

Alternative Higher Education (HE): Discourses in Lifelong Learning (LLL)

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Introduction

In an article published in a UK sociology of education journal, I analysed the EU discourse on Higher Education (henceforth HE) (Mayo 2009) mainly through its policy documents on universities and other tertiary-level institutions. I argued that in this discourse:

A number of key words emerge from these and other related documents, as well as other documents by agencies that dwell on the implications of these policy directions, such as the Council for Industry and Higher Education (Brown 2007) and the League of European Research Universities (LERU 2006). The key words include ‘knowledge economy’, ‘competitiveness’, ‘entrepreneurship’, ‘lifelong learning’, ‘access’, ‘mobility’, ‘outcomes and performance’, ‘quality assurance’, ‘innovation and creativity’, ‘diversification’, ‘privatisation’, ‘internationalisation’, ‘autonomy’ and ‘business-HE relationships’. Once again, the list is not exhaustive but contains the key terminology on which the EU’s HE discourse rests (Mayo 2009, p. 89).

I also argued that the overall tenor of this discourse is that of HE for employability and also spoke about the agenda of industry gaining the upper hand with the emergence of documents geared towards a more structured relationship between universities (important institutions within HE) and business. The paper highlighted the underlying neoliberal tenets of this discourse even though I tried to “tease out the tension that exists in the discourse between neo-liberal tenets and the idea of a Social Europe” (Mayo 2009, p. 87). The latter is a term used by those who point to an alternative way of doing European politics, one which extends beyond Neoliberal market-oriented approaches to include social solidarity measures and safety nets; they often point in

this regard to Europe’s tradition of social welfare programs and more recently the Social Charter.

This Article

In this brief article, I would like to focus on one aspect where this tension is played out, namely the area of University/HE Lifelong Learning (henceforth LLL). By Higher Education, I mean all those institutions and organized forms of learning that occur at tertiary level, that is to say those institutions whose provision extends beyond secondary education and high school. These include universities, academies and vocational colleges that award degrees, diplomas and provide certification of professional attainment. I however focus on those institutions which have potential for furnishing people with further and LLL opportunities outside the mainstream ‘lock-step’ approach. Many of the HE experiments that serve as a radical alternative to the mainstream provide LLL opportunities in that they can attract students who otherwise cannot benefit from full time attendance at an institution of higher learning.

I will start by pointing to the most prominent forms of HE taking place today, focusing on their connections to the market and underscoring the neoliberal tenets that, for the most part, underlie HE practice worldwide. The second part will deal with alternative approaches to HE, including university education, indicating, borrowing from Carl Boggs, the ‘prefigurative’ nature of much of this work (i.e. embodying those practices that constitute the ultimate, long-term vision of a future university or HE institution).

Many of these attempts point to alternative discourses to the generally accepted hegemonic one of a market oriented and Neoliberal LLL approach in HE. This alternative discourse affirms HE as a public good and the need for learning at this level to be accessible to most people irrespective of whether or not they have the wherewithal to benefit from it. It is primarily not learning *for* the economy and the market but learning *to engage critically with* society in general (this of course includes the economy). Much of this alternative

discourse is still in its embryonic form. The institutions that embrace it face major challenges in terms of acceptance and recognition. The article however argues that these pockets of alternative provision offer some indication of the direction struggles for a more democratic approach to HE can continue to take.

Theoretical grounding

Neoliberalism is the socio-economic model which is all pervasive in the current discourse and *modus operandi* of HE institutions worldwide. It is so well documented in the literature that its main features need not be rehearsed in detail here (see Callinicos 2006; Giroux 2014; Rhoads and Torres 2005). A key feature is that of HE serving as a consumption rather than a public good with students and academics seen primarily as ‘clients’ and ‘service providers’ respectively, rather than members of a community of scholarly learners/educators engaging in epistemological co-investigation of objects of inquiry. Paulo Freire’s proposed latter function (1998, p. 35) is reflective of a whole critical discourse in the history of education where education is seen as potentially contributing to the further development of a democratic, critically inquiring public sphere and learners are seen as social actors and not simply producers/consumers. This discourse, conceiving of HE as a public good and as a repository of critical thinking accessible to all, provides the guiding thread for my analysis in this paper.

