

# Neoliberal fatalism and the corporatisation of higher education in South Africa.

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*ΔAnyone who is capable of love must at some time have wanted the world to be a better place, for we all want our loved ones to live free of suffering, injustice and heartbreakΥUtopian ideas withΥ Δtheir imaginative excitement comes from the recognition that everything inside our heads, and much outside, are human constructs and can be changed@*

John

Carey

1. In a most recent debate (February, 2005) on *Safm*, Trevor Manuel, Minister of Finance, captured what seems to have become government=s increasing neoliberal attack on all public institutions. Manuel, in a debate about public health institutions, stated that these currently non-commodified or non-commercialised spaces are in need of proper management systems in order to improve their *efficiency* and *effectiveness*. According to Manuel, the solution to the miserable state of public institutions is the deployment of a new breed of managerial types who could convert these non-commodified spaces into sites that better >service= the needs of >clients= in the most ‘cost-effective’ wayB communicated in a language which has become the standard form being used by government officials when dealing with the public. All this, is part of the ongoing restructuring of state-run public spaces and part of the ongoing ‘transformation’ project of the second decade of democracy B an era of mergers and acquisitions. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), like most other public spaces cannot escape the onslaught of neoliberal militancy that claims to provide the revolutionary solutions to social problems in a country still heavily stained with the deeply rooted legacies of apartheid. Higher education (HE) is disintegrating into a crisis of its own and this is reflected in the recent funding cuts, student protests at many HEIs over the last few weeks, mergers and the new corporate-led managerialism being forced upon academics who have now become the generation of suspects, alongside teachers, policemen and nurses.
2. This paper focuses on the transformation of HEIs in South Africa within a broader discussion of neoliberal fatalism and argues that these institutions as non-commodified spaces are being transformed according to the dreams of global market utopia - TINA (ΔThere Is No Alternative@). I suggest that these institutions need to be protected as spaces which represent the values of a substantive democracy and sites of struggles for education as a public good. I further suggest that HEIs remain critical public spaces which provide citizens with knowledge, skills and ethical responsibility essential for active participation characteristic of an inclusive democracy. I believe that academics (like teachers) constitute a critical group of people in any society engaged in pedagogical practices in pursuit of social justice, freedom, democracy and citizenship B an invaluable practice under threat. I, however, point out that the ‘transformation’ project of government launches a vicious attack on HEIs as non-commodified spaces and intends to corporatise them, as part of an intensification of neoliberal fatalism which precipitates

current crises. I point out some of the dangerous implications of this corporatisation process. I conclude that we might be 'conditioned but not determined' (Freire, 1998) and that there are indeed alternative visions, hopes and aspirations of a truly South African democracy. These, I suggest require greater political agency and intervention from organic intellectuals, educators, activists, students, civil society as well as the development of a critical consciousness amongst all South Africa citizens.

