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The Social Market Model and Higher Education: The Survival of the Richest

by Jim McKernan

Abstract

This article addresses the increasing encroachment of technical rationality in higher education, in the form of the Social Market Model (SMM) ideology. Such a situation is leading to an erosion of liberal education values and has resulted in a consumption production technology which treats colleges as production units. This assault on academic rationalism has also favored the most privileged with scarce scholarship awards given that the higher the socio-economic status of students and their families the higher the academic achievement leading as it does to the ultimate "survival of the richest" in North American educational settings.

Education is regarded by the purveyors of Neoliberalism and the new social economic order as a product or commodity, defined by pre-specified performances as a public service within the social market model of value on both the political right and left. Technical rationality advocates an instrumental ends-means production/consumption role for higher education. This can be seen by the increasing managerial argot of administrators; outcome-based evaluation schemes and the unrelenting focus of colleges on behavioral targets, student competencies and standards. Students are produced yet supply lags behind demand. Not only is it desired that students reach specified standards it is mandated that this be done for the lowest cost in resources. On the left, even critical thinkers like Pierre Bourdieu have conceptualized education as a form of "cultural capital". Characteristic of the social market model (SMM) has been an obsession with performance indicators-time series data that record and reflect changes about the efficiency and effectiveness of a system. In public education, the testing of students has been an expensive manifestation of this policy. Two points need to be made about the SMM and testing. First, high stakes testing is not about improving student performance it is about holding systems and teachers accountable to economic and political policy decisions. Secondly, since achievement correlates positively with social class then the likely effect of performance data is to give more resources to those who have more already resulting in a "survival of the richest" effect.

As Stanley Aronowitz points out, the Bush administration has made Neoliberal ideology the cornerstone of its program and has been in the forefront in actively supporting and implementing the following policies:

[D]eregulation of business at all levels of enterprises and trade; tax reduction for wealthy individuals and corporations; the revival of the near-dormant nuclear energy industry; limitations and abrogation of labor's right to organize and bargain collectively; a land policy favoring commercial and industrial development at the expense of conservation and other pro environment policies; elimination of income support to the chronically unemployed; reduced federal aid to education and health; privatization of the main federal pension programs, Social Security; limitation on the right of aggrieved individuals to sue employers and corporations who provide services; in addition, as social programs are reduced, [Republicans] are joined by the Democrats in favoring increases in the repressive functions of the state, expressed in the dubious drug wars in the name of fighting crime, more funds for surveillance of ordinary citizens, and the expansion of the federal and local police forces. (Aronowitz, 2003, p.33)

During the past three decades Neoliberalists have lobbied and successfully socialized policymakers into an ideology which treats schools and colleges and their results as a social market mechanism. Inputs and outputs, efficiency, exam scores as social indicators of educational health, quality and excellence have been catchwords in this managerial argot which has threatened the very conception of true education. It is a "bottom-line" perspective with an eye on productivity and costs. Interestingly, costs in education have risen some three hundred percent in the last twenty years in spite of this efficiency paradigm and correspondingly it has been found that the costs of higher education administration have also increased three hundred percent. There is a crucial sense in which more is being asked of more educators with fewer resources. Each semester our classes grow larger, more pressure to go online is evident (which saves presumably on electricity, heating and plant usage) — I was reminded of this when a recently retired colleague, Professor X, informed me that since recent retirement he was in fact carrying a heavier workload-writing books, doctoral supervision unfinished, and all for no salary-my friend reckoned that the "Bush-lite" proprietors perhaps count on such patriotism to help the bottom-line. It's like Eric Hoffer's, (the stevedore-philosopher) remark that he would wake up tired from such heavy work in his dreams: loading ships, writing books — it's all more for less. Yet the idea of the student and educator as consumers is built into the national capitalist psyche. From this SMM ideology it is assumed that services like public education are production and consumption systems just like Ford Motor Company. That is that Schools are units of "production". This is not a new notion idea as the school as a factory was evident in experimentation in the early 20th century — to wit the Horace Mann school in Gary Indiana (Callahan, 1962) .

