

GLOBAL VISION OR CORPORATE NIGHTMARE? THE PRIVATIZATION OF ADULT EDUCATION IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM

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Abstract

Adult education in the new millennium is examined through a critical lens: Whose interests will it serve? After discussing corporate globalization, the World Bank, and the UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education, this paper focuses on the implications for adult education of the privatizing agenda. It then argues that adult education can open blocked public space which, in turn, can enhance civil capital and help people and communities to build the healthy civil society they require to resist the colonizing effects of corporate globalization.

Résumé

Quels intérêts l'éducation des adultes servira-t-elle dans le prochain millénaire? Dans le contexte de la mondialisation des marchés, de l'influence croissante de la Banque Mondiale, et de la Conférence mondiale sur l'éducation supérieure de l'UNESCO, ce texte se penche sur les conséquences, pour l'éducation des adultes, de la tendance à la privatisation. On soutient en outre que l'éducation des adultes peut faire revivre le débat public, et reconstruire le capital civil nécessaire pour résister aux effets colonisateurs de la mondialisation du commerce.

Adult education in Canada historically has had a strong social purpose and vision (Cruikshank 1993, 172), but recently has capitulated to technocratic ideology, market-driven logic, and rampant individualism (Welton 1997, 31). Selman et al. (1998) claim that adult education is losing its philosophical roots and becoming more like "a service industry" (p. 9). Whose interests does it serve?

In this paper I use critical theory (as explained by Welton, 1995) to examine whether adult education is at a crossroads between serving the lifeworld or serving the system that colonizes it. This choice is underscored by the privatizing plans for education as laid out at the 1998 UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education held in Paris. I begin with an overview of corporate globalization and its colonizing effects in Canada and around the world. I then examine the World Bank's role in corporate globalization, highlighting its involvement in

privatization discussed at the UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education. Next, I look at the implications of the corporate globalization agenda for the practice of adult education. I then argue that adult education can act as a social immune response to the cancer of corporate globalization by helping to build "civil capital"—wealth that can help people and communities build the healthy civil society they require to resist the colonizing effects of corporate globalization. I conclude that an adult education colonized by the system par excellence, corporate globalization, is not inevitable but the outcome of human choice driven by system values. Making other choices driven by lifeworld values, adult educators can link with community groups, which are the last line of defence against the totalitarianism of corporate globalization.

Corporate Globalization

Corporate globalization is an overwhelmingly successful example of the system's ability to colonize the lifeworld. Instrumental in the extreme, transnational corporations use anyone and anything to feed their insatiable appetite for wealth and power. Ratner (1997, 271) describes corporate globalization as a world system in which powerful, interconnected, stateless corporations nullify national boundaries and incorporate whole societies as cost-effective sites of production. Such corporations see people, communities, and natural resources as simply sources of profits to attract stockholders, moving on when profit sources dry up. In their wake they leave unemployment, fragmented relationships, and environmental despoliation. Enabled by international trade agreements, the control of these transnational corporations has become so great that they are beginning to "eclipse and subsume the power of nations,...[exercising] unparalleled control over global resources, labour pools and markets" (Rifkin 1995, 236).

The colonizing effects of corporate globalization are multi-layered and extensive, ranging from growing personal and government debt load around the world coupled with increasingly restrictive government policies, to rising unemployment and homelessness. The world is entering what Susan George (1997a, 1) calls the "Age of Exclusion," a time when the market, which increasingly determines political, social and economic priorities, has "no place for the growing number of people who contribute little or nothing to production or consumption." In starkly ultimate terms, if they cannot pay, they do not deserve to live.

The international effects of corporate globalization highlight the incursions of the system into the lifeworld. Khor (1997) describes how the process of

globalization, linked to liberalization, has gained so much force that it has undermined the sustainable development agenda. He notes that the top priorities of governments in the North and some in the South have been commerce, the perceived need to remain competitive in a globalizing market, and pampering and catering to the demands of companies and the rich. He adds:

The globalization process, enforced through the rules of [the World Trade Organization], rewards the strong and ruthless and punishes the weak and poor. In fact, it defines the criteria for success and failure, for survival and collapse. Its paradigm places profits and greed above all else, and its unregulated operation will continue to downgrade development, social and environmental concerns at both national and international levels. (p. 8)

Canada has experienced the colonizing effects of corporate globalization through mechanisms like trade agreements, public debt, and government policies such as downloading and restructuring. Under the guise of financial deregulation, the Canadian government pursued the Free Trade Agreement with the United States, which forced Canada to “set the terms on which it trades as low as possible” (Cameron 1991, 446). Then it followed up with the North American Free Trade Agreement, which many feel is merely the visible tip of a globalization iceberg that will sink the economies of small countries like Canada (Cruikshank 1995, 459). The colonization of the lifeworld through corporate globalization is increasingly evident in restructured education and health-care systems, reshaped employment structures, lower quality of worklife, and dismantled or unenforced environmental legislation. Cameron identifies a clear bias against the public sector, which hides the corporate globalization agenda of widening the scope for profit-making activity from the private to the public sector (p. 436).