3. The education system has been under coldlight scrutiny and attracts widespread and ongoing reactions. Many of our public educational institutions are increasingly viewed as complete failures and are largely being abandoned and left to their own demise. Poorly trained and paid educators, a decline in 'functional literacy', a loss of standards and discipline, the failure to teach well and teaching 'real knowledge' and economically useful skills, poor scores on standardised tests and more 'these are charges levelled at educational institutions including non-formal education settings within civil society' (Apple, 2002). And all of these, we are made to believe, have contributed to declining economic productivity, unemployment, poverty, a loss of international competitiveness, crime, and so on. In order to change all of these we need to reinvent ourselves and make our institutions more effective, more responsive to the economy and the demands of Multi National Corporations (MNCs) and our problems will be solved. There is increasingly less trust and faith in the public education system and educators, be they in schools or universities, have become a generation of suspects alongside our youth (Giroux, 2001). Behind all of these charges is an attack on egalitarian norms, values and ideals. Education, formal and non-formal, is increasingly being packaged according to qualifications, delivered through prepackaged curricula based on predetermined outcomes, and integrated within the economic agenda -- an integration framed within a discourse of improving competitiveness, jobs, standards, and quality. Neoliberal education policy, according to McLaren (2003), operates from the premise that education is primarily a sub-sector of the economy. This attack, however, is not only about the economy; it is also about cultural struggles and struggles over race, gender, sexuality which coincides with class alliance and class power (Apple, 2002). Education therefore remains a site of struggle and compromise. It is an arena in which resources, power, and ideology specific to policy, finance, curriculum, pedagogy, and evaluation in education are worked through. Education is both cause and effect, determining and determined. A complex site marked by major tensions, contradictions and struggles (Apple, 2002).
4. This neoliberal attack, informed by the new global market utopia, assaults all public spaces and wants us to believe that what is *private is good* and what is *public is necessarily bad*. The neoliberal project embraces economic rationality and celebrates the idea that learners and workers should be given the requisite forms of knowledge, skills and dispositions to compete efficiently and effectively in a ruthless global economy. A vicious onslaught on public spaces is deepening and all public spaces, be they health or education are viewed as 'black holes' into which money is poured. These spaces are sucking the financial life out of society and should therefore not be supported (Apple, 2002). More resources will have little effect on schools largely inhabited by the poor, as they lack basic resources, are housed in dilapidating buildings with dysfunctional plumbing and electricity, overcrowded classrooms and poorly paid teachers which have no bearing on how teachers teach and children learn (Giroux, 2001: 231). Instead, the

solution to this wastage is to convert all things public to private or hand them over to the market which could best serve the needs and demands of consumers.

5. This global market utopia paints a particular image of society and portrays itself as the *only* imaginable vision of society informed by a standard set of truths everyone is expected to believe. (George, 2004: 9). Neoliberalism, which is an integral part of this vision, glorifies a corporate-led economic doctrine that evangelically embraces economic democracy, pro-free trade, anti-trade unions, anti-human rights, competition, rapacious capitalism, consumerism, privatisation, the rejection of governments and so forth. Neoliberalism, as the most dangerous ideology and most brutal form of market capitalism of our times, reorganises society according to the politics of markets and corporations and rejects equity, redress, social justice and civic responsibility which underpin the values of an inclusive democracy. Public spaces are militarised and looted for profits - indigenous vegetation is destroyed to build golf-courses for the rich; the environment is polluted and defiled for profit-making; public services are decimated and considered inferior and undesirable; the quality of public education is being lowered to suppress the development of critical consciousness; educators are deskilled through the implementation of assessment regimes and student surveillance mechanisms; schools more closely resemble jails or shopping centres through the adoption of market models - cake sales have been replaced by entrepreneurial day; educators are pressured to become salespersons, hawkers and fundraisers and must sell more programmes to increase student numbers; universities become malls for the upper-class where the merchandise is out of reach for poor, black and historically disadvantaged youth; the media succumbs to the interests of corporations through inculcating a consumerist consciousness (we are bombarded with advertisements and particular kinds of programmes, many targeting the young, to inculcate a consumerist consciousness and values that embrace and celebrate the global market utopia); government legislation is increasingly couched in ways that favour liberalisation in favour of big business (Giroux, 2005: 2). The global market utopia and the pragmatic neoliberal thinkers (or right-wing Gramscians as described by Susan George) that advance these "ethics" tell us that the only form of democracy that must be valued is economic democracy which redefines citizenship as consumership and where the rights of the consumer replace the rights of the citizen.
6. A frightening and most disturbing aspect of the neoliberal ideology is the depoliticisation, privatisation and criminalisation of social problems. In a country where poverty, under-education, unemployment and disease are deepening, citizens are being blamed for these historic and deeply rooted social problems. Poverty, unemployment, homelessness and even disease are becoming private problems for which those, who are experiencing them, must be punished. Large numbers of people looking for jobs, shelter and food are arrested and kept in overcrowded prisons (South African jails are overcrowded, whilst at the same time, we are seeing the emergence of private prisons as yet another opportunity for the entrepreneur!). Unemployment and governments obsession with blaming the 60% unskilled labour force and the 40% unemployed for their situations (including the growing number of unemployed youth and more than 5,000 unemployed graduates) is a typical example. Many South Africans are made to believe that they should not only accept unemployment as a *fatalistic inevitability*, but that they are *deficient* and *inadequate* and thus responsible for their own undereducation and unemployment. Even those who do