The Social Market Model (SMM) also has heavy investment in Behaviorism as a theoretical base. This confidence is regrettably

misplaced as behaviorism has largely been discredited as a way forward in Psychology and the Human Sciences [awkward sentence; perhaps missing punctuation]. Behavioral outcomes are seen as the acid test as the targets of the education system. In research on social class and student performance in all nations since the middle of the 20th century the results show that the higher one's SES position the higher the achievement. Giving these students special rewards, scholarships and investment in their education clearly produces the net effect that the rich are the benefactors of public resources more so than the poor. This model applies the production and consumption systems of the West to the social realm of public services, notably the education sector (Elliott, 1993). Behaviorism is vital as it specifies the outcomes in neat pre-determined intentions in the form of intended learning outcomes. From a market mentality schools are producers of products (students) and in this endeavor teacher educators have now come under the surveillance of entrepreneurs and policymakers. To wit, initiatives that have promised higher productivity in the form of corporations and stock market companies that have taken over whole public school systems" in places like Baltimore, New Haven, Connecticut, Chicago and elsewhere. I would also add without much success. The upshot for Colleges of Education is that teacher education is becoming an area for free market enterprise and competition from external university sources and agencies. One side of this is the transference of traditional teacher education activities to staff in capitalist corporate entities and to schools. Secondly, university faculty are perceived as technical experts and operatives who impart their expertise to schools dressed up in positive terms like "collaboration" and University school partnerships. The rising number of "fixed term contracted" faculty is one indicator of this trend. Faculty are asked each semester to account for productivity in terms of indexes like the number of articles and books published; the number of classes and FTEs; all a "numbers game" in which traditions like tenure become casualties of economic and education policies. In North Carolina, the term "tenure" has disappeared from the lexicon in K-12 public schools in educational law (The 1997 Excellent Teachers Act) with the new term "career teacher" replacing it. In higher education only a handful of states have implemented "peer review" (including NC) which means effectively that one cannot hold "tenure" for more than five years without undergoing renewal. These are all attacks on the traditional privileges held by educators and faculty.

In the UK the attack on education by Conservatives has received expression in the form of a scheme of Teacher License that requires, since the 1988 Great Education Reform Bill, of two years of school-based on the job "training" as a criterion of entry to teaching. This on the job training is seen as a practical response to the view that teacher education has become too "theoretical". Conservatives argue that standards are low because of "progressive theory" contamination. In fact, government seems to attribute great influence to a particular theory that is "progressive" or critical in nature. Currently teacher educators with a methodological expertise must

spend sixty per cent of their time in practical school based training. Educational theory is taking an awful whipping worldwide. The downside is a disrespect for phronesis, or theoretical knowledge placed into action in settings, and an uplifting of "techne"; a complete reversal of the Grecian ideals with a premium being placed on training needs and little room left in the equation for the self-thinking autonomous student or educator. This technical rationality must be combated and resisted.

Some of the more worrisome trends include:

1. A corporate value structure and language which exalts concepts like quality, competencies, performance indicators, inputs/outputs, feedback etc.
2. The pre-specification of targets in behavioral terms measured by standards called "performance indicators".
3. The school and college of education as a "production unit"
4. The recognition of the relationships between student and teacher/school and culture as a producer/consumer economy
5. The loss of traditional academic rights to tenure through concepts like "peer review" and the increasing number of fixed term appointments in higher education
6. The reliance on IT to solve problems of knowledge and teaching and the erosion of the relationship of tutor and student through online distance education.
7. The trend towards core state curricula which treats curriculum as "teacher proof" and teachers as functionaries in a bureaucracy leaving little room for autonomous decision making and curriculum development.

Above all else, the Social Market Model is in opposition to a liberal education, which has historically been the cornerstone of a valued college education. It is premised on the belief that the education system provides a function: the production of workers and that it's very self is subject to servicing and needs assessment. This rather vocational view has been evident in national reports of the past quarter century. On this view it is only a short leap to seeing Colleges of Education as mere agencies among many supplying the training needs of initial and in-service students.

Quality education in my view means learning something in some depth so that a student can proceed further in his/her own growth. It is this freedom to learn in an unfettered way, which is the goal of education: Taking the old Silver Latin definition of the word education from the Latin "educere" meaning "to lead out from ignorance". This is quite different from training, or skills and competencies and instructional definitions. It also implies that "quality" is related to the constructivist nature of independent learning that it is so desired the student pursue. Mary Warnock, the English philosopher of education has remarked that "quality" in education is, measured by the degree to which the imagination is fired" (Peters, 1973)

If a student's imagination is fired and he/she shows some great desire and competence in a subject specialization this should not be postponed until his/her third year at university. Our system in the USA does not permit specialization at the secondary or even at the first two years of the tertiary level. Perhaps it should. Yet such a free and open debate about the merits and demerits of the conflict between the traditional autonomous professional rationalist educator and the contrasting social market model functionary educator will not be possible in our society when these policies are established by edict by political hacks in both Ottawa, Washington and in our State Legislatures.

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Jim McKernan is Professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction, East Carolina University, Greenville NC 27858 email mckernanj@mail.ecu.edu

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