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Higher Education in the Era of Illusions: Neoliberal Narratives, Capitalistic Realities, and the Need for Critical Praxis

Ali H. Hachem , Stephen F. Austin State University

Abstract

The modern American university is in transition, undergoing major changes to its very structure and function. While few of these changes are reflective of the rhetorical language of economic freedom, liberty, choice, and rights used in promoting the neoliberal state project, many others are clear indications of the re-coronation of a capitalistic oligarchy and the reinstatement of its class supremacy through the exploitation of society. While most of the critical literature in higher education attends to the structural macroscopic effects of the new capitalism, it is the argument in this article that more attention should be paid to the subjective microscopic embodiment of neoliberalism in various higher education contexts. This article starts by describing the rise of neoliberal tendencies in today's higher education. It then describes capitalistic trends in today's university. The article then moves to a historical grounding of the neoliberal narrative in American culture, showing that its inception could be correlated with pressures caused by partial gains made by the civil rights movement; and that the presence of such narrative in higher education today serves a class function. The article concludes by outlining a pragmatist pedagogy of embodiment that may counter the neoliberal narrative in today's university.

Keywords

higher education, neoliberalism, capitalism, pragmatism

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The modern U.S. university is witnessing radical changes that are “structural in nature and global in scope” (Schugurensky, 2013, p. 308), changes that are “at least as dramatic as those in the 19th century when the research university evolved” (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2009, p. 1.). Such changes are reshaping the terrain of higher education, remolding its structures, mechanisms, and very identity (for a detailed discussion of these changes, see Altbach, Berdahl, & Gumpert, 2005; Blumenstyk, 2014; Bok, 2003; Boston Consulting Group, 2014; Brown, 2011; Carey & Schneider, 2010; Donoghue, 2008; Forest & Altbach, 2006; Gerber, 2014; Gilde, 2007; Ginsberg, 2011; Giroux, 2014; Hermanowicz, 2011; Kirst & Stevens, 2015; Knapp & Siegel, 2009; Little & Mohanty, 2010; Newman, Couturier, & Scurry, 2004; Schrecker, 2010; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004; Stockdill & Danico, 2012; Washburn, 2005; and Wildavsky, Kelly, & Carey, 2011). While few of these changes are reflective of the rhetorical language of economic freedom, liberty, choice, and rights used in promoting the neoliberal state project, many others are clear indications of the re-coronation of a capitalistic oligarchy and the reinstatement of its class supremacy through the exploitation of society.

In the first section of this article, rising free market trends in today’s U.S. university are described, among which are neoliberalization, deregulation, marketization, corporatization, privatization, and globalization. The second section describes evolving capitalistic tendencies in the U.S. university including exploitation of students and other stakeholders, de-democratization, and mythification. The third section provides a historical mapping of the rise of neoliberalism in U.S. culture and its university. The main premise in this section is that neoliberalism functions as a distortive narrative among many others that have been advanced as a reaction to

participative democratic gains made by the civil rights movement in the face of material and cultural agendas of stratification and subjugation. As a transparent lexicon of classism became more and more politically incorrect, it had to be replaced by distorting linguistic carriers that separate discourse from reality altogether, by hegemonic narratives that preach freedom and choice while at the same time advancing oppressive capitalistic projects of control. In the last section, an outline of a pragmatist pedagogy of embodiment that attends to the subjective microscopic incarnation of neoliberalism in various higher education contexts is elaborated. Such pedagogy is a call for the scientific, democratic, public, educational, and critical inquiry into, criticism of, then action on the problematic cultural text, resulting in its progressive reconstruction, transformation, and reorganization.

The Neoliberal University

Neoliberalization. A dominant narrative in today’s U.S. higher education is that of neoliberalism. The rise of the neoliberal narrative in the U.S. university is a reflection of wider political and economic changes that have been taking place in the U.S. and other parts of the world since the early 1980s, changes that have accumulated as the contemporary solidification of neoliberalism as a hegemonic global economic discourse (Harvey, 2005). While the 1980s witnessed the consolidation of market language in higher education, the 1990s was a period of institutionalization of this discourse where “the boundaries between the academe and industry seemed to be blurring” (Kleinman, Habinek, & Vallas, 2011, p. 275), and today we speak of an established “academic capitalism” where different actors (faculty, students, administrators, and academic professionals) use state resources to “create new circuits of knowledge that links higher education institutions to the new economy” (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004,

p. 1). More lately, the university is becoming an economic institution with an economic vision and mission. While the university in the 1970s and 1980s served technical vocational needs and other wider societal goals (democracy, citizenship, critical thinking, political participation, cultural critique), today's university's center of gravity is the free market economy and its ever-shifting cycles of supply and demand (Donoghue, 2008; Schneider & Townsend, 2013).

