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HUMAN PERSON OR HUMAN RESOURCE- EDUCATION IN THE NEO-LIBERAL ERA

The current trend in education, as in almost all fields of life, is towards an aggressive corporatism which poses as globalization, while trying to apply economic principles to all aspects of life. In the case of education, such an approach is extremely damaging, because it affects the way human beings themselves are seen- as mere resources. This path will lead to a severe depersonalization of society and to new and aggressive social divisions. True globalization (an internationalism which encompasses more than just the economic aspects) is the only valid solution.

All so-called developed countries have been witnessing a profound change in education and training.

Among the main causes of this change, there is the technological development in informatics and communications, which strongly affected the work universe, the production of resources and, through that, the education and learning patterns. The 1980s public administration and politics orientation toward privatization of all public fields, including education, is another reason for this change. The development of globalization trends, especially capital movements, trade flows, the single market, new production structures and companies and the consolidation of the consumer lifestyle coupled with the commercialization of all human and social expressions, including education- are as many factors leading to change. Finally, the 1990s witnessed the affirmation of the birth of a new society, the knowledge society, as the new paradigm for the development of society and resources integrating another paradigm, the 1960s’ “information society”.

Among the visible effects of this phenomenon, whose social consequences may be assessed, there are some which rightfully deserve our attention. They are the issues which not only affect the world of education, but other fields as well. Firstly, there is the new design of education “for the human resource”, which has increasingly replaced education for the human person. The logic of the market economy does not mix well with education, which is a natural part of public life. Thus, education has
become a tool for survival at a time of worldwide competition, a war culture (achieving more than anybody else and taking their place), not a life culture (living with the others for the general good). Education is currently completely subordinated to technology, and it is the technocracy who gives sense and direction to knowledge. This marked the passage from equality to equity- in a real knowledge driven society, education and knowledge are seen as the major source for the production of resources, in our society, they are just tools to legitimize new forms of society stratification and division.

This whole process started through the generalization of the, initially strictly technical (Human Resource Management) notion of “human resource”. Although this is seen as exclusively progressive in mainstream society, reducing human work to the concept of “resource” has two major negative effects.

Firstly, through becoming a resource, human work ceases to be a social subject. It is managed by the organization (the human resources department) for the main purpose of using the “resource” to its best abilities and for the longest period possible, at the lowest costs, for the productivity and competitiveness of the organization.

The second effect is intimately linked to the first. Once it has lost its significance as a social subject, human work loses its political, social and cultural context and becomes an object. Like other material and non-material resources, the human resource is an “economic” merchandise. The only limitations to its access and exploitation are its costs. This has evolved far enough for the name of “merchandise” not to be seen as offending for human beings anymore.

The “human resource” has no social voice, nor any social representation. There are no human resource unions. Thus, the human resource has no civic, political, social or cultural rights- it is simply a means, whose value of usage and exchange is given and influenced by the organization’s economic balance. The human resource may be organized, managed, valorized, recycled or abandoned as per the needs of the organization, regardless of its human status and needs.

The human resource does not have, per se, the right to work. Its right to exist and be paid is strictly related to its performance and feasibility. It must prove it is “easy to hire” – thus the right-to-work principle becomes the right-to-prove-you-can-be-hired principle, in the name of a so-called “socially active work policy”. This is where education is involved, with a highly important role throughout the human
resource’s economic life—because, as technology evolves, the lifetime of the human resource’s skills and knowledge is proportionally reduced. This leads to decreased feasibility and a “difficult to hire” status for the human resource.

Continuing learning aims to maintain an organization’s human resources at a feasible and “easy to hire” level.

All these have led to a complete reorientation of the education system, which now instructs human resources for the greatest competitiveness of an organization. Human persons do not exist anymore, except at primary school level.

The obvious result of the above is the forcing of the commercial and financial logic of private capital in exclusively public fields—such as education. Private capital influences directly the definition of the goals and priorities of education. The phenomenon spread even in the United States, where, although the actual privatization of education had been in use for years, the definition of the goals of education had been, at least up to the 1970s, an issue of the collectivity. Now, the collectivity has nothing to say anymore. Under Reagan’s policies and the explosive development of information and media, education has become just another market. Even its new language shows the intrusion of the private in the public—we now discuss the “education market”, the “education business”, the “educational products and services market”, the “educational organizations” and even “the teachers and students market”. The very initiative to organize a “World Education Market” (first held in May 1999 in Vancouver, Canada) shows the complete consensus of public and private actors to make education commercial. The only issue left is what it will sell, to whom and according to what rules.

The merchandise sold is obvious—knowledge, and at a steep price. Who will sell knowledge? Increasingly, it looks like the creators of multimedia products, the internet providers, the telecommunication multinationals and the moguls of computer technology are going to be the sellers. Together with university professors, these can easily gain support from public authorities convinced that their role is to create the most favorable environment for competition between organizations and for profit.

