

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/268422883>

Education and the Enclosure of Knowledge in the Global University

Article · January 2009

CITATIONS

11

READS

100

1 author:



Silvia Federici

SUNY at Binghamton

39 PUBLICATIONS 956 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE



Education and the Enclosure of Knowledge in the Global University

Silvia Federici¹

Emeritus Professor, Hofstra University,
103C Roosevelt Hall, Hempstead, NY 11549-1000 USA
Email: nuscszf@hofstra.edu; dinavalli@aol.com

Abstract

This article is based on a talk given by Silvia Federici at the University of Leeds in November 2007. In it the author addresses the crucial issue of how knowledge is being enclosed in the global university. Federici has decades of experience in universities systems spanning Africa, Europe and the USA and her experience of African universities has shown us how structural adjustment policies squeezed funding to African universities and restructured them in conformity with the interests of global business values. Federici points to two trends: the first is the growing commercialisation and corporatization of academic life, and in particular the penetration of business interests within the university, and the second is the development of educational institutions that are reshaping educational programs, in particular through the growth of standardised on-line courses taught in what David Noble has called “digital diploma mills”. Federici ends by looking at resistance on campus, drawing on the example of the Democratizing Education Network.



Introduction. What we mean by "Global University"

I will share with you tonight some of my experiences and thoughts regarding "Education and the enclosure of knowledge in the Global University." By "global university" I refer to two related developments. First, I refer to a set of trends that have characterized the restructuring of education internationally in the '80s and '90s, such as the end of publicly supported education and the commercialisation and corporatization of academic life. I also refer to the development of educational institutions that do not only seek to recruit an international student body and thus train a global elite, but are reshaping educational programs across the planet, setting the standards for education world-wide. These developments--I argue-- have resulted in an "enclosure of knowledge," in the sense that education is increasingly evaluated according to its profitability, rather than its contribution to social improvement. That is, education has become a commodity whose production and distribution are subject to market values and conditionalities. As a result, its social content has been impoverished, and its acquisition is increasingly organized in a way that deepens social inequalities.

The Enclosure of Knowledge in Structurally Adjusted Africa

My first encounter with the global university occurred in Nigeria, while teaching at the University of Port Harcourt in the period from 1984 to 1986. Nigeria at the time was confronting a historic crisis, soon extending to the rest of the continent, and undermining the gains Africans had made with the anti-colonial struggle. The crisis appeared as a "debt crisis," but it soon became evident that the debt was but a tool international financial institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) were using to bring about a major reform of Africa's political economies, a reform that has since been described as a "recolonization" process.

Encouraged by the boom in oil prices, and following a development model based upon the import of foreign technology and goods, Nigeria, in the late 1970s, had taken many loans that, by the mid-1980s, as oil prices collapsed, had become unmanageable. In the past a defaulting country might have been able to declare bankruptcy. But this time, the international financial institutions forced the indebted countries to take loans from them in return for an extensive restructuring of their economies. This meant adopting a set of policies that, combined, have become known as "structural adjustment programs" (SAPs). Nigeria did not immediately take any loan. However, by 1986, the government began to implement the same policies which the World Bank and the IMF had imposed on it as conditionalities for the country's ability to access the credit market. Key among these policies were the removal of tariffs on foreign imports, the privatisation of national assets, currency devaluation, wage freezes, and above all, as far as our

discussion is concerned, the end of government investment in public services, such as health, public transports, and education.

By the early 1990s, most African governments were pulling out of the business of financing education. They cut money from everything: infrastructure's maintenance, libraries' budgets, teachers' wages and the wages of non-academic staff. Student allowances (for food, transport, books) were also eliminated; though many students could not continue their studies without them. Within a short time, the university system began to look like a desolate land and a battlefield, because the cuts were met with a tremendous resistance, particularly from the students, and this resistance in turn elicited a fierce repression. Student organisations were driven underground, campuses were shut down for long periods of time.. Soon a situation developed where it became difficult for people like myself to remain in Nigeria. In fact, by 1986, when structural readjustment took off, many teachers, African as well, left the country,

On returning to New York, some of us who had been teaching in Nigeria formed an organisation called the Committee for Academic Freedom in Africa (CAFA) that for more than 10 years, from 1991-2004, published a bulletin to inform people in North America, especially in the universities, about the situation on the African campuses. A compendium of those bulletins is now collected in a book we have produced, titled *A Thousand Flowers, Social Struggles against Structural Adjustment in African Universities* (Africa World Press 2000). It includes a chronology of these struggles documenting the existence of a pan-African student movement against structural readjustment.

What CAFA has argued is that the World Bank's attack on Africa's higher education has been part of a restructuring of the international division of labour that has gone hand in hand with the globalisation of the world economy. In other words, public investment in higher education has been gutted in Africa because, in the plans of international capital, African workers have been destined to occupy a subordinate position, not requiring that they become producers of knowledge. (This is why, at a meeting of African VCs, held in Harare in 1986, a World Bank officer bluntly declared that "Africans don't need universities!") Indeed, in the new global economy, Africa has been restored to its former colonial role as exporter of raw materials, minerals in particular, and labour. The attack on the universities has been functional to this process. Many young people who previously would have been college students, expecting at graduation a rewarding job, have had, instead, to leave their countries, migrate to Europe or the US, where they now work as street vendors, car washers, factory workers. Or they are populating the EU detention centers, when they are not laying on the bottom of the Mediterranean, where it is calculated that more than 10,000 migrants have drowned during the last decade.