Deregulation. One major reason for this neoliberalization of the university is the rise of the deregulated, neoliberal, nation-state, a state which major function is to guard an economy in which it makes sure not to be a player (Harvey, 2005). The new university is then an abandoned financial child of an already fainting welfare nation-state. Both the federal government and individual states have historically decreased their financial support to higher education institutions (Tandberg & Griffith, 2013). While in 1988, public colleges and universities received 3.2 times as much in revenue from state and local governments as they did from students, they today receive about 1.1 times as much (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2015). More specifically, 47 states (except Alaska, North Dakota, and Wyoming) are spending less per student in the 2014–2015 school year than they did before the recession with an average decrease of \$1,805 (20%). The number is more than 40% for Arizona and Louisiana (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2015).

Marketization. Such free market economicization of the university has had many consequences on higher education. First, today's university is more conscious than ever before of the economic presence and needs of the free market. One of its major missions is to help students to secure employability and to travel successful career paths. To do so, the new university emphasizes degrees in voca-

tional and professional fields, popular with big industries and dominant service sectors. Some of the popular metrics used today to assess a university's organizational performance are labor market readiness, employment rate, post-enrollment earnings, and the degree's return on investment (Ewell, 2010).

Another major mission of the new university is the production of commodifiable research that is sellable in the free market. This university is no stranger to the language of patents and licensing, copyrights and royalties, and corporate start-ups. The number of patents granted to U.S. universities increased from 267 in 1979 to 4,797 in 2012 (U.S. Patent and Trademark Office, n.d.) while the number of university start-ups increased from 330 in 2003 to 647 in 2012 (Brookings, 2013). Currently, MIT has university corporate alliances with about 800 companies, among which are Boeing, ExxonMobil, and Samsung. MIT research sponsored directly by industry was \$128 million in the fiscal year 2014, 19% of the total MIT research funding (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2015). In 2013, Harvard University paid its head of public-market investments a total of \$11.5 million (Chronicle of Philanthropy, 2015).

Corporatization. Second, forcing a change in the university's mission, the neoliberal economicization of the university has automatically forced a deeper change in its structural identity. A basic entity of any free market economy is the corporation, an entity that today's university is forced to emulate (Ruben, Immordino, & Tromp, 2009). The new university is one of standardization, whether of vision, mission, structures, processes, or outcomes. It is also one of strategic planning, continuous system-wide data collection and analysis, and standards-based accountability (Knapp, 2009). Like any other corporation, the new university is also facing a business environment characterized by flux,

chaos, and unpredictability. This is why it is forced to become yet another creative, corporate entrepreneurial economic actor that is committed to risk-taking, creative destruction, disruptive innovation, and adhocracy (Etzkowitz, 2009; Brewer & Tierney, 2011).

The ultimate goal of today's university, like any other aspiring free market corporation, is to increase profit, and this can be done by either reducing costs or increasing revenues. To reduce costs, the new university refers to measures of fiscal austerity, including the outsourcing of services to cheaper providers. In 2010, for example, the division of Business Law and Ethics Studies at the University of Houston outsourced assignment grading to EduMetric, a Washington company whose graders are mostly from India, Singapore, and Malaysia (Williams-June, 2010). Another money-saving strategy is to hire the cheapest "labor" possible, whether as contingent faculty or as nontenured professors. While the number of part-time faculty increased from 25.1% to 41.5% between 1975 and 2011, that of full-time tenured faculty decreased from 28.6% to 16.6% and full-time tenure-track faculty from 15.9% to 6.9% (American Association of University Professors, 2014).

To increase revenues, the new university may refer to philanthropic fundraising (Thelin & Trollinger, 2014). In 2013, U.S. universities received \$33.8 billion in donations (Blumenstyk, 2014), and the number of mega-gifts (\$50 million or more) to higher education institutions increased from seven in 2009 to 43 in 2014 (Marts & Lundy, 2015). Another way to increase revenues is the profitable business of noneducational commodities. In 2012, the sales of college-licensed merchandise totaled \$4.62 billion (Bundrick, 2015). In 2010, the median spending per athlete at institutions in each major athletics conference ranged from 4 to nearly 11 times the median spending on education-related activities per student (Knight Commissions on Intercollegiate

Athletics, 2010). At Duke University, the annual salary of the college basketball coach is \$9,682,032, about nine times the university's president pay of \$1.1 million. The gross profit of the Duke basketball program is \$12.8 million (Sherman, 2015). In 2013, the University of Texas had the highest college sports revenues—\$165.7 million, among which \$58.8 million came from rights and licensing (Gaines, 2014). "One enterprising university even succeeded in finding advertisers willing to pay for the right to place their signs above the urinals in its men's rooms" (Bok, 2003, p. 2). Yet another way to make a profit is to have aggressive commercialization, branding, and marketization strategies (Bok, 2003). In the first half of 2013, U.S. colleges and universities placed \$570.5 million worth of paid advertising. For the first time, the investment of the nonprofit sector was higher than that of \$302 million spent by the for-profit sector (Educational Marketing Group, 2013).