have employment are made to feel that they are incompetent and also in need of “upskilling” (Baatjes & Mathe, 2004). It only takes a brief look at the current job market to see the reality. Neoliberals attach so much value to the connection between markets and education, yet it would appear that most jobs that become available do not really require such high levels of education at all. The paid labour market will increasingly be dominated by low-paying, repetitive work in retail, trade and the service sector (think of Thabo at MacDonalds serving BigMacs and who only needs basic reading skills to read the labels on the till which also tells him the amount of change he has to give). The sectors that seem to attract most of the labour include personal care, home health care, social workers (many of whom are now facing unemployment due to cutbacks in social spending), hotel and lodging, restaurant employees, transportation workers, and business and clerical personnel. We are more likely to see an increase in jobs for retail salespersons, cashiers, office clerks, truck drivers, waitrons, nursing aides, food preparation workers and janitors. The majority of these positions obviously do not require high levels of education. Many of them are low-paid, temporary, nonunionized, part-time, with low or no benefits. And many are dramatically linked to, and often exacerbate the existing race, gender and class divisions. This is the emerging economy we face, not the overly romantic picture painted by neoliberals and *rightwing intellectuals* who urge us to trust and have great faith in the market. In fact, I am astonished by intelligent people who believe that the purpose of a neoliberal capitalist economy is to create and provide jobs. On the contrary, the capitalist economy (in the case of South Africa growing at more than 5%) is to reap profits and to increase shareholder value. Even when corporations are making huge profits they still retrench people (George, 2004; Rifkin, 1995). According to George, as far as the market is concerned, people are not human beings with names and families but labour or human resources counted on the company books as costs, not assets (George, 2004:71). Unemployment, like many other social problems, should not be seen as a private matter or a fatalistic inevitability, but rather a result of economic globalisation, scientific and technological advances that lack a form of *ethics* that serves the interests of human beings and the unfettered greed of the powerful minority who control the world today (Freire, 1997:116).

7. The fatalism of neoliberalism (see Chang & Grabel, 2004; Bello, 2002; De Rivero, 2001; Shutt, 2001 for discussions about the failure of neoliberalism) has now been extended to higher education institutions in South Africa and we are told that HEIs have no choice but to transform in order for the country to compete in the ruthless global economy. In other words, HEIs must submit to the same *neoliberal dystopia* that celebrates wealth, privilege, and greed and rejects struggles for economic justice, freedom, substantive democracy and equality! Freire (1998) in his abhorrence, condemnation of and anger towards neoliberalism captures eloquently the hope and dystopia of the neoliberal class and the importance of recognising that human beings are not determined but creators of history. Freire writes:

It seems that there is now a global tendency to accept the crucial implications of the New World Order as natural and inevitable ... that third world children suffering from acute diarrhoea ought not to be saved because we would only prolong lives destined for misery and suffering...

There are times when I fear that someone reading this, even if not yet totally converted to neoliberal pragmatism but perhaps somewhat contaminated by it, may think that there is no more place among us for the dreamer and the believer in utopia. Yet what I have been saying up to now is not the stuff of inconsequential dreamers. It has to do with the very nature of men and women as makers and dreamers of history and not simply as casualties of an a priori vision of the world... It means that we know ourselves to be *conditioned* but not *determined*. It means recognising that History is time filled with possibility and not inexorably determined - that the future is problematic and not already decided, fatalistically.