As in many countries around the world, the implications of corporate globalization for ordinary Canadians are grim:

If people simply try to cope with the irrational conditions generated in those unregulated global financial markets by working harder or tightening their belts, or if they focus their anger only on symptoms like tax increases, spending cuts or factory closures, they will not find a solution. Indeed they will be ground down and they will end up fighting each other, as one person’s tax cut becomes another’s job loss. Meanwhile their dreams of a stable, prosperous and just society will turn into a neoconservative nightmare in which billion dollar fortunes grow as rapidly as the soup kitchens and the armies of the homeless (Bienefeld 1993, 367).

As McMurtry (1999a) forcefully argues, corporate globalization is a cancer that consumes the life that supports it by demanding ever higher levels of money

accumulation while committing ever fewer resources to the social hosts that it invades. The gap between rich and poor grows exponentially, excluding more and more people from their allotted role in life as consumers of privatized goods and services. In the face of such overwhelming colonization by the system, the lifeworld shrinks and withers. The opportunities and spaces for communicative action diminish as some cocoon themselves in front of their televisions, while others fight over the few remaining public resources.

The World Bank's Role in Corporate Globalization

One of the major players in the colonization of the lifeworld by the system is the World Bank. Created in 1944 as one of the so-called Bretton Woods Institutions, the World Bank has taken on a kind of power that was never intended in its charter (George 1997b, 14). Along with the International Monetary Fund, it manages the debt burden of most third-world countries and designs the structural adjustment programs that increasingly promote the transfer of money from the poor to the rich. The ultimate goal is not to have these countries repay their debts, but to keep them creditworthy so they can continuously service the debt with the money they formerly used to support social programs like education and health. George points out that eighty percent of the populations of these countries never received any benefit from the borrowed money in the first place, but make enormous sacrifices to pay back the debt, sacrifices not shared by the elites. In this way, the World Bank is on the ground floor of the current, world-wide, economic restructuring, which facilitates corporate globalization by enabling easier access by transnational corporations into national economies. The colonizing effects of such restructuring on millions of people around the world prompts educator Joel Spring (1999) to comment that "the growth of the global economy requires protection from exploitation by multinational corporations and economic organizations such as...the World Bank" (p. 167).

Economic restructuring ultimately involves the privatization of formerly public goods. In terms of higher education, the World Bank (1995) prioritizes lending to countries that put a "greater emphasis on private providers and private funding." George (1999) notes that the World Bank has pushed its privatization agenda around the world to such an extent that, by 1991, it had made 114 loans to speed the process. She points out that, although considered economically efficient by those who serve the system, by a lifeworld calculation privatization simply involves transferring "wealth from the public purse—which could redistribute it to even out social inequalities—to private hands" (p. 4). Such privatization cuts into the heart of the lifeworld itself because it involves the

“alienation and surrender of the product of decades of work by thousands of people to a tiny minority of large investors” (p. 6).

Publicly funded education, like many other hard-won institutions of the lifeworld, is undergoing its own kind of restructuring—one that is not created by communicative action, but is imposed instrumentally by the system through institutions such as the World Bank. Indeed, the World Bank claims the unilateral right to speak for the world, demanding that any viable education today must serve, as its primary responsibility, the needs of a new global free market economy (Smith 1999, 7). However, the global market is not being served by the state support for education that has grown over many decades. Such subsidization has meant that private corporations have been unable to make a profit from this public good. One objective of the global market is continuous growth; transnational corporations need new markets in order to keep growing. So they look to the public sector and see an enormous marketing opportunity in education. The World Bank legitimizes, advocates, and promotes this marketing opportunity through its privatization agenda.

One clear example of this privatization agenda occurred at the 1998 UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education in Paris. A professor from the State University of New York at Buffalo, D. Bruce Johnstone, with two members of the World Bank, Alka Arora and William Experton, presented a paper entitled *The Financing and Management of Higher Education: A Status Report on Worldwide Reforms*. The paper offers a stark reminder of the power of the system to appropriate institutions of the lifeworld for private profit. Throughout this paper, Johnstone et al. justify the market orientation of reforms to tertiary education in terms of the “ascendance, almost worldwide, of market capitalism and the principles of neo-liberal economics” (p. 3). This fundamental position is never questioned or explored, but understood as a given.

Although Johnstone et al. (1998) maintain that “a dominant theme of higher education in the 1990s has been financial distress” (p. 2), nowhere do they mention the role that indebtedness and the World Bank played in the creation of this distress. Instead, they mention enrolment pressure, rising education costs, increasing scarcity of public revenue, and “the growing dissatisfaction in many countries with the rigidities and inefficiencies of the public sector generally” (p. 3)—an attitude brought about by the endless but unsubstantiated repetition of the corporate mantra that the private sector is more efficient than the public sector.