Privatization. Third, and beyond corporatization, today's university is witnessing deep changes in its institutional environment. Little by little, the new university is moving from a bureaucratic institutional environment controlled by local, state, and federal authority to a free market institutional environment where the corporate university is expanding its ties to other free market corporate entities (Deluca & Siegel, 2009). One way to connect to the new corporate environment is through triple helixes (university, government, and industry partnerships). In this case, industry provides funding and employment, while the new university provides useful knowledge and skilled labor (Etzkowitz, 2009).

Another way to become a strong knot in the corporate web of the free market is simply to detach altogether from the bureaucratic clutch, to become one of the many rising private for-profit providers (Fain & Lederman, 2015; McMillan-Cottom, 2017). Some

of these providers are for-profit colleges and universities like Apollo, Capella, and Laureate, and the share of such entities in the student market increased from 0.3% in 1967 to 10% in 2011 (Hentschke, 2011). Some of them are alternative service providers like Straighterline, Open Network, and Edu-Venture. Still others are a variety of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) like Coursera, Udacity, and EdX. In 2014, Coursera had a total of 22,232,448 enrollments with students from 190 different countries. Approximately 240,000 students enrolled in the most popular class offered (Coursera, n.d.).

Historically, the privatization of higher education has been coupled with the rise of online education (Stokes, 2011). While less than 7,000 students were pursuing degrees via fully online instruction in 1995 (Stokes, 2011), the number was 2,642,158 in 2012, 12.5% of total enrollment. Arizona had the highest online enrollment of 48.2%. In that same year, the total number of students enrolled in some but not all distance education courses were 13.3% of total enrollment (U.S. Department of Education, 2014).

Globalization. The neoliberal economicization of higher education has then led, and is leading, to drastic shifts in its vision and mission, substance and identity, and terrain and milieu. Today's university cannot escape the neoliberal, nor can it afford to ignore it. A major unneglectable assumption of neoliberalism is the ability of both producers and consumers to compare various brands of goods and services across the market for the purposes of valuing, ordering, and exchange, an assumption that led to the elaboration of sophisticated and massive global ranking data tools and systems (Harvey, 2005). Such a trend has been mirrored in higher education (Hazelkorn, 2011; Wildavsky, 2010), and the popularity of the U.S. News & World Report, the Princeton Review, and the QS World University Rankings systems are but a few

examples of such mirroring. The function of rankings, Hazelkorn (2011) reminds us, is to “order global knowledge and knowledge producers, determine global competitiveness, and gauge national success in the new world order” (p. 202). Insuring global comparability across the promiscuous body of institutions called higher education is no easy task. Still, one small step forward might be the elaboration of metrics that allow comparing the quality of research across—instead of within—the academic disciplines (Martin, 2010). Today's university takes ranking very seriously. In 2008, for example, and to improve its ranking, Baylor University encouraged its incoming freshmen students to retake the SAT. Retaking the test was to result in \$300 credit for the campus bookstore, raising the score by at least 50 points was to guarantee an additional \$1,000 merit scholarship, and a further score increase was to qualify the student for “a higher-level merit based Baylor Gold Scholarship” (Burd, 2015). The Princeton Review has recently, and for the first time in its history, stripped the University of Missouri-Kansas City from its 2011, 2012, 2013, and 2014 ranking of the 25 best college and business school entrepreneurial programs for graduates and undergraduates. The reason is misreported data in the areas of enrollment, number of student clubs, and number of mentoring programs (Jacobs, 2015).

Another unignorable dimension of neoliberalism is its global nature (Alberto Torres & Rhoads, 2006). The free market is literally free, seeking all geographies and taking advantage of “the compression of market transactions in space and time” (Harvey, 2005, p. 4). Such an opening up of uncharted geographical horizons translates as business opportunities in a global knowledge economy. Hence, we see in today's higher education a rising discourse of internationalization and globalization (Altbach, 2006; Knight, 2006; Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2009). “No academic

system can exist by itself in the world of the 21st century” (Altbach, 2006, p. 138) and the “partial disembedding of [higher education] institutions from their national contexts” is already happening (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2009, p. 18). Today’s university is then no stranger to international campuses, global research centers, and the business of international students. It is aware of the global dimension of the marketplace, selling and buying all, be it knowledge, technology, students, faculty, or image and reputation. In 2012, for example, about 4 million students studied abroad—up from 2 million in 2000—representing 1.8% of global tertiary enrollments. The United States alone hosted 18% of these students (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2014). Between 2012 to 2014, the number of countries hosting international branch campuses increased from 53 to 71 and the number of home countries increased from 24 to 30 with 200 international branch campuses overall (Redden, 2015).

