

Neoliberalism and the Demise of the University

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Abstract

The article focuses on the new paradigm of general education, its social role and functions. With the impact of globalization and neoliberalism in higher education, the ambition is to have more autonomous and flexible university staff. The employers – university administrations – have their own idea of autonomy and flexibility. They are of the opinion that university teaching staff should be exempt from the rigid system of state officialdom because they are convinced that this system does not allow them to reward the more successful researchers/teaching staff and define their workload at their own discretion using their own criteria. However, experience from the higher education sector shows that more flexibility would result in more arbitrary conduct (misuse) and would be a major step backwards in terms of the standards that the trade unions have helped achieve in recent years in the field of social and labor rights. In addition, if the common framework was lost, universities and higher education in general would become more exposed to unintellectual policies whose main goal would be to further cut funds, introduce flexibilization, commercialize and reduce the number of study programs and ultimately completely disintegrate the system.

Keywords: teaching staff autonomy, neoliberalism, flexible and autonomous worker, flexibilization, university



1 Introduction

The article presents typical discourses and practices that foretell the imminent demise of Slovenian universities (see Marinčič, Javornik Krečič, 2014), which is connected with the neoliberal ideology in education and the overestimated role of knowledge. As Štefanc (2008, pp. 11) found, “seen from a macrosocial perspective, neoliberalism to a large extent inspired and articulated a paradigmatic shift in the understanding of the social role and functions of general education (in particular).” Favored are utilitarian models of knowledge and education with a (current) high market value, while the concept of general education is disappearing (Laval, 2005; cf. Kodelja, 2002; 2004; 2010). As Lyotard (2002, pp. 13) predicted the idea of education where acquisition of knowledge is closely connected with the formation (Bildung) of the mind or even personality (cf. Blankertz, 1982, Liessmann, 2006) has become “obsolete” under the pressure of dominant ideology. The dominant education model is based on the fact that schools are subject to pragmatic economic considerations; as Laval found (2005, pp. 25), the two key references of the new pedagogical ideal are the flexible man and autonomous worker. In 1995, when Michel Freitag published *The Demise of the University* (Slovenian translation Freitag 2010), his premonition about the triumph of technology and technocratic management over science to many sounded too catastrophic. Today, they sound prophetic. If reflections about the industrialization of university were scarce at the time, the literature about the neoliberal transformation of universities has reached almost industrial proportions in the last decade. Unfortunately, many of these discussions are markedly academic in character and confirm that institutional professionalism has trapped university, and that to a large extent has led to the demise of the university. Developments both on the macro-level -- the level of higher education policy -- and the micro-level, -- i.e. because of measures that were adopted by the universities themselves, indicates that the neoliberal university is no longer just a tendency, but reality that is partly seen as inevitable by the protagonists, the university workers and students, and is partly actively created by them. In other words: cooperativeness of academic community is a convincing evidence that the demise of the university to a large extent is the result of its internal crisis. Molesworth et al. (2011) made a pertinent remark that responsibility for this development lies both on institutional administrations, which are prepared to implement policies imposed by the government, as well as on every individual that passively accepts the idea that private sphere or the sphere of market expenditure is the best solution to public problems and issues.

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2 Globalization processes and their consequences for the educational systems

Globalization processes have drastically transformed the educational systems and institutions (cf. Roberts in Peters, 2008, Hill and Kumar, 2009). The listed literature talks extensively about flexible school, commercialization of research, entrepreneurial universities, transformation of universities into factories for the production of efficient knowledge, university capitalism, institutional hybridization, deinstitutionalization, devalorization, disintegration, marketing and the end of university as a uniform place of knowledge and the announcement of the so-called multiversity that would comprise only administratively connected vocational training centers and research centers (Torres, Schugurensky, 2002, Bok, 2003, Laval, 2005, De Zilwa, 2010, Molesworth et al., 2011). It is common to all these aspirations, as Štefanc pointed out (2008, p. 16) that institutions will only be able to attain their goals with a thorough reconceptualization of the following: (1) the curricular level: students as future workers and service providers in the market must acquire the necessary knowledge, skills and personal traits required by the job market; (2) at the level of organization and management, it is necessary to implement market mechanisms and establish



funding arrangements that will force educational institutions to rationalization and competitiveness in the educational-training market. In Slovenia, both happened, first at the level of policy that encouraged commercialization through self-paid part-time studies under cover of “financial autonomy”; in addition, university administrations adopted neoliberal rhetoric and the logic of “university as enterprise”, which was analyzed by Marinčič and Javornik Krečič on the example of the University of Maribor (2014).