The Commercialization and Balkanization of African Universities: "Studying Under the Link."

The end of government investment in public education was the first step in the globalisation of African universities. The next steps were the full commercialization of the educational systems and the development of "dependent education." For once public funds were cut, universities had to become self-supporting or go under. Self-financing was achieved not only through the introduction of "user fees", as demanded by the World Bank, but by hosting courses and research programs financed by international NGOs or by the World Bank itself, or by renting campus facilities to study abroad programs, or by establishing links with universities abroad providing curricula, books and other pedagogical materials.

Due to the students' stiff resistance, publicly funded programs could not always be totally eliminated, but they have survived as waste lands, asphyxiated by the lack of resources. This means that the African campuses have witnessed the development of a two-tier system of education. On one side, there are the remnants of the previous publicly supported education system, with no funds, no resources, no pedagogical tools, none of the infrastructural amenities that make studying possible, and with an unpaid, demoralized faculty that reduces its teaching to a minimum needing to find other sources of income to keep body and soul together. At the same time, African universities now host well-financed programs provided with current books, computers, air-conditioned class rooms, functioning toilets, all paid by foreign "donors," NGOs, or the World Bank, that clearly take advantage of their monetary clout to dictate what Africans are to be taught. Not surprisingly, with "dependent education," a shift has taken place in the direction of the university curriculum, away from the humanities in favour of business accounting and generally of courses likely to groom a generation of technocrats sensitive to the needs of foreign investors. This is what the World Bank has called "Africa Capacity Building."

With the rush to commercial proficiency, African universities have also undergone a balkanization process. For a class differentiation has come into place depending on the departments' and programs' money-making capacity. This means that the institutions and departments with the "links" and the funds call the shots, whereas the others must follow along. To what extremes this situation has gone has been well described by the Ugandan scholar/activist Mahmood Mamdani, in *Scholars in the Market place. The Dilemma of Neo-liberal Reform at Makerere University. 1989-2005*. (Kampala: Fountain Publishers 2007). Mamdani shows that, under the pressure of money-making, each department has begun to function as a self-subsistent unit, with its own budget, its own money-making ventures, leading to an increasing fragmentation of academic life. In fact, things have gone so far that affluent departments now want to move away and organize themselves

on an independent basis, not wishing to contribute the money they are making to the rest of the university. This spells the end of the university as a unitary, coherent project. Mamdani also describes how turf wars are on the rise, because every department wants to teach the courses most financially profitable, regardless of its own academic specialization and expertise. Under these conditions, teaching and research take a backseat. Teachers pretend to teach, students pretend to study, often organizing a division of labour among themselves, so that those who attend certain courses take the exams for many others as well, sure that their frequently absent teachers will not notice.

The Enclosure of Knowledge in the US and the Rise of the Global University

The restructuring and commercialization of African universities was not just a response to the "debt crisis," as is often assumed. The same developments have unfolded in every other country, including the US. Here too the commercialization of knowledge and academic life has taken different forms. First, there has been the end of "open admission," which in the New York City University system (CUNY) occurred already in 1976. Starting in the Reagan era, state and federal subsidies to schools, at all levels, have been steadily reduced. Also the commitment to "affirmative action," i.e. the commitment to redress the legacy of slavery and institutional racism in the educational field, has been reneged. Not only have universities eliminated tuition-free enrolment, tuitions have increased so much that college education is becoming unaffordable, at the very time when it is promoted as the only door to a "living wage." Students now must take loans from the government and/or the banks, and must borrow not only for graduate school but even to get an undergraduate degree. The indebtedness of the student body has reached such a crisis level that "debt slavery" is a term used more and more on US campuses to describe the student status. It is calculated that the average students will face a debt of up to 60.000 and even 100.000 dollars upon graduation. How will these students pay this debt? How will this debt weigh on their lives, and on the choices they will make?

"For Profit Education" and the Rise of the "Digital Diploma Mills"

There has also been a corporatisation of the university life. Not only has corporate funding of academic research grown; universities have been reorganised along a corporate model, with efficiency and profitability as the guidelines. This has gone hand in hand with an ideological shift whereby business is now openly welcomed by university administrators as a key partner. Teachers too are expected to be more business like and bring money directly to the university by applying for government grants or other types of grants. Teaching and publishing are no longer enough. Thus, on US campuses as well, the faculty is increasingly divided between the lucky teachers who have a grant and those without it, who inevitably have less power and prestige. This is a dangerous turn as it weakens the position of the faculty in its power relation with the university administration. Meanwhile, the

universities are trying to claim as their property all that teachers produce while under contract with them, from scientific discoveries to syllabi. The idea is that the material teachers produce for their classes can be standardised and then put online to service a larger number of students. But faculty reject it as a violation of their academic freedom..