The Capitalistic University

Classism. Wearing the mask of neoliberalism, an authoritarian global economic oligarchy is today thriving as “the incredible concentrations of wealth and power that now exist in the upper echelons of capitalism have not been seen since the 1920s” (Harvey, 2005, p. 119). For example, while the top 1% of U.S. households received 8.9% of all pre-tax income in 1976, they made 22.46% by 2012. Between 1979 and 2012, the top 5% of U.S. families saw their real incomes increase by 74.9% while the lowest 20% witnessed a decrease by 12.1% (Institute for Policy Studies, *Income Inequality*, n.d.). In 2013, the bottom 90% of U.S. families held 25% of all family wealth while the richest 3% held 54%. In the same year, the bottom half of U.S. families owned 0.8% of all financial assets while the top 10% owned 84.5% (Institute for Policy Studies, *Wealth Inequality*, n.d.).

Although today’s university carries in it some shards of neoliberalism sprinkled here and there—a point that we will go back to in the next section of this article—its core substance is nothing but a replication of such a rising new capitalism and its second gilded age. Consciously or not, the new university is inseparable from capitalistic economic stratification and economic classism (Giroux, 2014). So, what are some of the classist tendencies in the new university?

Students’ exploitation. To many students today, higher education is becoming less affordable (Thelin, 2013). Since 1973, the average inflation-adjusted public college tuition has more than tripled while the median household income has barely changed (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2015). The phenomenon of rising tuitions is coupled with a variety of neoliberal deregulating efforts. For example, while the number of merit-based institutional grants at four-year public institutions increased from 8% to 18% between 1995–1996 and 2007–2008, those of need-based only increased from 13% to 16%. The numbers are even more staggering for private, nonprofit four-year institutions with 24% to 44% for merit-based and 43% to 42% for need-based (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Another example of such neoliberal deregulation efforts is the attack on affirmative action policy. The following states already have affirmative action bans in their constitutions or statute books: California (1996), Washington (1998), Florida (1999), Michigan (2006), Nebraska (2008), Colorado (2008), Arizona (2010), New Hampshire (2011), and Oklahoma (2012). In 2014, the Supreme Court upheld Michigan’s ban on affirmative action, opening the door for other states to follow that path (Pew Research Center, 2014).

Rising tuitions and deregulation efforts coupled with selective marketization of some higher tier universities and biased admission

mostly against students of color (Stevens, 2007) means that the cost of the state cuts in higher education is passed on to the nation's most vulnerable students (Center for American Progress, 2014), poor students of color. In 2013, for example, 77% of dependents of the top income quartile families attained a bachelor's degree by age 24. The number was 9% for dependents of bottom income quartile families (Association of American Colleges and Universities, n.d.). Young White adults earn bachelor's degrees at nearly twice the rate of African Americans and nearly three times the rate of Latinos (Education Trust, 2014). Although many students of color have historically referred to part-time work to cover some of their college expenses, such possibility is today more than grim. While in 1980 an undergraduate needed to work 21 hours for 52 weeks to earn enough to cover the average cost of attendance at a four-year public college, the number in 2012 was 61 hours, 21 hours greater than the 40 hours required for a full-time job (Bousquet, 2008).

Two consequences of such difficulties with access to higher education follow. The first is that many students end up either "flooding low tuition, open-access, two- and four-year institutions" (Georgetown Public Policy Institute, 2013) or joining covetous private for-profit diploma mills. While high-risk students (low socio-economic status students, students of color, single parents, and those with poor academic achievement) constituted about 36% of the enrollments in traditional institutions in 2011, the number was 54% in for-profit institutions (Hentschke, 2011). The second consequence is that many students earn their degree with an insupportable amount of debt. The nation's aggregate student loan debt tripled in the past decade to nearly \$1.2 trillion and is now higher than credit card debt (\$700 billion) and the auto loan debt of \$955 billion (Vasquez, 2015). The average graduate leaves school today with nearly \$29,000 in education loans

(Holzer, 2015). While 17% of students in debt are delinquent, only 37% are making regular payments (Education Trust, 2015). While for-profit colleges enroll 13% of the nation's college students, such colleges account for nearly half of all student loan defaults (CNN, 2015). The net effect of such difficulties with access is that the average new university's student does not earn a good quality education and ends up lacking the tools to climb the economic ladder and achieve social mobility, resulting in intensifying, never-ending cycles of economic reproduction. No wonder only 13% of domestic students in the United States whose parents do not have a high school education attain a tertiary degree (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2014).

