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The Commodification of Education

This critique of the interpretation of education exclusively in terms of the system of commodity relations explores the general cultural role of education and its “producing” function from the standpoint of the growth of the culture of knowledge. It looks at the position taken by foreign specialists that sheds light on the negative consequences of the “commodification” of education.

The falsehood embodied in the position that looks at the institution of education as a supermarket, and its students as customers and consumers, has far-reaching cultural and economic consequences. When education and science are declared to be *nothing other* than a sector of the economy, not only is there a danger that they will lose their identity (as noted by specialists [1, pp. 150–51]), but also, to a larger extent, the foundations of *modern* culture and, in particular an economy that runs on knowledge, are subjected to revision. The steady and dynamic growth of the culture of producing knowledge prescribes, as its chief condition, the human ability to create new knowledge and, more broadly, the intellectual competence of *cogito*,

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which must be able to give life to knowledge and incorporate it into society. Only in this way can that which is human surmount that which is artificial and is engulfing it, only in this way will it be able to force this artificial construct to work for it (i.e., for what is human) rather than for its own expanding reproduction. Embodied in this overcoming of the artificial, which is increasingly transforming human life into a technological, informational, and scientific mode, is the value of individual existence, its ability to engage in spiritual action that rules out the automatization of social functioning.

The current tension in issues linked to the regulating of the institution of education has as its source the transformation of its cultural space. The intensification of social rhythms, their amplitudes and break points, are represented in the technological dynamic that is powered by the proliferating production of knowledge and the expanding consumption of knowledge, in cultural interventions that create aggressive communities and a dissonant structure of life, in transnational processes termed globalization. The institution of education has been drawn into formulating the rules of existence for an environment that is socially and culturally conflicted. It has ceased to be a place of cognitive stability, an instrument of enclosed socialization, a community with a rigidly structured system of roles. Changeability, flexibility, and fluctuation are now the metaphors of its existence.

The commodification of cognitive activity, which has turned knowledge into a commodity, into an item of commercial use, is changing the means by which educational practices are organized (the bureaucracy) and interpreted (economic pragmatism and commercial mimicry). When the principle of rating the quality of a factory-made product or pricing a market product is transferred into education, the deeper formative, essential nature of spiritual and intellectual disciplines such as literature and history is destroyed. "Measurement materials" are not capable of determining the "quality" of the intellectual world, the genuineness of a civic position, the ability to engage in *human* understanding and interpretation. When "the money that follows the student" comes into a private educational institution, it does more than just take part in the formation of profit for the owners of the institution. The moral and acutely

social problems lie in the fact that money held in common—that is, public money—is being used to improve the lives of wealthy students rather than poor students, and in this way it creates a new mechanism of social exploitation. In regressive contexts of this kind there is no validity to the arguments of the commodificationists who talk about equal claims to public funds, trying to legitimate the rights of the wealthy to buy an educational service in a private educational institution by putting into this purchase the small portion of public funds they supposedly have coming to them. In this way the logic of commodification attempts to justify the use of the state’s budget to create the conditions that are necessary for a life of privilege for the wealthy. This logic takes funds out of the general education sector that nurtures the talents needed for the “common” economy of knowledge.

The interpretation of reforms in education as part of the humanistic dimension has as its source the cultural traditions of the European university. The university, as the center of a people’s spiritual formation and education, should be a place where, according to Karl Jaspers, there is “a search for truth that is unconstrained, there is a concern with the individual as a human being.” Such a “university, together with the essence of upbringing, is of the highest interest to the state in its domestic policy, since what is involved is the ethical future of its own people, a future linked to truth” [2, pp. 8, 13, 15]. Consequently, the university is not merely an enterprise in which professions serve as “means of production quite similar to the production and sale of commodities” [2, p. 23]. Educational reforms become “superficial, distracting, and confused” when carried out not as a spiritual movement but as a bureaucratic order “by means of endless and arbitrary details and regulation.” On the human plane, such reforms are trifling [2, pp. 22, 23].

