study (Brownlee, this volume).

In order to cope with chronic underfunding, many universities and colleges are turning to part-time instructors rather than full-time, tenured faculty, resulting in an increased rate of precarious employment as well as reduced student-professor face-time (Silver, this volume; McLaren, this volume; Harden, this volume). For neoliberal proponents “...knowledge [is viewed] as a commodity...and education as a path to income generation that must be privatized and made profitable in order for it to be maintained effectively.” (Caffentzis, 2005, 600). Increasingly, then, democratic control over resources, knowledge production and public space is monopolized by private interests with no other aim but to make a profit. Hence, many universities are streamlining their services and course offerings to those that address market considerations or are “business-related,” while those more critically inclined, and therefore less likely to buy into a purely market driven educational model are isolated or have their program spending reduced or axed all together. This includes smaller departments and/or programs such as women’s and cultural studies, history and philosophy, critical interdisciplinary centres, especially those focused on labour-capital relations and smaller specialized programs like political economy, social and political thought or, oddly enough, Canadian studies.

As a consequence, university investments in the arts, humanities and the social sciences pale in comparison with the physical sciences and explicitly entrepreneurial or business-related research. Rather, university administrators navigate the grant economy seeking to partner with

¹ Parts of this section are drawn extensively from Fanelli, 2013

private sector philanthropists, in the process endangering scholastic independence by catering to the needs of powerful sectoral interests. This necessarily “curtails the pedagogic processes that potentially generates a critical perspective against the [capitalist] system...” As Kumar (2010) continues: “Education is more than formal institutional structures and classroom transactions. It is an arena that reflects the agenda and need of the dominant class interests in a society. Therefore, to understand whatever happens in education it is important to understand the class politics, or labour-capital conflict, characterizing a society.” In this sense, the terrain of education and what is taught is at its core an ongoing field of class struggles across its diverse forms, including against racism, heteronormativity, gender-based discrimination and other intersecting axes of oppression. These issues, as much as concerns over universal accessibility, social justice, knowledge production and labour-capital-state conflicts in the PSE sector and beyond, are themselves deeply entrenched within capitalist power structures (James, this volume; Macias, this volume; Mirrless, this volume).

The province of Ontario, where we are located, is exemplary in this respect (Newstadt, this volume). Between 1988-9 and 2005-6 consecutive federal governments have reduced total transfer (both cash and tax points) payments for PSE by 40 percent (in 1998 dollars), while simultaneously pushing for enhanced partnerships with business counterparts in order to create new profit-making opportunities. This has resulted in the semi-privatization of Ontario’s PSE fees and thereby the creation of a quasi-market in the public sector (Fisher et al., 2006; Jones and Young, 2004). This is perhaps best reflected in the steadily advancing privatization of PSE in Ontario as there has been a proliferation of private career colleges opened since the 1990s as commercial enterprises. The number of these colleges rose from just over 200 in 1990 to over 450 by 2004 (Fisher et al., 2009; Levin, Kater, and Wagoner, 2006). In Ontario, between 1992-3 and 2004-5 provincial expenditures on PSE (in 2004 dollars) decreased by nearly 15 percent (Fisher et al. 2009, 553). Transfers to colleges and universities per full-time equivalent student enrollment over the same period decreased by nearly 32 percent (CAUT, 2006).

Thus in Ontario, user-fees and privatization measures are subtly being introduced under a policy framework of incrementalism, with recent reports proposing an expansion of for-profit PSE (Drummond Commission, 2012). In Ontario, spending as a share of university operating revenue between 1994 and 2004 decreased from 73 to 49 percent (Fisher et al. 2009, 554). While in 1990 tuition fees accounted for 20

percent of institutional operating budgets, today it's over 50 percent. As a consequence, between 1991 and 2008 average domestic tuition fees across Canada increased by 176 percent. It is useful to point out that approximately 40 percent of the Canadian population lives in Ontario and roughly 42 percent of Canadians choose Ontario as their destination for PSE (Jones and Young, 2004; Dylan, 2012). Thus what happens to PSE and labour disputes in Ontario may reveal broader trends Canada-wide (Hewitt-White, this volume; Nelson and Dobson, this volume).