Other exploitations. Higher education classism is not restricted to students but influences faculty, departments, colleges, universities, local geographies, and even entire countries. Adjunct faculty of today hold "academic McJobs" that "destroy lives [and] breaks the human spirit" (Nelson, 2009, p. 193 and p. 180 respectively). In fact, 25% of part-time college faculty members rely on public assistance for survival. The highest number is 52%, and it is for fast-food workers (University of California Berkeley, 2015). In 2013, Princeton University's tax-exempt status generated more than \$100,000 per full-time equivalent student in taxpayer subsidies, compared to around \$12,000 per student at Rutgers University (the state flagship), \$4,700 per student at the nearby regional Montclair State University, and only \$2,400 per student at Essex Community College (Nexus Research and Policy Center, 2015). Finally, the direct costs of higher education in the United States are the highest among all Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2009).

De-democratization. Capitalistic classism, although tempting and profitable, is precarious to the very being of the capitalist elite. Class is oppressive, a continuous generator of resistance and consequently menace. The oppressed culture upon which capitalism preys should internalize the logic of capitalism and consent to its hegemonic narrative. To ensure hegemony, capitalism promotes its own cultural pedagogy and pedagogical culture (Gramsci, 1971). The primary enemy of hegemony is, of course, a critical democracy that centers a conversation about inquiry, critique, praxis, conflict, power, oppression, politics, ethics, community, and justice (Giroux, 2014).

The role of the U.S. university as a pioneering democratic institution with a democratic vision and mission, and a commitment to the public good, social justice, and cultural critique is nowadays under serious attack (Donoghue, 2008; Schneider & Townsend, 2013). Instead, the new university is an economic bit in an economic machine (Berman, 2012; Hentschke, Lechuga, & Tierney, 2010). John Sperling, founder of the private for-profit University of Phoenix, best captures this economic rather than democratic emphasis: “this is a corporation. . . . Coming here is not a rite of passage. We are not trying to develop [students’] value systems or go in for that ‘expand their minds’ bullshit” (Donoghue, 2008, p. 97).

One way to marginalize democracy in higher education is to deemphasize teaching and researching academic disciplines interested in the art of human togetherness, including critical versions of the humanities and social sciences (Donoghue, 2008). While the number of master’s degrees conferred in the humanities decreased from 14.6% in 1970–1971 to 8% in 2011–2012, that in business increased from 11.2% to 25.4% (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). Even more conservative classical versions of liberal

education and liberal arts are now at the brink (Ferrall 2011; Chopp, Frost, & Weiss 2014). At a federal level, the situation is not better. For example, the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Appropriations recommended that federal funding for the National Endowment for the Humanities be reduced by 49% in the fiscal year 2014 with a comparable cut for the National Endowment for the Arts (Schneider & Townsend, 2013). More recently, and in its budget proposal for the fiscal year 2018, the Trump administration planned the elimination altogether of both agencies (Bowley, 2017).

Another way to trivialize democracy in higher education is to target its democratic structures and processes. The democratic university is antithetical to the current attacks on academic freedom (Schrecker, 2010), the institution of tenure (Baldwin & Chronister, 2001; American Association of University Professors, 2015), faculty governance (Gerber, 2014), professional institutional autonomy (Schugurensky, 2013), and faculty unionization (Flaherty, 2015). It is also antithetical to a rising authoritarian grip of university bureaucrats over curriculum, pedagogy, and research (Ginsberg, 2011; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2009). While the percentage of professional employees per 100 faculty members was 52.4% in 1976, it has risen to 97.3% in 2009 (Center for College Affordability and Productivity, 2012). Perhaps Naomi Schaefer Riley (2010) is illuminating here:

Professors should be given the option at some point early in their careers: Do you want tenure or a higher salary? Do you want tenure or the more expensive health-insurance package? Tenure or a nicer office? Tenure or a better parking space? . . . If you know you’re the type of person who is going to say controversial things, you can opt into the tenure system. But there will be a cost. (p. 312)

Yet a third way to silence democracy in higher education is to open its door to the direct

influence of market forces which control over curriculum, pedagogy, and research has been on the rise (Bok, 2003; Gross, 2011). In 2008, it was discovered that Charles Nemeroff—a leading authority on depression and chair of Emory University’s psychiatry department—had failed to report more than \$800,000 in payments that he had received over six years from the pharmaceutical giant GlaxoSmithKline (American Council of Trustees and Alumni, 2013). In 2014, oil tycoon Harold Hamm, a major private donor of the University of Oklahoma, informed its dean of College of Earth and Energy that he wanted specific scientists who were studying the links between oil and gas activity and the state’s nearly 400-fold increase in earthquakes dismissed (Elgin, 2015). Florida State University has received a \$1.5 million grant from billionaires Charles and David Koch. In exchange, the brothers demanded appointments of free market economics faculty (Cummings, 2014).