As they are understood in the European cultural tradition, educational reforms are the result of *collaborative* and critical thinking, and a search for the reasons why education systems work the way they do [2, pp. 13, 23]. At the end of the twentieth century, Bill Readings continued Jaspers’s idea in the context of reforms of the modern university; he noted that the university is a flexible and open system that offers a place for the *coexistence* of different

kinds of thinking, a place that is not just for the communication of ideas but a means by which to listen to the other—an “other” who has “many names: culture, thinking, desire, energy, tradition, event, something immemorial and exalted” [3, pp. 208, 213]. The interpretation of *that kind of* thinking is the destiny of states that strive to live in accordance with truth, for which “a life based on falsehood has no value at all” [2, p. 8].

It is the pragmatics of industrial life that attempts to place in question the institution of education as a cultural instance of the spiritual type. The “food” model of education at the beginning of the twentieth century interprets it in the terms of healthy consumption and nutrition, comparing instruction to feeding. Paulo Freire shows that the didactic simplifications proceeding from that kind of interpretation eliminate the generative qualities of the personality and the sociocultural connections of knowledge from the process of instruction [4, pp. 44–47]. By the 1960s we find a reformulation of the “food” metaphor of education in terms of the “market,” which manipulates via the same “grocery product” aspect—this time as a commodity. Stephan Collini notes that starting in the 1970s “official discourse was increasingly colonized by the language of economics,” which takes its idioms and arguments from the language of management schools, business consultants, and financial journals [5, pp. 9–14]. In the 1990s the interpretation of education using the “commodity” vocabulary became widely debated and discussed in the West.

However, the idea of the commodification of education hardly differs from its food model in its didactic consequences. Any active component of cognition is not a part of the system of its basic conceptualizations. Consequently, on the directive plane it is an excluded essence, despite the *seeming* possibility of choice. The educational supermarket offers a readymade assortment of services and goods for the “consuming” personality, an array that has been created and decided on *by someone*.

The cognitive relation that has been formulated in terms of service to the consumer of knowledge, relative to the generative function of human thinking, is not in any way better than the dietological interpretation. Moreover, under the conditions of

the growth of knowledge culture its negative function takes on a radical character. It not only sanctions a regression to ineffective methods of instruction that shape the “mechanical” person, but it also fundamentally eliminates any emerging culture of cognition, at the heart of which is cognitive production. The metaphor of “production” must not, in this case, lead to confusion. It does not entail the bureaucratization of the institution of education in terms of the production, distribution, and consumption of knowledge, as stated by Bill Readings [3, p. 214]. It refers to the creating individual, to that individual’s generative thinking [6, pp. 619–20], to collaborative thinking in human collectives, opening up what is epistemically new on the broad cultural horizon.

And so, the conceptualization of education in the terms of “commodity” and “service” eliminates from its didactic basis the methods and content that form the kind of creating individual who possesses an inquisitive attitude toward reality, that is, the kind of individual who is able to create knowledge. Consequently, it removes the view of education as the chief protagonist of a society that runs on knowledge.

In terms of its role, by the early 2000s the university had begun to resemble a transnational corporation, a technobureaucratic structure that is not by any means guided by the concept of reason proposed by Immanuel Kant or by the Humboldtian idea of culture. The university is coming to be a simulacrum of the idea of the university, notes Readings, and it views its students as consumers. The viscissitudes of conditions today force the university to function in a technocratic mode. As aspects of professional life become subordinate to administration, the administration process represents the most rapidly expanding area in attracting resources, rather than research and teaching [3, pp. 73, 83, 82, 168, 169].