The fatalism of neoliberalism assaults universities as institutions engaged in dialogue, education and learning and concerned with social responsibility, the demands for public participation and democratic citizenship. Universities, which have been left untouched for the last few years are suddenly being thrown into crises as a consequence of mergers and acquisitions, student protests, increasing unhappiness amongst academics – all part of the reorganisation of capital-in-crisis in South African society visible in many people's struggles with municipalities about housing, evictions, water and electricity cuts and a variety of other struggles including privatisation, environmental issues and health – and an ongoing struggle about The Commons. The emergence and incredible growth of new social movements that expose the misery, human suffering, exploitation and ecological violence resultant from rapacious capitalist desires and the neoliberal dystopia bear testimony to the broader crises and the struggle for non-commodified public spaces, broader human values central to democratic civic culture and the need for public voices and social agency. HEIs are increasingly being viewed as 'inefficient' and 'ineffective' and in need of total overhauls because they fail, like public schools, technical colleges to help build useful human capital for competition in the local and global economies. The problem is directly related to the way universities are run, their failure to teach "useful knowledge", and that corporate models and corporate culture must be installed to make them more credible and accountable. Therefore, HEIs are under considerable pressure to run like businesses in order to provide better services to their clients. What follows is a summary of the implications of the neoliberal take-over of HEIs and a few suggestions and arguments in defence of HEIs as spaces to be protected in the interests of the public and the values that HEIs represent.

- (a) ***New managerialism***: HEIs, in light of market-drive notions of competition, privatisation and consumption must adopt corporate models of management in order to reduce costs and maximise profits. Public HEIs are regarded as wasteful and can only be rescued through new forms of managerialism and corporate culture that can improve efficiency and effectiveness. A new breed of technical experts with backgrounds in management and efficiency techniques and professional support for accountability, measurement, product control and assessment are deployed or used as consultants to advise top-management of HEIs. According to Apple (2002) these managerial intellectuals do not only bring with them business models of systems management and control, but also merge

the language of empowerment, rational choice, efficient organisation and the new roles of management skilfully. It should therefore not come as a surprise if business people become the future principals of HEIs. An MBA might become an absolute requirement for the position of future principals and deans of faculties. With the appointment of these new super-managers come huge salary packages which are typical of the upward distribution of wealth which characterises neoliberalism.

- (b) **Advisory faculty boards:** Faculty boards which historically provided an important forum for discussion about the cultural and technical aspects and where important decisions about a variety of institutional decisions could be discussed, will be reduced to advisory structures and stripped of any substantive discussion and decision-making. Decisions in mergers and acquisitions, are made, often unilaterally and passed down to faculty and staff for implementation without the need for critical engagement, analysis and critique. Cost-based analysis will increasingly become the tool to be used by management and faculty boards to justify the need for programmes, projects and research.
- (c) **Vocationalisation of curriculum:** The curricula in HEIs will be under constant monitoring and review in order to check its responsiveness to the needs of the economy and the demands of corporations. Demand-led curricula are in vogue and their instrumentalisation or technicisation is on the rise. University deans will have to establish good relationships with business partners and develop curricula tailored to the needs of corporate interests. With the technicisation of curricula, academics are slowly beginning to lose control and autonomy over their own work. This is largely a result of curriculum construction based on outcomes which often not owned= by the academic.
- (d) **Consultants and clients:** The corporatisation of HEI also redefines the identities and relationships between academics and their students. Academics as **>service providers=** or **>consultants=** are far more important than scholarship or community work and students are becoming clients who must be made **>compliant=** through **>best practices=**. Academics are being lured into becoming operatives (Giroux uses the term **corporate drones** to describe these operatives) of corporations rather than seekers of the truth. Even the administrative offices of HEIs will become the future **Acustomer services@** sections of the new corporate university. Even these workers will be under severe pressure to develop the ideal customer-care competencies in order to improve the image of the university or to protect the **Abrand@** and institutional vision and mission.
- (e) **Academics as suspects:** Academics are becoming the new generation of suspects, having acquired this label following the incessant attack on teachers in schools over the last few years who continue to be described as unskilled and poorly disciplined. It is a profession reduced to being most unpopular in our society today. Academics are now the **inefficient and effective liabilities** who work in an ivory tower and need to be brought back to reality and to serve the demands of the market and feed rapacious capitalism. They are under pressure to teach more