Implications of the EU HE Discourse for LLL

The EU’s HE discourse has several implications for adult continuing and LLL. The EU’s focus is on the 20/5-65 working age bracket, despite other references to LLL as spanning life ‘from cradle to grave’. The emphasis on work and employability encourages provision of continuing education for the economy’s purposes, and this despite the fact that a person’s ‘employability’ does not necessarily translate into ‘employment’ (Gelpi 2002) or a person’s ‘desired level of employment’ (Brown, Lauder, and Ashton 2010).

Colleges of Further Education providing education beyond that received at secondary school, that is distinguished from University-based HE, are likely to run courses purported to lead to a variety of ‘prospective jobs’, often supported by funding from employers (CEDEFOP 2015). Incentives for this purpose, including tax deductions for investment in employee training, are often provided by governments. Universities, for their part, are more likely to invest in continuing professional education/ development (CPE or CPD) programs, funded by prospective adult

learners. They include those who can afford the fees involved, who take loans for this purpose or who benefit from ‘sponsored mobility’ by their own employers to obtain the qualifications that suit that higher rank in the firm earmarked for them. The added qualifications, say an MBA or DBA, also convey status to the firm that has them on its books.

As for broader domains of learning, this is often governed by the market and by the ability of people, seeking coveted qualifications in say ICT, Management, the Arts and Social Sciences, to pay for courses leading to them. The classic example here would be the University of London’s External degree provision, the prices for which have shot up exponentially since the 80s. These qualifications are often also obtained through a process of ‘sponsored mobility’ for teachers working in different institutions, including colleges of further education. Of course, this consideration does not necessarily apply to all nations. Suffice to mention that the English Open University model has taken root in a variety of places, as has the London External degree model. The former differed from the latter as it traditionally provided a more structured course, with modules and assignments, while the latter was, for years, based solely on the candidate’s performance in a final summative exam, with a possible allowance for one or two papers to be taken in advance. The London system changed considerably in more recent years – modular, college/school/institute-based, branded ‘International Programmes’ and designed to take advantage of recent technological developments. Of course, in the past, many students in the University of London External degree programs enrolled in correspondence programs, provided by independent colleges (e.g. Wolsey Hall, Oxford), that prepared people for these exams –some even attended the odd residential seminar offered by the University of London or by the preparatory independent college itself.

A non-UK institution, UNISA (University of South Africa) that offered external degree courses somewhat on the lines of the old London External Degree model, though more structured, charges what is believed to be reasonably affordable fees. It has a long standing provision of external degree course programs. Nelson Mandela is arguably its most celebrated graduate, having studied for a UNISA external degree when incarcerated on Robben Island (UNISA 2017). He also studied with Wolsey Hall to prepare for his London External LLB degree while also in confinement.

As far as open universities are concerned, a few stand out. We can refer to the 2006 launch of the Open

Universiteit in the Netherlands. We also find Athabasca University in Alberta, Canada, South Africa's UNISA (University of South Africa, established in 2004 as a result of the merger between the old UNISA –from which Mandela graduated - and Technikon Southern Africa with the incorporation of the Vista University Distance Education Campus, Vudec), the Open University of Israel, the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya with its headquarters in Barcelona, the Palestinian Al-Quds Open University (QOU) with its headquarters in Jerusalem/Al-Quds, the Hellenic Open University and more recently the Open University of Cyprus (English and Mayo 2012). This distance learning model, one of many models whereby universities and other HE institutions can provide forms of LLL, testifies to the widespread use of open learning platforms. This effort in reaching people in different localities has come a long way since the days of 'correspondence education'/'home study' (e.g. Wolsey Hall College which, though autonomous, prepared people to take London External degree and other academic bodies' exams) involving conventional snail-mail communication and printed course material with model answers to set questions.(see Fisher 1983, p. 2) The EU and the larger hegemonic discourse of ICT have arguably had their greatest impact on university continuing education in the area of online distance learning.