The history of the commercialization of education in Europe traces its origins back to the early thirteenth century, when the selling of knowledge in universities via instruction—knowledge that unconditionally belonged to God—nonetheless was accorded the highest sanction by the church. Together with the official practice of remuneration for instruction, a university oligarchy was created, striving to “extract more and more gain from the performance of its

functions,” and the commodification of education, which counted “instructors among the group of hired workers, a group that was just as despised in the Middle Ages as it had been in antiquity” [7, pp. 85, 86, 89]. But the commercial “trope” did not become the idea of the university, any more than it became the idea of the kind of general education institution that has intrinsic value. However, according to faculty association members at the University of California, Berkeley, the current reality is such that “the university administration is obsessed with money. . . . Everything it thinks about has to do with increasing tuition, attracting private donations, getting more and more research grants, and reducing expenses” [8]. At the same time, the government sees universities first and foremost as organizations that make a contribution to the economy [5].

Commodification strategies in education are implemented as a result of the fact that the principles of the market have been transferred into that sphere, and their basis includes the Anglo-American model that is oriented toward competition. American and European reforms of higher education have proceeded in pursuit of increasing the university’s contribution to economic growth, measured exclusively in “commodity and money” units. Including the educational institution in the “market” thesaurus makes it possible to speak of the need for education by way of supply and demand, the development of education in terms of regulation of the market of educational services and competition among its agents, the accessibility of education as the result of the functioning of the system of credits and vouchers that operate the mechanism of “the money follows the student.” The business model that has been built in the space of “competing suppliers of services” and “demanding consumers” [5] is a view of education that has been given legitimacy by today’s culture. At the same time, its position is by no means the only point of view of spiritual culture of both the industrial era and today’s postindustrial era.

The fundamental difference in the angle of vision proceeds from whether the present and future of the institution of education is viewed in the context of the knowledge culture or the view is narrowed down to commodity commerce circulation in the knowledge

economy. The former more than covers the latter. However, when the former is replaced by the latter, the institution of education takes on the form of a financial corporation, and its activity is viewed from the narrow angle of the completion of the business plan. The interests of the state, understood in the narrow sense of the vicissitudes of the economy, determine the country's well-being via the effectiveness of commodity transactions, but not in terms of spiritual investments in the human being, which determine the spiritual growth of all of society. The reformers do not want citizens; they want obedient consumers [9]. At the same time, the Magna Charta Universitatum (1988) affirms as the fundamental principle the following: "In order to meet the requirements of the modern world, the university has to be morally and intellectually independent of the political and economic powers in its teaching and research activity" [10].

An example of the sociocultural contradictions growing out of the commodification strategies of the interpretation and transformation of education today can be found in the case of Great Britain, one of the chief legislators of fashion in European education. In his analysis of the twenty-year history of the departmental institutionalization of education and science in Great Britain, Stefan Collini notes that "the universities, along with scientific research activity, are increasingly under the supervision of official departments that are responsible first and foremost for the development of business, trade, and employment" [5]. However, Great Britain also provides an example of a civil society's reaction, one of whose culturally effective traditions consists of the public's correction of the authorities' reformation policies.

On 28 June 2011 the Department for Business, Innovation, and Skills (BIS) published a White Paper titled "Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System of Education." The economic slump and the budget deficit serve as the arguments in favor of expanding market relations in the system of education. The prehistory of this document goes back to the government's White Paper "The Future of Higher Education" (2003), the BIS framework document "High Ambitions: The Future of the Universities in a Knowledge Economy" (2009), and "An Independent Analysis of the Financ-

ing of Higher Education,” compiled under the direction of Lord Brown, former head of British Petroleum. It proposes that changes along the lines of the publicized proposals will start in 2013 and will ensure stable financing of the system of higher education and better training of the students, and will encourage social mobility [11, pp. 2, 3].

On 27 September 2011, *The Guardian* reported that hundreds of scientists had signed a document titled “In Defense of Public Higher Education” [12], warning against the fatal consequences of the White Paper and averring that the planned reforms are fundamentally wrong [13].

Professor Howard Hotson, the organizer of the protest campaign at Oxford University, predicts in *The Guardian* a “winter of discontent” for the ruling political group whose commodification attempts are not acceptable to universities, student associations, and teachers’ unions in Britain [14]. The metaphor has a cautionary context. In English political rhetoric the phrase represents citizens’ unhappiness during events of exceptional social importance, in particular the winter of 1978–79, when the protests staged by labor trade unions, which were unhappy about Labor Party rule, forced the government to hold general elections, which were won by the Conservative Party headed by Margaret Thatcher.