Private universities are already ahead as to the merchandise they offer. “Virtual universities” are more and more numerous and their declared mission is to “offer high quality education, regardless of the students’ and teachers’ place on the
map, make profit and pay our taxes\(^1\). Beside the virtual universities, the so-called “corporate universities” (cca. 1070 in 2001) can also deliver the goods- thousands of students may get the guarantee that they are “easy to hire”, without necessarily getting a diploma, since they learn solely the information that the organization which supports the university needs.

In this context, it is easy to foresee that the rules of the game are also going to change- to an aggressive liberalization. The failure of Seattle’s 1999 “Millennium Negotiations” to impose the rules of globalization (or, better put, of corporatism) in all fields, including education, as laid down in the December 1994 GATS Agreement on Service Trade, reduced somewhat the impact of private organizations on education. This, however, is not likely to last, as more and more public authorities accept, openly or not, that the corporate governance decide the goals and organizing and functioning rules of education. It is easy to guess that a future where schools and universities become companies (some still public or semi-public, yet with an important involvement of private capital) acting in the characteristic way for trade organizations- competition and profit.

Privatization leads to increased competition between organizations, a boom for the economy of that country, especially where employment and keeping an employment are concerned. Unemployment automatically drops, since human resources’ qualifications grow so they have increased probabilities to find well-paid jobs.

There are also disadvantages to this rosy picture, which, as we might expect, mostly affect human resources. When an organization needs qualified personnel, it not only tends to reduce the numbers of its unqualified personnel (thus creating a conflict of interests between qualified and unqualified personnel), but also to replace older qualified personnel with the young specialists (as IBM did in 1994, firing thousands of engineers over 50)- thus creating a conflict of interests between ages. Another alternative is to look for human resources (both qualified and unqualified) that are cheaper, in other countries, according to the principle of the lowest cost-highest benefit and the level of leniency of that country’s legislation. There is obviously a conflict of interests here between human resources in different countries. This mixture between the public and the private leads to another, easy to guess,

\(^{1}\) “Learning in Cyberspace”, Financial Times, 8 March 1998.
consequence: as private organizations get more freedom of movement, they abandon
the idea of work contracts on long, determined periods with significant rights and
benefices for the employees. These tend to be replaced with short and very-short-term
work contracts or work contracts on indeterminate or variable periods, with little or no
social guarantees- letting the employee fend for him or herself, thus increasing even
more the aggressive competition for work access (which, as we have already shown,
is entirely to the organization’s advantage).

Another result of this way of thinking is the classification of institutions of
education (a long tradition in the United States and Great Britain)- to find out which
are the “best” schools and universities. This way, education focuses solely on teaching
the logic of competition in order to win, typical for the human resource. Education is
only a means for organizations to pick up the best, instead of valorizing diverse native
abilities and inclinations. And, of course, the best will be decided upon in accordance
with market and technology innovations- thus, subordinating education to technology.

This belief that technology is paramount, behind which, one might find, at
least partially, the “technologic imperative” (everything possible on a technological
level must be done) is the basis for the strong comeback of the technocratic elite
during the 1980s and 1990s. There are three main groups which form this elite, in
contrast with its past incarnations:

- the great financial and industrial business or corporate world;
- the great bureaucratic, economic and military structures (the public
  power);
- the experts.

The first group has the power because it possesses intellectual and copyright
rights which give it access to most material or non-material resources of the planet.
The second group is made up of, on one side, the state superpowers- the United
States, but also certain countries from the E.U. On the other side there are the
international bureaucracies- the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund
(although, in certain cases, the actual power is still in the hands of the state- such as
the World Bank and the U.S.). The third group makes the link between the first two-
exerts, scientists, media and culture representatives are “used” equally by the
corporate and public powers.

Education is paramount for each of these three groups. It has the ability to
offer future generations the tools and abilities necessary to advance technologically.
However, there is not a single call for technology to adapt to the needs of human beings! Moreover, the very same technology could offer millions of people the basic services that they lack—water, food, shelter, health—but this is not considered an issue either. The reasons for this vary. One of them is the often-mentioned thesis according to which only the “technologic imperative” may, one day, give everybody access to basic resources and services. Another has to do with the fact that, for accessibility to increase, competition between organizations would have to decrease—yet, less competition means less profit… And, this way, we get to a scenario which could seem funny if it did not mean the death of thousands every day—the tool determines the need. The tool is obviously the financial capital. As we speak, the tool is knowledge, the next step for the 1990s “information society” being the new millennium’s “knowledge society”. It is the society where most concepts start with an “e-”: e-commerce, e-transport, e-education, e-organization, etc. All these can be found on the World Wide Web, are completely virtual and make up the “e-society”. This new society is extremely important and acknowledged as such by most so-called developed countries. In Great Britain, for instance, the administration went as far as to state that the Knowledge Driven Economy is a phenomenon more common than de-industrialization, globalization or the information era. The E.U. went even further—the development of the knowledge society is recognized as one of its most important long-term goals.