3. Consequences of the measures for the employees at university

Owing to the instability and an unclear system of funding, universities have found themselves in a difficult position. However, it is necessary to ask the question whether the administrations did everything in relation to the government. We can see that the University of Maribor administration occasionally publicly opposed the higher education budget cuts on the declarative level; at the same time, university bodies entered the principles of entrepreneurial university in strategic documents and implemented them through “rationalization” and “optimization” measures.

Regarding “human resource management”, both standpoints and actual measures undoubtedly weaken the position of employees. The existing system, which despite its shortcomings highlighted scientific and pedagogical achievements, is disturbing for the entrepreneurial university because it impedes the establishment of completely new management hierarchies. The developments at the University of Maribor also confirmed that “/.../ employees have fewer and fewer guarantees and less stability regarding their value and who they are /.../” (Laval 2005, p. 39). The use of abstract euphemisms is particularly interesting in this respect. It shows that the academic management is trying to hide the pressure on the workers. Workers see “autonomy” and “flexibility” as management arbitrariness and the loss of academic freedom; however, in the entrepreneurial newspeak, the two have become individual virtues that characterize the ambitious, resourceful and entrepreneurial individual, the “3rd generation academic worker”. As Laval found (2005, pp. 35), “neoliberalism aims to remove rigidity, including psychological one, in the name of adapting to diverse situations that are encountered by individuals at work and in life”.

One concrete tool for this staff (and psychological) engineering is the systematic pushing of the existing academic staff, which predominantly is involved in basic research and teaching, to the role of “pedagogues only”, who can teach 20 and theoretically 40 hours per week (in reality, this already exists based on the pedagogical work evaluation criteria, which has illegally increased the legally stipulated weekly teaching workload). In addition, also envisaged is the spread of a parallel system of “researchers-entrepreneurs”; past experience clearly shows that these are mostly flexible workforce with short-term contracts (“autonomous” researcher today often stands for an independent entrepreneur with no social security). This will result in the loss of university as an institution that creates and mediates new knowledge; university is being turned into hybrid creation that at the same time is a research enterprise and a vocational school.

This way it is easier to understand the effort of the Rectors’ Conference or individual rectors to exclude university staff from the system of public servants. The employers – university administrations – consider the existing system rigid and inflexible because they are convinced that this system does not allow them to reward the more successful researchers/teaching staff past the promotion criteria and define their teaching workload at their own discretion using their own criteria. Past experience shows that more flexibility leads to more arbitrary conduct and misuse; it would be a major step backwards in terms of the standards that the trade unions



have helped achieve in recent years with regard to social and labor rights. University administrations ignore the fact that the public servant system currently protects the entire higher education sector before the anti-intellectual policies that would force the universities to provide fewer services under financial pressure, commercialize (also by introducing tuition fees) and thus ultimately disintegrate.

Conclusion

Two points must be emphasized at the end of this article: first, the system no doubt needs stable financing, and university should be defined as (non-profit) public service for all citizens. The authors of new legislation can rely on the Constitution of the Republic of Slovenia, which privileges state universities as providers of the right to education and freedom of research and teaching without political and other pressure (cf. Articles 57-59 of the Constitution (1991) with the interpretation of the Constitutional Court U-I-34/94 (1994). New legislation is 22 years late because legal disarray has already caused irreparable damage in some areas. Second, it must be acknowledged that the academic community is to a large extent responsible for a 22-year delay. The legislator was able to avoid its duty also because universities themselves see education as a market good, they emphasize the role of competition and accept the bazar-like forms of commercialization. As several authors have pointed out (e.g. Scullionetal, 2011, p. 233), the academic community allowed its universities to become a market area. Academic community allows an instrumentalized understanding of the degree as the impediment before finding employment that will make possible additional joys of consumerism. Authors believe that academic community should reestablish the complex relationship between research and teaching/learning. However, it seems that this can only be achieved, if the academic staff and students recognize their common interest in a *public, non-profit higher education system*, resolutely fight against the transformation of the existing clientelistic structures into managerial hierarchies and start to implement the remaining impact inside of their institutions within the existing system.



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