A document positioned as an “alternative White Paper” was drawn up in the summer of 2011 under the direction of John Holmwood, professor of sociology at the University of Nottingham and a founder of the Campaign for the Public University [14]. Its preamble spells out the basic principles contained in the Magna Charta Universitatum [10], signed in 1988 in Bologna by the rectors of 388 major universities in forty-seven countries (including a few in Russia), and also notes that “these principles are in jeopardy owing to the adoption of market relations in the system of higher education and the involvement of commercial companies.”

The alternative White Paper establishes this fundamental position: public higher education is financed by society and the state, but that does not mean it ought to be controlled by the state. The authors point out the paradoxical motivation of the government, which uses the financial crisis caused by the collapse of the market

as the excuse for the adoption of the market in higher education. If education is a necessary social condition that enables the market to flourish, then what is the collapse of the market of education going to mean? The document affirms that “the only motive for the government’s proposals is a false ideological conviction rather than financial necessity.” To put it another way, what we are seeing are the initiatives of a political doctrinaire group that totally ignores the social value of higher education.

“The covert meaning of this White Paper,” notes the alternative document, “is the commodification of education,” whose purpose is to “provide new sales markets for capital that is looking for any suitable opportunities for investment.” The proposed “changes will encourage students to think of themselves as consumers who are investing explicitly in their own personal human capital to harvest the fruits of high financial reward. At the same time, the changes will make it hard for graduates to think of their university education as anything other than something they purchased at a high price for private gain.” However, “education is [supposed to be] something more than a place to satisfy one’s own interests and the pursuit of a career . . . the system of education constitutes the foundation of social life,” notes Melissa Benn [14].

And so, the official discourse in regard to education is characterized by a rise in consumerist relativism. And this is not characteristic of Great Britain alone. Education is also discussed in terms of commodity language in the United States, the Netherlands, Australia, India, and, of course, Russia. The assumption is that having been transformed into a system that develops in terms of the market, education will turn students into “critical consumers” and institutions of higher learning into suppliers that will put together “programs to order” [15]. The assumption that “education is more than greed and a race to the top” [16], that education is more than just training to get a job [12], is being overturned by doctrinaire groups that view education exclusively through the prism of financial regulation.

Commodification puts limits on the purpose and functions of education in regard to the human being as an individual and on the broader horizon of the cultural functioning of society. The *Oxford University Gazette* notes [17] that education is a powerful instru-

ment for the maintenance of a stable and humane society. It gives society access to the broadest possible range of talents.

In the long run, “placing financial authority in the hands of students” means nothing more nor less than “forcing them to pay for what they already ought to be receiving by rights” [5], since “public higher education is a part of the contract of the generations, in which the older generations invest resources in the well-being of future generations, which, in turn, will support them” [12]. This investment in the young “is built on the conviction that our shared future, the future of this state and this country, depends on their talent and wisdom. This is why higher education must be virtually free of charge” [8]. Of course, universities do cost a lot, but taxpayers understand all of the benefits they gain from educating the *individual* [9].

The social mission of education has many facets. The mission is to improve the state of things in regard to social inequality, to inculcate and maintain standards of citizenship [12], and to contribute to the culture and the economy of local communities where education represents the heart of civilization. The Alternative White Paper notes that “the university sector is much larger than just the narrow group of elite universities.” A major portion of England’s universities are located in the regions, and every year they accept thousands of students from poor families and support them in the process of their learning. They “train future nurses, emergency aid workers, social workers, schoolteachers, and representatives of many other professions.” They “help their students with guaranteed job placement after graduation, something that would not be available to them if they had not gone to university.” In other words, they are the ones that really provide for social mobility, which is definitely not true of the more elite universities. In addition, owing to their public character the universities are able to create the space for debate and discussion, for independent analysis of commercial and political projects [12]. Critical debate and discussion is one of the genetic foundations of the existence of the universities as epistemological communities that make up an open society.

