

# Antipode

**Responses to the Participatory Geographies Research Group's 'Communifesto for Fuller Geographies: Towards Mutual Security', September 2012**

## **Educational Restructuring and Strategic Partnerships**

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Right now in the US we are in the midst a major push to profoundly restructure our education system, from elementary school through the university. The very purposes of knowledge (*i.e.* research) and of education (*i.e.* teaching) are being redefined in strictly economic terms, with profound consequences for the possibility of critical, participatory, and socially-engaged work in the future. Although research and teaching have always been justified with reference to their economic utility (Heyman 2000; 2001), historically, that argument existed side-by-side with other justifications, especially the ability of research to address non-economic, social questions and the crucial role education plays in a multicultural, multiracial democracy (Lustig 2005). Those functions of the education system were understood as direct public benefits that were crucial to the future of the American polity and society. Now, however, as education and research are being more and more directly pulled into the current accumulation regime, the 'public' value of education and research are being recast exclusively in terms of their economic value, essentially adopting the neoliberal argument that the highest public good comes from the pursuit of private goods in the marketplace. The 'public' justification for education and research remains, but its very meaning has been altered from providing direct public goods to providing an indirect public good through the direct provision of private, market-based goods (knowledge and technology that are transferable to the private sector, and well-trained workers). We no longer hear research and teaching defended in the

# Antipode

public sphere for its direct public benefits, but only for its economic ones, a situation that has deepened during the current economic crisis (in typical ‘shock doctrine’ fashion).

This discursive shift underlies many of the ongoing neoliberal changes to the American university and much of the restructuring of higher education that we have seen in the past generation, from the reduction in state funding, to the assault on critical knowledges, to the increasing demands for accountability and assessment, to the accelerating differentiation in academic jobs, to the rise in student indebtedness that is making indentured servants out of a whole generation of young people.

Let me draw an example from my own institution, the University of Texas. The past several years have seen serious budget cuts in many of the University’s units system-wide, including the core liberal arts, leading to increases in student tuition fees; yet, since 2006 the University has spent \$3 billion on a ‘Competitiveness Initiative’ that “significantly increased the system’s science, technology, engineering and health [‘STEM’] physical infrastructure...totaling about 5.9 million square feet of added or renovated space...[I]t added more than 41 percent of academic research space and two and a half times more clinical space [to] the UT system” (UT Regents 2011). Building on this initiative, the University recently authorized a further \$50 million for the creation of an ‘Institute for Transformational Learning’ that has as its goal to enhance the University of Texas’ ‘brand’ name internationally by massively expanding ‘computational’ and online learning. The University is currently in negotiations with the for-profit Coursera company (Hamilton 2012), the rapidly expanding leader in ‘Massive Open Online Courses’ (MOOCs) (Young 2012). The goal of universities participating in the MOOC movement (started by the not-for-profit edX partnership between Harvard and MIT) is to leap-frog to the top of a restructured higher education landscape in which a handful of major research universities are responsible for providing ‘educational content’ to a second-tier of deskilled, teaching-only institutions through online learning. The vision is for the vast majority of education to be job training delivered by major university ‘brands’ online, with the revenue generated through companies like Coursera funding elite education and research at the ‘bricks-and-mortar’ flagship campuses. A peek at Coursera’s course offerings gives a fair insight into what these restructured flagship institutions will look like: overwhelmingly skewed towards STEM

# Antipode

fields, with critical knowledges and socially-engaged work pared away or eliminated altogether (this is the vision David Noble [2001] warned us about more than a decade ago). One of Coursera's founding investors, Intel billionaire and major Silicon Valley venture capitalist John Doerr, is also one of the founders of New Schools Venture Fund, which is playing a significant role in the privatization and restructuring of public education through the promotion and funding of charter schools in dozens of cities across the US, thus bringing the whole of the education system in line with the economic logic of neoliberalism. Doerr also serves on President Obama's 16-member Economic Recovery Advisory Board (now called the President's Council on Jobs and Competitiveness; see <https://www.coursera.org/about/founders> and <http://www.newschools.org/ventures>).

In sum, we are witnessing a major infusion of financial, as well as political, capital into the restructuring of the education system; this both relies on the project of redefining research and education in purely economic terms and furthers it.

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In order for us to fight against the rising 'insecurities' noted in the PyGyRG's Communifesto, it is important to see the systemic dimensions of university restructuring that are creating them, including the connection to K-12 restructuring. Only then can we make effective strategic partnerships, as the Communifesto suggests, with unions and community organizations fighting against educational restructuring. Here I have in mind groups such as the Chicago teachers' union, who recently won a significant victory against the privatization scheme of former Obama Chief-of-Staff Rahm Emanuel, or the group Occupy AISD (Austin Independent School District) which is fighting against charter schools in Austin, Texas (see <http://occupyaustin.org/category/aisd/>; see also <http://occupiedchicagotribune.org/>).

Another strategic partnership not mentioned in the Communifesto that is absolutely crucial to fighting educational restructuring is with students. As the strike and victory by students in Quebec earlier this year shows, when mobilized to defend the direct public benefits of education, students can be a potent force (as one point, more than 300,000 students were on strike) (Leitsinger 2012).

# Antipode

If we want to ensure space within the university for critical, participatory, and socially-engaged work in the future, we must join the wider fight over the purpose of knowledge and education: we must organize to fight against the continuing redefinition of education in purely economic, rather than civic, terms. The recent victories, partial as they are, in Quebec and Chicago, show that the fight against educational restructuring is not over - the forces of neoliberalization have not yet triumphed. Critical geographers need to join the fight by forming strategic partnerships with unions, community organizations, and students.

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# Antipode

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