Ontario occupies the unenviable distinction as the most expensive province in the country to complete an undergraduate degree. In 1990 the average cost of Canadian tuition was under \$1,500 but now stands at more than \$6,000 per year. This mirrors a similar process for graduate students who now have to pay the highest fees in the country at over \$9,000 per year.² The tuition fee freeze that students won between 2004 and 2006 was cancelled by the Liberal government and replaced with a new tuition framework. That framework, which ran from 2006 to 2012, allowed tuition fees for undergraduate students in their first year to increase up to 4.5 percent, while fee increases for the continuing years were limited to 4 percent. Fees in graduate and professional programs, however, could increase by up to 8 percent for students in their first year, and 4 percent for students in continuing years. Overall, tuition increases were limited to an annual average of 5 percent at each institution. This framework was succeeded by the current framework where the overall cap is 3 percent and that for graduate studies is a maximum 5 percent increase. The Ontario government has done away with specifying a separate undergraduate cap and leaves it to institutions to sort out the undergraduate increase within the overall limit of 3 percent based on their particular program mix (Artuso, 2013; Yan, 2013).

As a result, Ontario undergraduate students hold the largest debt at graduation averaging more than \$37,000 per student and increasing to over \$44,000 for PhD graduates. At \$9,718 average per-student funding, Ontario spends 20 percent less than the national average of \$12,500. This has led to larger class sizes and debt overhangs that have resulted in the number of summer days a student would have to work to make

² This pales in comparison with Quebec's average undergraduate cost of \$2,415, which were previously frozen for thirty-five years. It must be recalled that Quebec never passed the cost of federal funding cuts onto students, while college generally remains free for residents and scholarships are 'needs-based' in an effort to reduce socio-economic inequalities. Similarly, between 2002-04, the government of Newfoundland and Labrador reduced tuition fees by 25 percent and have since then been frozen, although recent austerity measures have begun to undermine the freeze and the Quebec differential.

enough money to pay tuition fees for one year rising from barely over six weeks in 1980 to fifteen weeks by 2010 (based on undergraduate fees averaging \$5,951, minimum wage and an 8-hour work day). As well, Ontario continues to provide zero funding transfers to universities for international students. This has not stopped many university administrations from seeing international (particularly graduate) students as a strong source of foreign capital since they pay upwards of three times what domestic students pay (see Ross, this volume).

All things considered, the trajectory of PSE in Ontario is one where higher education is envisaged as serving business-related vocational and technical labour market needs, sustaining competition and ensuring market-oriented research (Noonan and Coral, this volume).³ International trends suggest similar processes of neoliberalizing PSE (Bocking, this volume; Coşar and Ergül, this volume). Thus recent austerity measures must be considered in historical perspective as budget cuts and the pressures related to austerity are merely the latest in a sustained assault on public colleges and universities (Potter, this volume; Orłowski, this volume). This has been reflected in a de-democratization tendency or ‘disciplinary democracy’ in the PSE sector as across the public sector more generally that ever-more deploys authoritarian measures that marginalizes, and even criminalizes, dissent in defense of austerity and market freedoms (Albo and Fanelli, 2014).

The articles collected here challenge the unsubstantiated assertions of free market fundamentalists dogmatically insisting that education in all its forms requires capitalism in the classroom. This raises the question without providing any easy answers, of course, about under what conditions a social justice-centred approach to education that deepens and extends democratic capacities may flourish. *Alternate Routes* first explored these concerns in a series of panels organized at the conference *Capitalism in the Classroom: Neoliberalism, Education and Progressive Alternatives* held at Ryerson University on April 4, 2014. Like previous *Alternate Routes* conferences, video presentation can be found online at www.alternateroutes.ca.

All things considered, this volume builds on our previous conference, while continuing to grapple with subject matter challenging the neoliberal degradation of education. We would like to extend our gratitude to Ryerson University’s Faculty of Arts, Office of the Dean,

³ Some have argued that the University of Ontario Institute of Technology – the first new university in the province in forty years – is explicitly oriented to serving the automotive, technological and electrical power generation industries in Ontario (see Fisher et al., 2009).

Department of Politics and Public Administration, Department of Sociology, Centre for Labour Management Relations, and Toronto Centre for Social Justice for providing us with financial support in order to see both the conference and this issue through. Thanks are also due to the conference presenters and participants for their thoughtful contributions and engagement. With this volume, Bryan Evans joins our Editorial Advisory Board and John Shields as co-editor for our next issue. We look forward to continuing and extending *Alternate Routes'* commitment to critical social research.

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