Consequently, the universities today are by no means just global economic institutions. It is obvious that a private commercial uni-

versity will be oriented first and foremost toward its owners and shareholders. It is certainly not going to be interested in satisfying the broad range of the needs of society, any more than those of the local economy [12]. It is from this point of view that we need to look at the point that some universities do not have the ability to compete in the market, and the prospect that they will be taken over by private suppliers of educational services.

The model of the student as a consumer obscures the real nature of the institution of education. The so-called “free” choice of educational specialization is, in fact, determined by many competing factors, which include the early influence of the profile training program around the age of fourteen, and shifts in the fashion for education among seventeen-year-olds. Both are the result of influence that lies outside the boundaries of the “market in educational services” [5]. For many, the decision to go to a university is a one-time event, which is why the model of the student as a market “customer” does not stand up to criticism. S. Collini notes that “it is more similar to getting married than to purchasing laundry detergent” [5].

It is not possible to purchase the results of schooling as if they were a commodity; they are the consequence of the person’s own efforts, his own obligation, his own hard work and risk. Also involved, however, are the individual talents and inputs of those who teach. The results of schooling have to include the development of the personality in a way that shapes the inquisitive mind, the ability to classify ideas in terms of problems and to come up with new ones, systematic and critical thinking, understanding and social interaction. And all these aspects are part of the concept of “education,” which constitutes the source of the culture that shapes the ongoing progress of society today. Since that is so, what we are dealing with in the sphere of education cannot properly be understood first and foremost as a “market,” since “desire” and “money” do not lead to its acquisition here.

Let us focus on how the “commodity” view of education and research and, in the long run, on research education and research cognition, is leading to the deconstruction of even the possibility of an economy of producing knowledge. That is, it is directly hostile to

that which it has attempted to derive benefit from and promote.

Research cognition makes up the cultural dominant in the processes of transformation that determine the social model of the future.

The University of California at Berkeley is one of the best universities in the United States, with an enrollment of more than 35,000 students. In the memorandum of the university's faculty association we read: "Research is the main function of a university, and moreover research into the boundaries of human knowledge is capable of yielding unexpected benefits for society and the economy. Sometimes the results of this research take years or even decades to be apparent, but that is exactly the reason why it is so important to support fundamental research and not just commercial applications. A university's trademark is not just a brand name, like Coca-Cola, something to be marketed for the sake of revenue. We must not become a business that sells online courses and external degrees. We can use the Internet and other technologies to reach a wider audience, *but only with considerable caution*, so as not to worsen our educational mission" [8].

Oxford University in Great Britain, which is the oldest English-speaking university in the world and was teaching as far back as the eleventh century, has an enrollment today of more than 20,000 students. Oxford views scientific research and education as a fundamental component of an open, pluralist, and innovative society, as stated in its *Gazette*. Also noted therein is that a rigid model of organization and financing of research implemented in the framework of a "commodity" paradigm is not in accord with the realities of science: "successful research is not the result of an organizational model considered separately; instead, it depends on the aggregate set of a number of interactions between individuals and groups, and on the environment in which it is conducted." In the case of the student community, moreover, research does not by any means play the role of a service to be acquired—first and foremost it becomes *upbringing*, which is what determines the high quality of education. Analysis shows that strategies of commodification lead to the separation of the process of instruction from scientific research, and this demotes the personnel of educational institutions.

Overall these strategies are capable of having a fatal effect on the universities that are engaged in conducting intensive scientific research, in particular when it comes to research partnership and scientific mobility [17].