Mythification. As discussed earlier, the capitalism of the new university is an antidemocratic ideology that cannot survive without the art of illusionary narratives, narratives that function is the alienation of the cultural actor from her oppressive reality (Giroux, 2014). The new university is then increasingly a master of the craft of grand distortive narratives which purpose is to make sure that higher education produces nothing but “robots, technocrats, and trained workers” (Giroux, 2014, p. 31). Mythical stories told to students about the content and processes of knowledge (curriculum), the possibility of social mobility, the free will of the average cultural actor, the authenticity of existing forms of democratic governance, the unconditional freedom of the rational consumer, the naturalness of amusement (Jacobs, 2014; Newlon, 2014), and the warmth of communities made from bricks of logos, brands, and cheerleaders, are nothing but hegemonic tools of a classist order. “As big money, big

sports, and the culture of illiteracy, violence, and corruption they inspire make clear, schooling is no longer about educating students. Rather, it is about exploiting them when not infantilizing them in the name of entertainment” (Giroux, 2014, p. 124). Of course, the most controlling of these narratives is that the neoliberal potentials of global knowers in a global knowledge economy of limitless possibilities.

Narratives in an Era of Illusions

The cultural history of the United States has always been an arena of ferocious—even though many times silenced—struggle between two competing contradictory cultural currents. The first has embodied radically participative forms of democracy, while the second has drawn from a variety of material and cultural agendas of stratification and subjugation. The body of U.S. history is undistinguishable from this conflict between participation and alienation, voice and silencing, justice and oppression. Although the civil rights movement era has made public and conscious the structural oppressive tendencies in U.S. culture and has made many considerable steps forward, the fight for the spirit of U.S. democracy was not totally won, and the battle is today far from over.

Since the early 1970s, and because of the long-lasting victories made by the civil rights movement, the oppressive agenda in U.S. culture lost its familiar lexicon, one of naturalized racism and classism, as it became more and more “politically incorrect” to celebrate oneself or one’s clique for the variety of existing racial, ethnic, gender, political, national, linguistic, religious, geographical, and economic discriminations. An oppressive public language, through democratic cultural resistance, was more or less lost, and new linguistic carriers of the segregation agenda had to emerge. The elaboration of such linguistic carriers, however, was no easy task; camou-

flagged oppressive language addressed to the masses, many of which are oppressed, cannot afford but to be contradictory. The solution was to detach discourse from reality altogether, centralizing the first with the purpose of camouflaging the second. “The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory—precession of simulacra—that engenders the territory” (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 1). Via the new language of oppression, illusion becomes the new reality, naturalizing oppression as the normal, if not the desirable.

We live, then, in the era of illusions. Grand narratives hide reality, distort perception, and silence voices of the alienated, being an ethnic or racial minority group, an othered gender or sexual identity, a radical democratic political project, a second-language child, a not so familiar religious practice, an inner city “infested” with “ills,” an immigrant, or the unmentionable poor. It is fair enough to argue that these tendencies to cultural illusion have gained great momentum in the current political climate. Such games of illusion are today employed, for example, by the dominant political leadership. They are embodied in unsubstantiated claims (floating signifiers) about the viciousness of total populations of immigrants (Moreno, 2016), the cultural deficiency of entire communities of color (O’Conner & Marans, 2016), the reduction of poverty to an act of individual carelessness (Peck, 2017), the evilness of whole religions and countries (Johnson & Hauslohner, 2017), and the “abnormality” of entire categories of gender and sexuality (Samuels & Johnson, 2017). Such rhetorical games are also manifested in deceptive cultural discourses that naturalize the superiority of a handful of White male elites (Lange, 2017), the suitability of militarization and wars (Blow, 2017), and the justifiability of police force (Rosenthal, 2017). At the heart of these games is the rise of an exclusionary, narrow, and nativist White nationalism

(Struyk, 2017) which extreme intolerance to participative democracy cannot survive without a systematic attack on all foundations of a democratic civil society, including its democratic political institutions (Cillizza, 2017) and mechanisms (Pramuk, 2017), its legal apparatus (Phillips, 2017), its free press and media (Sheehan Perkins, 2017), not to mention its very public (Griffiths, 2017). The purpose of these divisive games of illusion is always unique: to mask the reality of the true historical evils in U.S. culture while at the same time promoting these historical evils’ ontological, epistemological, and axiological projects.