The results of this approach are obvious—private organizations become the main subject and place for the promotion, organizing, production, valorization and spread of “the knowledge that counts” for the developed economy. Public policy is changing. Its main goals are currently to promote the business spirit, to create “private-modeled” organizations in the scientific environment and in universities, to acquire knowledge through the policies of promotion and protection of copyright. The problem is not this, however. Implementing such a policy in a world increasingly marked by the division between “the qualified” and “the unqualified” is the actual problem. Those who have no access to the “knowledge that counts” (the unqualified) are much more numerous than the qualified few—and one of the sad results of this fact is illiteracy. This “brave new” public policy is about to turn education into a tool for the legitimacy of a new (and highly unfair) social division.
What we described above is left out from the presentation of the “social liberalism”\(^2\) which states that the new public policy is superior to the old variants because the market is the optimal regularization tool which achieves social justice through equity. Welfarestatism perpetuates injustice, according to this theory, because of its policies of redistributing wealth to the poorer, which stifles individual initiative. The market society is, however, fair, since it gives everybody the possibility to compete with others for the top place and to achieve their well-being through their own initiative and creativity. Individual responsibility is everything.

As for education, according to the equity principle, a state insures justice if it creates the favorable conditions for the free access of all citizens to the basic resources, among which education. The state has no right to intervene anywhere further.

By maintaining maximum freedom of access to the market and a favorable environment to entrepreneurs, the State has no further responsibility to prevent or correct the inequalities between persons, social groups or countries because these become “natural”, “objective” and “unavoidable”. The more so, since these inequalities are based on the difference of access to knowledge and qualifications promoted by the current educational system, supported by the same state. In this context, it is no longer ethically, politically and socially “fair” to fight inequalities associated with the level of qualification, competence and performance\(^3\). This is actually the main trap of this line of thought.

The mystifications which lead to the above conclusion are too obvious to discuss at too much length. The results are obvious in the policy of private organizations, which abandon without any second thought the human resources which are not or cease to be important for their needs, or lack the appropriate skills to navigate fast on the net. Moreover, the public policies which support this approach will result in new impassable barriers, based almost entirely on knowledge, between human resources which are “easy to hire” (organized in international professional guilds following the corporate model of multinational companies) and those who lost their feasibility, the new proletariat of the world capital.


There are, of course, ways to solve this problem before the current public trend leads, like communism before it, to inequalities which will take decades to solve.

A very easy way to solve this is to apply the traditional ethics of public organizations to the “knowledge society”. Traditional ethics asserts that public authorities have the responsibility to decide exclusively in the public interest (which obviously excludes corporate interests), to act objectively, openly and to be accountable. According to this principle, public authorities have the responsibility to declare any private interest. As we have seen above, currently this responsibility is fading fast.

Public policy is often seen as a tool of the state, yet, from an economic point of view, the market is equally using it. When economic, financial and social mechanisms are automated, the public authority has the ethical responsibility to insure that they serve the public good. Those who support the “social liberal” theories above ignore an important fact- the market is not autonomous, it has to be continually subjected to an ethical analysis.

It is obvious that, once these mechanisms have ceased to serve man, they tend to make him subservient to external needs with no relation to the public good. The perils of not applying ethics where it is dearly needed are the exclusive desire for advantages and the thirst for power. These can only be avoided by placing the human being (not the human resource) at the center of education. There are traps here as well. For instance, to simply oppose capital and work (using the liberal or Marxist model) is just a reduction, because the relation between the two is reduced exclusively to the notion of “commercial”- the error of consumerism.

In fact, all economic goods are the results of human labor. This is completely left out at this time and economy is given absolute priority. The economic system has become an absolute value, its own purpose, while the only remaining values of society are production and consummation.

An education focused on the human person and the public good is the real way toward a true knowledge society.

Economy is not the main cause of human acts, neither as role, nor as goal. The ethics of economy is intimately linked to the ethics of work. The philosophical

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approach to work based on the knowledge of the human person is the only orientation for human acts. Human acts must answer moral requests based on clear ethical values.

In both the public and private sectors, success does not depend as much on competition as on a deep knowledge of the human person. When hiring a person, his or her human reactions are as important as the technical skills.

Therefore, the greatest challenge is creating an educational system focused on the priority of the human person and an environment where the practice of ethical values encourages attitudes toward ethical responsibility and accountability in both the private and the public sector. This is the answer to today’s total subservience of education to corporatism.

This would lead to a true globalization- an internationalism which would take into account the needs and expectations of states, beyond the corporate world. The process of internationalization would be a progressive one (there are many dividing issues- mostly social and environmental), but social reforms would at least have a common basis. Since not all the issues we are faced with can be reduced to economy-then why let economy rule our lives?

Bibliography