Access and the Public Sphere

The expenses vary among the different institutions, often to a large extent. The issue of access becomes relevant in this context. One way in which universities can engage in a meaningful process of *access* is by re-conceiving of their role as being there to not simply boost the economy, 'knowledge intensive' or otherwise, but contribute to a regeneration of democracy and the public sphere (Giroux and Giroux 2004). We have recently witnessed the development of MOOCS - Massive Open Online Courses - taking root not only in the USA but now also across Europe and especially the UK. For the moment, much of what passes as MOOCS constitutes a form of open access learning. Certain universities and consortia of universities from different parts of the world place their entire course material online, free of charge. People who sign up for a MOOCS study unit can carry out the various tasks required of course participants and receive feedback. For the moment and in the majority of cases, they are barred from receiving the official university credit that can result in a degree. Some universities provide the option of obtaining an official testimonial of the course undertaken (edx (a) 2017) - a certificate - against a nominal charge (edx (b)

2017). This form of provision appears *prima facie* to be a way for the university or institution concerned to contribute to the public sphere. It appears laudable from an 'access to knowledge' perspective, a form of 'socialization of the means of knowledge production' (Livingstone 2013, pp. 51-52), if you will. It remains to be seen what trajectory this type of provision will take in future – simply 'testing the waters' in the marketplace of knowledge dissemination and acquisition? The jury is still out on this.

Alternative Models of HE as a Public Good

As far as HE as a public good is concerned, much will depend on the nature of the institution concerned. There will always be those politically committed institutions or consortia of such institutions that seek to retain vestiges of university continuing education as a public good. In short, they would prioritize access for those not expected to form part of the traditional constituency for universities. Social class is an important factor in this thinking. Today one also broadens the profile to include people for whom traditional university settings can be disabling or people of an ethnic orientation and culture different from those of mainstream students.

One would expect the public good factor to feature prominently in the work of the Global Labour University (global-labour-university.org), with the International Labour Organisation (ILO) among its institutional consortium members. It involves universities working in tandem with trade unions. A consortium of this type would be expected to strive to retain the notion of a workers' education program in the tradition of those programs which once represented, in the UK and elsewhere, the best of adult education in its democratic extension mission. This is the tradition associated with the likes of R.H. Tawney, Raymond Williams (McIlroy and Westwood 1993) and E.P. Thompson. This tradition is associated with Ruskin College, Plater College, the Plebs League (Waugh 2009) and the Oxford Delegacy for Extra-Mural Studies. One can also mention, in this context, what Sharp *et al* call the "Repressed historical tradition of independent working class education" (Sharp, Hartwig and O'Leary 1989; Simon 1992; Waugh 2009).

Engaging with Wider Communities

In this respect and in keeping with the EU's promotion of the concept of 'active citizenship', not one in which the individual is reduced to the intertwined roles of producer-consumer reminiscent of Marcuse's one dimensional citizen (Marcuse 1964),

we require institutions that support the efforts of those who have traditionally been swimming against the current. They have been doing so by seeking ways and means of extending their roles as educators outside the university. They seek to build alliances with activists and popular educators in the wider communities, among youth, children and adults, doing such work against all odds and in the face of much risk. Alas, the recurring complaint is that this type of community involvement is rarely rewarded in conventional department reviews, despite the fact that ‘contribution to the community’ is listed as one of the criteria for promotions in a number of universities.

HE, Universities and Social Movements

We often come across attempts by academics to engage the academy in popular education, to forge partnerships with grassroots activists, as evident in the Ontario-based projects, NALL (New Approaches to Lifelong Learning) and subsequently WALL (Work and Lifelong Learning) or PEN (the Popular Education Network), coordinated from Edinburgh. They involve engaging the academy in communities, including, in the Ontario case, engaging in communities of workplace learners in different sectors of the economy (wallnetwork 2017). These and other initiatives in various parts of the globe can provide signposts for future directions that a truly vibrant HE institution can take. See for example attempts at forging links with social movements and other social organizations. This is the sort of link augured by Boaventura de Sousa Santos when providing the proposals on which the Popular University of Social Movements was set up at the World Social Forum in 2003. The UPMS, a collective asset, holds workshops, preferably of a couple of days involving discussions, study and reflection periods and relaxation activities (Alice 2017). One classic example is the MST (Movimento Trabalhadores Rurais sem Terra [Landless Peasants Movement]) and especially the school it supports, the Florestan Fernandez School in Brazil, named after a working class sociologist (Mayo and Vittoria 2017, pp. 93-95). It is recognized, by the Brazilian government, as a school with levels of learning equivalent to those of a University. It remains to be seen, however, whether, as a result of the impeachment of President Dilma Youssef, in what has been perceived as an indirect ‘coup’, we shall witness the withdrawal of this recognition, given the Brazilian Right’s opposition to the MST.