Auseful knowledge@ in favour of corporate profits. Most academics are uncomfortable with and disheartened by changes and the new forms of corporate-style leadership and any resistance by them is described as 'anti-transformation' and 'anti-government'. In response to the corporatisation project, they tend to retreat to their offices and classrooms, disengaged from participating in political discussions or contributing to and fighting for democratic cultures and practices. Many of them, especially those on contracts, fear losing their jobs, while others are looking at entrepreneurial possibilities or private consultancies which are in steep decline in South Africa. Work audits and other surveillance strategies are increasingly being used to calculate the cost and value of academics.

- (f) ***Corporate culture-filled faculties:*** Corporations have narrow and bankrupt visions (global market utopia) of society and absolutely no ethical position. Their only interests are in profits, reducing jobs, creating low-paid and benefit-free work. The corporatisation of universities is likely to change the collegial culture within faculties to become dungeon-like spaces where all are treated as faceless workers who have to justify their cost to the institution. Linked to this is the constant threat of outsourcing work, the reduction in salaries and competition encouraged through the international human capital economy. The latter is currently being drafted into the latest immigration legislation.
- (g) ***Social justice research:*** Just as instrumentalist curricula are favoured, so is research that advances profits. Faculties such as the Sciences would most likely get more resources and funding because of the benefits to corporations, while the humanities would experience the opposite. Corporate mentality and the neoliberal fatalism have no regard for any form of research in favour of social justice, oppression and exploitation. These kinds of research would be viewed as useless, ornamental and a waste of scarce resources. In addition to this, intellectual inquiry that is unpopular and critical and an invaluable asset in an inclusive democracy will be labelled unhealthy, counterproductive and might even be banned. This dystopian view of research will reinforce and even deepen existing injustices which should in fact be the focus of research in South Africa.
- (h) ***Higher education as a privilege:*** Many South Africans might already perceive higher education as a privilege rather than a right. This growing perception will translate into limiting access to HE through a number of ways. Firstly, access will be controlled through access requirements and secondly, through costs. Fewer students are likely to receive government funding for HE. This is part of government=s sanctimoniousness about its neoliberal tendencies to privatise HE in line with the other dictates of MNCs. The implication of this is that the historically disadvantaged will continue to suffer the consequences of a global market utopia opposed to all forms of human rights. A system that transfers wealth from the poor to the rich; increases inequality within and between nations, remunerates capital to the detriment of labour and creates more losers and winners (George, 2003). More students would become the victims of the debt economy and corporate banking and will take years to repay loans.

- (i) ***Undermining substantive democracy:*** The greatest threat of the corporatisation of HE is its abandonment of real hope and possibilities for social justice B addressing the deeply rooted socio-political issues in our society. While universities house the capacities to advance the possibilities of social justice and substantive democracy through teaching and research. For instance, the development of proposals for the most efficient and effective methods for the collection and distribution of scarce resources so as to meet those needs including clean water, food security, shelter, energy, education, health, culture and decently paid work for all should undergird the role of universities. These are the issues which can never be achieved through neoliberal fatalism!

8. The key question that arises from reading this text is: What can be done? I have already suggested in the text the need for recognising that the global market utopia is a disastrous vision of society that should not be allowed to determine the future of humanity and society. It is being sold to publics as the only route to emancipation through a language that is most appealing to the uncritical ear and expressed in ways that cancels out forms of despair and resentment that produce unacceptable levels of resistance and social criticism (Giroux, 2001). Any other utopian vision of society and the counterrevolutionary options presented by organic intellectuals (using Said=s view of the organic intellectual who is on the side of the poor) are being rejected and ridiculed or even demonised without any critical engagement. There have been numerous and well-conceived alternatives presented by scholars, philosophers, activists, Gramscian social movements (those on the side of the poor and oppressed) and so forth. The central argument presented by these individuals and groups, whose collective works I draw from, rejects neoliberal fatalism and argues that another world is possible - a better world A less ugly, less mean, less authoritarian, more democratic, more human@ (using one of Freire=s most famous quotes). I raise a few key points for consideration and hope that it would form the basis to expand and develop, as part of a new utopia, more debate and future praxis.