"On-line education" is a direct outcome of the academic quest for profitability. Some university managers look at it as a utopia, for it cuts immensely the need for investment in infrastructure and wages. Who needs buildings if courses can be piped into somebody's living room and hundreds of students can be reached by one teacher? It is also claimed that online education can customize pedagogical products to best fit students' lives and work needs, and it provides an ideally cheap education for "poor countries" in the "third world." Not surprisingly, a staunch supporter of on-line programs is the World Bank. Today, even prestigious universities, like Columbia University or New York University, have substantial online sections, that (for instance) provides courses and degrees for soldiers in the army. In the 1990s we have also had the development of "for profit education," that is, universities exclusively financed through the stock market, although their viability is now very much in question.

The Growth of the "Global University"

The main novelty, however, in the academic world has been the growing global engagement of US universities in the sense of their growing intervention in the restructuring of education worldwide. This means that select US-based universities are increasingly "linked" with universities in Africa or Eastern Europe or any part of the world where it is believed the university system has to be restructured, and are involved in the reshaping of these programs (for example, revising curricula or examination procedures, or establishing computer networks, etc.). Thus, North America universities, together with universities in England, France and international NGOs, are becoming the gatekeepers for education and knowledge production across the world, setting the standards for what should be considered pedagogically valuable on a global level. The same universities also recruit a multinational/multicultural student body, presumably forging the future managers of the global economy; and they pipe courses into the colleges of impoverished/indebted "third world" countries, taking advantage of the fact that, in the aftermath of adjustment, their educational systems have been dismantled, devalued, and made dependent on external experts and aid. This means that the globalization of education and culture has actually resulted in a centralization of knowledge production, in the sense that this is now organized along a pyramidal structure whereby the same countries and institutions that control the world economy also set the rules, the canons, the ideological paradigms for education and culture on a global level. In this way, despite the seeming increased interest in

multiculturalism, worldwide culture and knowledge are becoming more homogenized, and more controlled to reflect the interests of the world powers.

To conclude, a globalization of knowledge is welcome when it involves a genuine increase in the international exchange of ideas. However, this exchange is now occurring in a field of unequal power relations and it contributes to deepen social inequalities. As we have seen, the commercialization of Africa's education system, coupled with the liberalization of its political economies, has produced a new diaspora and "brain drain." The students and teachers of yesterday are today's migrants, who risk their lives crossing the Sahara or making their passage to Europe on overcrowded boats drifting through the Mediterranean. The alternative is a life with no future, but recruitment by the many armies that assist local and foreign chiefs in the expropriation of Africa's mineral and agricultural wealth. The globalization and commercialization of Africa's higher education benefits in fact the agribusiness, mining and pharmaceutical companies that are running around the globe appropriating the resources on which people live, including the knowledge that indigenous people have developed over the centuries, and which now these companies want to privatize. Already rivers of blood have flown for the sake of gold, diamonds, coltan. Already many African plants have been patented, a process which in essence is a direct expropriation and theft of indigenous wealth. The lack of autonomous educational institutions, capable of protecting this wealth, put an end to "gene hunting" or, at worst, negotiating better terms of trade, has been a key factor in this process.

Resistance, Struggle and Campus Activism

As I have stressed, these developments have been met with a stiff resistance by African students and teachers— a resistance that CAFA has supported and documented. Resistance has been mounting on the US campuses as well. Teachers are rallying around the concept of "academic freedom" against the universities' property claims on their work and the commercialisation of education and academic life. Students too have been organizing and fighting on various fronts, increasingly coordinating their activities with those of Canadian students, recognising that they have the same problems. [A good source of information on students' struggles in the United State is Campus Activism (see www.campusactivism.org). This is a website that introduces you the Democratizing Education Network (DEN), a broad coalition of students groups based in the US and Canada].

One of the main struggles students in the US are making is against recruitment on campuses by the military and the CIA, which has escalated since September 11 2001 and the war against Iraq. Another major front of struggle is that against student debt. One of the strategies students have used to make their plight visible has been the "tent city model." They have built tents across the campuses and lived there, both to show the impact indebtedness is having on their lives, and

to show that they need to move away from a university that is becoming more and more like a financial operation, more and more commercialised. Students have also been very active in the anti-globalization movement, building coalitions against sweatshops, opposing the presence of items produced under sweatshop conditions in their universities, and pushing the universities to disinvest in their World Bank Bonds. Through all these struggles students have increasingly built alliances not only with teachers but with other campus workers, supporting their union organizing and their strikes. .

The following is the Charter DEN has adopted which reflects what students in the US are demanding.

- Full public funding for public higher education
- Free access to higher education and the abolition of tuition
- Affirmative action to end institutionalised racism and sexism
- Full recognition of the rights of students and workers to organise
- Democratic self government of higher education
- Service to the public welfare not to corporate profits
- Free speech and academic freedom
- Debt forgiveness of student loans
- Civic education for a democratic society
- Education not war
- Schools not jails