In these most innovative of institutions, one finds parallels with other grassroots experiments in HE emanating from such movements as the Occupy Movement in the USA (Piven 2012) and Europe or

protestors in Turkey (Gezi Park), Greece and Italy who set up university tents and itinerant libraries. These provide a taste of what an alternative, popular higher education would look like. Other initiatives include the Global Centre for Advanced Studies (GCAS) (globalcenterforadvancedstudies.org) founded by Creston Davis (critical-theory.com 2017) and which includes established academics/cultural workers such as Alain Badiou, Oliver Stone, Gayatri Spivak and Antonio Negri. This institution carries out its seminars in a variety of countries, including France (Paris) and Cuba. It seeks to bridge the gap between theory and action by working with activists in connection with such movements and parties as *Podemos*, the latter founded in Spain in the aftermath of the 15-M/ *¡Democracia-Real Ya!* demonstrations.

Eschewing Nostalgia for the Humboldtian Model

Most of this work can be regarded as providing an alternative to the Neoliberal University. When confronting the Neoliberal University people often nostalgically lapse into exalting some ‘golden age’, including that in which the Humboldtian idea of the Prussian/German University was raised. One would pose the question of whether, for all its virtues, the old, often-evoked Humboldtian concept of the university remains relevant. Aside from its elitism, this concept was purported to serve a society that has changed significantly since the time when the idea was conceived. This in a way recalls Gramsci’s ‘epitaph’ to the old, Italian classical school which was once effective but could not continue to be so in his time since the society it was meant to serve had changed by then (Manacorda 1970). What form this newly required university institution takes depends on the political values and orientation to knowledge production and dissemination that underlie the concept being carried forward. The hegemonic market-oriented EU discourse in HE is being met with resistance. Some of this resistance can be found within the neoliberal institutions themselves. This lends credence to the gramscian view that hegemonic institutions contain, within their interstices, the spaces in which the relations involved can be challenged and renegotiated. As Foucault argues, the resistances are not external to the power structures in place.

One finds resistance in the experiments of bringing together world renowned intellectuals, academics and cultural workers in institutions making degrees available to persons who cannot afford high quality university education on a full-time basis. These institutions cover areas of knowledge not easily associated with ‘instrumental learning’, that is learning for the economy. Let us take, for instance, the

European Graduate School, a not-for-profit degree granting institution in the Social Sciences and Humanities charging moderate fees and which has just received EU-wide accreditation through Malta's National Council for Further and Higher Education. Students, many in full time employment, meet in one of its two campuses (Saas Fe, Switzerland and Valletta, Malta) for intensive two week periods working with such high caliber academics, artists and directors as Judith Butler, Slavoj Žižek, Jean-Luc Nancy, Margerethe Von Trotta and Giorgio Agamben. They do this in addition to writing research papers and working for a much longer period on their dissertations at MA and PhD levels. The Global Centre for Advanced Studies (GCAS) also seeks to depart from conventional university modes of operation. It has its degrees accredited by the Bologna Accords (Europe) through the Institutum Studiorum Humanitatis (ISH) and Alma Mater Europaea-ECM.

The Cooperative Institute for Transnational Studies (CITS) (coop-its.org 2017) is another institution pursuing a non-conventional approach to LLL in HE. It is a cooperative, where one member has one vote in the decision-making. It is creating higher education as the commons, neither public/state funded not private, but self-run. It was founded by Greek scholar and activist, Maria Nikolakaki, Professor at the University of Peloponnese, Greece, formerly of GCAS, and features such scholars and academics as Jacques Ranciere, Etienne Balibar, Tariq Ali, John Holloway, Raquel Gutierrez and Peter McLaren.