Cultural and traditional values (such as belief in God and country or views on the position of women in society) and fears (of communists, immigrants, strangers, or ‘others’) can be mobilized to mask other realities. Political slogans can be invoked that mask specific strategies beneath vague rhetorical devices. (Harvey 2005, p. 39)

Back to our problem, neoliberalism is the central linguistic carrier of illusion in U.S. higher education. Such a carrier is nothing but an illusionary myth, an anti-scientific ideology (Clarke, 2005) which historical sociopolitical function has always been the coronation of a dominant economic class and the reinstatement of its class supremacy (Harvey, 2005). Although neoliberalism in higher education has always promised freedom, autonomy, agency, choice, rights, privacy, possibility, creativity, success, prosperity, happiness, and a better quality of life, the reality for all but top-ranking universities is strikingly different. It is a reality of ethnic, racial, gender, political, national, linguistic, religious, geographical, and economic hierarchies doomed by exploitation, inequality, dehumanization, immiseration, marginalization, exclusion, social immobility, economic reproduction, hegemony, and never-ending cycles of economic reproduction, let alone the conscious efforts to de/un/mis-educate in the democratic tradition.

Because masking is illusionary, critical unmasking should not only attend to the structural cruelties of capitalism but also deconstruct the illusionary nature of the neoliberal discourse in higher education. Such neoliberal discourse may appear to be illusionary but its occupation of reality is nothing less than actual. The struggle for the spirit of radical democracy should address both the structural macroscopic ills of capitalism and the subjective microscopic embodiment of illusions, including those of neoliberalism. Because the coin has two sides, so should the fight. Such a deconstructive project becomes even more crucial when knowing that an already vulnerable student population in higher education has been on the rise for some time now. The student of today is more likely to be a student of color, come from low economic status, work full time, and study part time. Today's student is also more likely to be financially independent, a family provider, single parent, older, and a first-generation college attendant (Aziz, 2014; Center for Postsecondary and Economic Success, 2015). It is in the critical embodied consciousness of such students that the promise of radical democracy endures. That said, it is also these same students that may be most easily bewitched by the emotive oratories of cruelties.

A Pedagogy of Embodiment

The battle over the body of democracy is at heart educational. Culture is pedagogical and a material of pedagogy. While oppressive versions of cultural education are invested in disciplinary teaching, learning, and authority, more democratic ones are an expression of voice, participation, and improvising. Between the doctrinaire and the palimpsested oscillates the cultural text, a text that is becoming under the new capitalism more positive and alienated from the democratic needs and potentials of the common and their realities.

Reclaiming democratic higher education requires, then, the elaboration of a democratic theory of cultural pedagogy, one of embodiment. Perhaps no thinker in the U.S. intellectual tradition devoted his life to such a project more than did John Dewey. In its generic form, Deweyan pragmatism is the democratic theory of cultural pedagogy par excellence (Dewey, 1916, 1920, 1925, 1927, 1929, 1939; Dewey & Bentley 1949).

In its core, Deweyan cultural pedagogy is a call for a scientific, democratic, public, educational, and critical inquiry into, criticism of, then action on a problematic cultural text resulting in its progressive reconstruction, transformation, and reorganization. This statement is further elaborated below.

Pedagogy is scientific. Like any science, pedagogy is dedicated to the study of nature. Because Dewey equates nature with experience, science becomes the study of human experience. Science is an exercise in phenomenological and hermeneutical cultural investigation that embraces locality, subjectivity, and time/space historicity while rejecting abstracted idealizations. Pedagogy is democratic. Deweyan democracy is pluralistic, participative, and communal (rather than political). It is grounded in a firm belief in human nature and is committed to the authentic growth of every member of society. Democracy is "primarily a mode of [community] associated living, of conjoint communicated experience" (1916, p. 87). It is:

a way of life controlled by a working faith in the possibilities of human nature. Belief in the Common Man is a familiar article in the democratic creed. That belief is without basis and significance save as it means faith in the potentialities of human nature as that nature is exhibited in every human being irrespective of race, color, sex, birth and family, of material or cultural wealth. (1939, p. 226)

Pedagogy is public. Dewey defines the public as “all those who are affected by the indirect consequences of transactions to such an extent that it is deemed necessary to have those consequences systematically cared for” (1927, pp. 15–16). Such an organic understanding of the public is at odds with “reforms which rest simply upon the enactment of law, or the threatening of certain penalties, or upon changes in mechanical or outward arrangements” (1897, p. 93).