A Education must not be confused with training, suggesting that educators resist allowing commercial values to shape the purpose and mission of higher education. Richard Hofstadter recognized the threat that corporate values pose to education, arguing that the best reason for supporting institutions of higher education >lies not in the service they can perform Y but in the values they represent=. The values of justice, freedom, equality, and the rights of citizens as equal and free human beings are central to higher education=s role in educating students of leadership, social citizenship, and democratic public sphere@

(Aronowitz & Giroux)

- 8.1 ***Utopian thinking*** remains a key consideration and it should be embraced as a political project that challenges the historic and existing inequalities and injustices in our society - war, poverty, disease, racism, sexism, classism, unemployment, discrimination and oppression. Academics have an important role to play in shaping this utopia.

- 8.2 ***HEIs are public spaces*** that should be protected as non-commodified spaces of critical thought, theorisation and resistance and should be driven by the imperatives of social change and a vision of a more humane society that embraces the values of freedom, human dignity, peace and democracy. HEIs should continue to encourage intellectual courage and adhere to the ideals of critical citizenship, building democratic public spaces and creating public values in favour of authentic social change and the development of inclusive democracy.
- 8.3 ***Organic academics*** who defend the interests of the poor, excluded and marginalised must be protected, acknowledged and supported by all citizens. Academics together with activists constitute an invaluable part of any democratic society because their work and teaching advances the future of democracy and critical and participatory citizenship.
- 8.4 ***Much greater political agency*** amongst academics and youth (students) is required. Too many academics have fallen victim to neoliberal fatalism and have been apolitized and incapacitated. Academics must become more involved with civic issues and reinvent themselves as political agents in their own institutions and society. Academics must become more offensive and challenge the corporatisation of HEIs and the commodification and commercialisation of public spaces.

Too many intellectuals are disconnected from social movements and have trouble connecting their work both to pressing public issues and wider constituencies. More often, intellectuals cut off from the wider society fall prey to forms of professional legitimizing that not only deny the political nature of their own labour and theoretical work, but also cause them to reinforce a deep-rooted cynicism about the ability of ordinary people to take risks, fight what they believe in becoming a force for social change.

(Giroux, 2003)

- 8.5 ***Building resistance and social movements*** in response to the corporatisation of HEIs and the attack on public institutions is crucial. Academics need to engage in a sustained and vigorous identification, analysis and critique of political, social and economic issues in order to provide the public with a good analysis of unjust and undemocratic policies and practices. Academics should join social movements, the poor and community struggles and help build collective resistance that challenges the commercialisation of educational institutions.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to reiterate the urgency of developing new utopia and an optimistic hope alternative to the neoliberal fatalism which the neoliberals are determined to make us accept and to coerce all public spaces to embrace. HEIs are not only important spaces that should point out the myths of neoliberal fatalism as the saviour of the world, but also public spaces that could contribute to advance the promises of democracy, freedom and peace which are the core values that HEIs represent. It is therefore imperative that higher education be defended as a vital public sphere through intellectual work that self-consciously recalls its roll as a guardian of wider civic freedoms and the preserver of deeper democratic practices. An enormous responsibility in opposing neoliberal fatalism rests on the shoulders of intellectuals in protecting, reviving and advancing democratic culture.

“...though I know that things can get worse, I know that I am able to intervene to improve them...I am involved with others in making history out of possibility, not simply resigned to fatalistic stagnation...the future is something to be constructed through trial and error rather than an inexorable vice that determines all our actions”.

(Freire, 1998)

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