CITS collaborates with institutions such as the Autonomous University of Puebla, Mexico, for accreditation, and the California Institute of Integral Studies, Mexico Solidarity Network, the Social Sciences Centre at Lincoln (UK) and the Universidad De Tierra en Oaxaca for its projects. This, especially the Oaxaca connection, indicates the urge for these types of alternative institutions to collaborate with social movement activists from all over the world. In fact, the issue of collaborations and the partner institutions involved constitutes a bone of contention within these alternative agencies for continuing education and LLL. This has, at least in one instance, led to a fall out, with a group leaving the institution to set up another on the grounds that the first institution strayed from its original goals.

With no fees charged and no formal distinction drawn between students and staff, the Social Sciences Centre in Lincoln, England provides a radical alternative to the widespread marketization of higher education. Lying at the heart of the city, it is housed in local county council premises, as indicated in an

interview with one of its key animators, Mike Neary (opendemocracy 2017).

Many of the above initiatives are born out of dissatisfaction with the way universities have been developing in the USA and Europe over the years, especially their neoliberalisation. Needless to say, these resistances and re-conceptualizations meet with countless obstacles when it comes to recognition of qualifications and funding. We have grown accustomed to seeing a negative reaction 'from above' to anything highly innovative coming especially from the grassroots. These alternative projects are striking at the foundations of institutions that have, for the most part, been conveying privilege. Those who unlearn and give up privilege freely are few and far between. However, the establishment and general recognition of a radical social-justice oriented HE institution or university requires a 'long revolution', to borrow the term coined for wider usage by Raymond Williams (Williams 1961). It is the revolution to which the GCAS, CITS, UPMS, MST (Florestan Fernandez School) and Lincoln projects aspire and contribute. The same holds for those setting up Tent University in London and Tent State University (a movement in the USA and Britain) when occupying squares and streets, reclaiming them as public spaces (Earl 2016). These types of alternative HE agencies focus on collective learning and activism, captured in CITS' slogan 'Occupy Knowledge'.

This revolution engages those educators, working inside and outside the academy (tactically inside and strategically outside?), who act beyond the traditionally perceived boundaries of their work, culture and social location to join forces with others (on whose terms?) in the quest for a substantive democracy.

Teaching and research

To return to my 2009 paper, I argued that such a democracy would be ill served by an HE discourse seeking to separate teaching from research, thus denying possibilities for *praxis*. This separation was suggested in certain EU circles (the separation between research universities and teaching universities) (CEC 2006). This discourse leads to the occasional vice-chancellor, in a university with a strong community extension tradition, urging students, administrators and academics, to think 'outside their country' and reach out to the world (read: see themselves as part of an institution aiming to be a 'world university', the much coveted modern day 'world class' university).

This is the direction the current EU HE discourse seems to be taking, as the university seems to have found itself at a crossroads. It sought change from the

'old ideal', popularly denigrated as that of the 'ivory tower', and chose the market oriented one, albeit tempered by some social-democratic concerns. Several of the above initiatives, certainly the more progressive ones, many in their embryonic stage, are born out of dissatisfaction with this choice. They provide an alternative which exalts criticality in education. They privilege accessibility - one's being able to further one's education without having to abandon full-time waged work at the same time. One is allowed to do so at a very affordable nominal charge by institutions whose main concern is to foster the advancement of knowledge and not serve as money-making devices to strengthen the economy. These institutions' concept of knowledge is broad enough to embrace concerns with developing not simply the economy but a healthy democratically-inclusive environment. That these pockets of alternative approaches exist has just been documented. That they are not mainstream approaches indicates that they prefigure a university not as it is but as it can and, depending on one's values, should be – a plausible alternative to the neoliberal paradigm. At the moment, this constitutes marginalized and at times 'subaltern' HE work serving for the most part as sources of LLL for those who cannot access full time study. In their accessibility and alternative way of doing things, they constitute a subaltern form of LLL that prefigures what can prove to be the democratic university of the future.

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