Pedagogy is educational. Dewey centers the role of education in the democratic society and sees in it the only path to personal growth and social progress. Such an education is nothing but the continuous intelligent reconstruction, transformation, and reorganization of the social environment by the social actor. The educated is the reconstructive center of society. Human experience and the “curriculum” are one and the same. Otherwise, we end up with disciplines that serve the new capitalism and its projects, disciplines that are “dynamic structures for assembling, channeling, and replicating the social and technical practices essential to the functioning of the political economy and the system of power relations that actualize it” (Lenoir, 1993, p. 72).

Finally, pedagogy is critical. The aim of pragmatist pedagogy is to “take part in correcting unfair privilege and unfair deprivation [rather than] to perpetuate them” (Dewey, 1916, p. 119) and its practice of criticism is “the theory of education in its most general phases” (p. 33). Pedagogy is inseparable from the ethic of care and social justice and the ideal of the public good. It reads a text that is cultural, historical, and philosophical, one that is fused with politics, power, and conflict.

Pedagogy is also transactional, capable of seeing “together, extensionally and, durationally, much that is talked about conventionally as if it were composed of irreconcilable sepa-

rates” (Dewey & Bentley, 1949, p. 69). Finally, pedagogy is naturalistic. It denies the cultural/material dualism that has plagued social theory for so long now because “further advance will require complete abandonment of the customary isolation of the word from the man speaking, and likewise of the word from the thing spoken of or named” (p. 50).

Such a cultural pedagogy of embodiment, I argue, has many advantages when it comes to resisting the neoliberal/capitalistic project in U.S. higher education. Its focus on embodied local experience resists the capitalistic detachment of language from reality. Its radical participative democratic background resists capitalism’s distortion and fragmentation of the public self and of the public. Its centering of intelligence and progress resist capitalism’s monopoly over both. Its far-reaching commitment to experimental praxis resists capitalism’s control over and channeling of human thinking and action. And its instance on the critical reconstruction, transformation, and reorganization of cultural structures and mechanisms and the humanizing of politics, power, and conflict resist capitalism’s attempts to cultural ossification and stratification.

Being cultural rather than technical in substance and orientation, such a pedagogy of embodiment could be used in higher education at a variety of levels and by a variety of stakeholders. It could be used to guide an entire university or its different units in their strategic vision and mission planning; by faculty of higher education teaching and research in their curriculum and pedagogical planning; and by students of higher education teaching and research in their project/inquiry/problem based learning ... and it is the province of these different groups to tailor such a cultural pedagogy to their respective technical needs and environmental sensitivities. Although not the only tool that could be deployed in the resistance of the

oppression of capitalism (e.g., Giroux, 2015), the peculiar advantage of a pedagogy of embodiment is in its continuous insistence that change happens only through experiential action and that action is performable only in the here and now and by specific communities of praxis positioned against specific material realities.

Conclusion

The modern U.S. university is in transition, witnessing radical changes to its very structures, mechanisms, and identity. While few of these changes are reflective of the rhetorical language of economic freedom, liberty, choice, and innate rights used in promoting economic neoliberalism, many others are clear indications of a yet another rising capitalism. The reality of today's U.S. higher education is more and more capitalistic, one of exploitation, de-democratization, and mythification. At the same time, its rhetorical games are more and more of illusions, of fictional stories about neoliberal autonomy, entrepreneurship, and mobility. Neoliberalism as such serves a distortive hegemonic function of classist capitalistic control. As a transparent lexicon of classism became less and less accessible during the civil rights era, it was replaced by empty and distorting linguistic carriers that separate discourse from reality altogether, by hegemonic narratives that promise freedom and choice while at the same time advancing oppressive capitalistic ventures. It is my argument in this article that a genuine democratic project in higher education should take seriously both the nature of such contradiction and the need to dismantle it. A Deweyan pedagogy of embodiment that centers a scientific, democratic, public, educational, and critical inquiry into, criticism of, then action on the problematic cultural text, resulting in its progressive reconstruction, transformation, and reorganization is proposed as one possible theoretical framework for the advancement

of such a democratic project. Whether to entire organizational units, individual faculties, students, or student affairs professionals, the peculiar advantage of such a pedagogy of embodiment is in its continuous insistence that change happens only through experiential action, and that action is performable only in the here and now and by specific communities of praxis positioned against specific material realities. The sign is after all charged with materiality, a materiality that in turn carves the limits and horizons of our individual and collective cultural uttering.

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