However, the logic of the market only recognizes the utilitarian meaning of research and teaching. This commodification logic lies at the basis of the activity of the commercial suppliers of knowledge that provide training modified by commercial relations from the standpoint of both its human “quality” and the “balance [sheet]” of knowledge. The commercial companies are not burdened with any responsibility for preserving the social values of education. The logic of the market is to provide incentives to commercial suppliers of academic programs that act through a network of franchising providers of education [12], or to distribute the financing of scientific research in competitions where the main criterion of the rating is a reduction in the cost of the projects. At the same time, academic courses that are put together and delivered as a commodity by outside organizations deprive the instructor of the opportunity to engage in creative participation and deprive education of its generative power. Both of these factors render problematic the organization of instruction via research and the students’ acquisition of competencies that are relevant both to the economy and to the culture of producing knowledge.

The logic of the market tends to diversify the institution of education in such a way that it begins to lose its epistemic character. Among the online comments on the Internet version of *The Guardian*, user Gerry P. writes: “Now the Polytechnical College has become a university that specializes in the science of athletics, the study of the mass media, and, God help us, dance. Oh, excuse me, they also still teach chemistry” [14]. The adoption of regulated tuition does not, by any means, lead the universities to principles of “a good market,” since very soon all universities start to be given a higher category [5], eliminating even the possibility of the development of social mobility. And so, the market stimulates mechanisms of cognitive exclusion both on the level of institutions and among individuals. In the context of such social mechanics, Professor Simon Szreter of Cambridge asks: “Then how will it be possible

to achieve the radical modernization of human capital that is so essential for a modern economy based on knowledge?" [18].

Science cannot be represented as a market of "competing" researchers, the same way that education, in keeping with the cultural progress of society, is by no means a market of competing institutions. In *The Oxford University Gazette* we read that an indispensable part of the *culture of research* has long since consisted of cooperation between individuals and research groups in various institutions of higher learning, cooperation that goes on regardless of the borders between countries [17]. In addition, universities make common use of their teaching resources [14]. The adoption of purely commodity relations is capable of making it impossible for scientific and educational institutions, as well as individual researchers, to have access to generalized resources of knowledge and objects of collective scientific use. In the Internet version of *The Guardian*, comments on the government's "commodity" initiatives mention, for example, the worldwide practice of exchanging (or purchasing at the base price) reagents of the antibody type, DNA and RNA tests, particular species of laboratory mice, and so on, as well as science seminars to which supposedly "competing" researchers are invited for the purpose of exchanging opinions and having private conversations with any specialist. "If scientific research is pure competition, then such a system does not work. . . . Competition is a good thing at the right time and in the right place (for example, in the recruitment of students), and we feel that we are stronger together, which is why we work together" [14]. In the words of S. Giannini, a department head in the Union of Rectors of the Universities of Italy, it is essential today to achieve the ability to compete by way of new models of *cooperation* between universities, in keeping with the humanistic ideas of the European tradition [19, p. 2].

The logic of the market cannot be applied to the "sale" of costly disciplines in the field of science and technology. This fact had to be announced and economically played up (in regard to subsidies) by the British White Paper on higher education (2011). "High technology" courses of this kind have a lot of high overhead costs for materials, equipment, and qualified technical personnel. Con-

sequently, the logic of the market should be excluded specifically from that cluster of the educational system of the knowledge society with its focus [cluster] on its basic economic interests that have to do with the production of knowledge. Otherwise, if the universities are not able to find enough students to pay for such “high-technology” disciplines, then such courses should not be offered to them in spite of the fact that they are so critical to the knowledge economy [5]. This is the way that the “commodity” approach to education gives birth to this oxymoron: “free” competition under controlled conditions.

Education changes along with a changing society. At the same time, it serves as the basis for the development of society itself, society’s social, political, and economic strategies. Proceeding from this are the demands on education, which is supposed to maintain the pace of a rapidly developing society and set up systematic relations with other spheres of activity. This is the kind of interaction that gives rise to educational innovations that draw the attention of educational collectives, the authorities, and society. However, standing behind these innovations, as always, is education as such, constituting the cultural heart of the life of society with its enduring values, traditions, pedagogical experience, and aspirations to instill and hold on to its human foundation. It is this cultural heart, placed at the center of innovation, that is able to give it a long and fruitful life.

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