Johnstone et al. (1998) claim that higher education is like a private good for two reasons. First, it “exhibits conditions of rivalness (limited supply), excludability (often available for a price) and rejection (not demanded by all), all

of which do not meet the characteristics of a purely public good" (p. 3). Second, "the consumers of higher education are reasonably well informed and the providers are often ill informed—conditions which are ideal for market forces to operate" (p. 3). Its private-good credentials thus established, higher education is up for sale. What will enable this commodification is a shift in decision-making power "not just *from government*, but also *from higher educational institutions*—and especially from the faculty—to *the consumer or client*" (p. 4). To lubricate this shift, the ideology promoted by Johnstone et al. moves the "higher education cost burden from taxpayers to parents and students" (p. 3), which translates as full-freight tuition with no grants and no scholarships to hamper pure commodification. Those who can pay, will; those who cannot must do without or borrow from the banks, which inaugurates them into a lifetime of indebtedness.

The role of faculty in this totalitarian plan will conform to the market agenda. Faculty are expected to exercise "unleashed entrepreneurship" (Johnstone et al 1998, 4), thereby adding revenue to their institutions and benefit to their societies (p. 25). Johnstone et al. outline the advantages of introducing entrepreneurial activities to universities:

It helps introduce a market sensitive institutional culture; relevant training experience is introduced for students; cooperative links are established with business partners who might become involved in curriculum guidance, work placements, and part-time teaching arrangements, etc., all of which helps enhance quality of higher education and monetary inflow (p. 16).

Currently seen by Johnstone et al. as a politically powerful constituency, faculty have a chance to redeem themselves and become a corporate partner, which means "radically altering who the faculty are, how they behave, the way they are organized, and the way they work and are compensated" (p. 22). Indeed, Johnstone et al. advocate laying off faculty "no longer relevant to the needs of the students, the economy, or for that matter of the university" (p. 23). Although they see most economically and educationally developed countries as still holding much of higher education in largely conventional pedagogy, they view technology (traditionally the source of productivity gains in industry) as the means to making financial gains in education by substituting for faculty (pp. 24-25). What effect could these proposed reforms have on adult education?

Implications for Adult Education

Adult education has deep roots in the lifeworld. Grounded in practice, it has a long history of satisfying people's personal, social, and professional needs. Within the home, the community, the workplace or the academy, the foundations

of adult education are richly people-centred. Nevertheless, McMurtry (1991) points out that:

Education has always been subject to external pressures that seek to subordinate its practice and goals to vested interests of some kind, whether of slave-holding oligarchies, theocratic states, political parties or merely prevailing dogmas of collective belief. The history of the development of social intelligence is largely a history of this conflict between the claims of education and inquiry, on the one hand, and the demands of ruling interests and ideologies on the other. (p. 209)

The ruling interests today are clearly and unambiguously the transnational corporations. The World Bank's emphasis on privatization supports those interests, including the commodification of education for private profit. In this way, it serves the interests of the system by promoting education as a priced good for sale to those who can afford it.

Increasingly, adult education, like other forms of education, has been relentlessly undermined by the demands of the system in the form of corporate globalization. These demands are so insistent that they lead Selman et al. (1998, 9) to speculate whether such forces are "tying adult education predominantly to vocational and technical matters and requiring it to be a slave to the cash register." Others such as Hall (1996, 118) are even more pessimistic, contending that adult education, outside of those forms needed for market adjustment and maximization, is being left on the sidelines.

The implications of the corporate globalization agenda for the practice of adult education are far-reaching and sinister. It could result in a total colonization by the system, affecting every aspect of adult education—its role in society, funding, governance, access, curriculum, teaching, learning, technology, and outcomes. Under the corporate globalization agenda, adult education's role in society is one of service to the system. Increasingly, adult education is "aimed primarily at providing people to play a part in the existing social and economic order and at adapting men and women to the system" (Selman 1989, 77). Under this agenda, the role of the educator is clear: "to prepare and 'skill-train' all of us to go into and have loyalties towards the advance of the global market" (O'Sullivan 1999, 32).

As the literature makes clear, the funding of adult education under the corporate globalization agenda is no longer the duty of the state. Many countries, especially those crushed under structural adjustment programs sanctioned by institutions like the World Bank, are either requested to reduce or eliminate state funding of adult education or forced to do so from economic necessity. All in all,

the global economic restructuring that is the result of corporate globalization is, according to Hall (1996, 118), "causing the state to withdraw from previously understood responsibilities" of financing adult education.

The governance of adult education under this agenda is not about democratic decision-making and popular input through communicative action, but about decision-making guided by market demands—demands that result in increased centralization of adult education. As a result of such centralization, "fewer and fewer persons have a say as to how adult education... policies are developed" (p. 119). Similarly, access to adult education under the corporate globalization agenda is restricted to those who can pay. Those who cannot afford it will have to invest in their future by borrowing from the banking system, or be excluded. As Cruikshank (1997, 6) points out, the educational needs of people who cannot pay are ignored.

The curriculum in adult education under this agenda is designed to match the neo-liberal economics that Johnstone et al. (1998) promote by limiting both choice and range to subjects that are relevant to market demand. Adult education increasingly emphasizes training (Hall 1996, 117), as corporations become business partners and promote system values. Courses turn into vehicles for corporate advertising, both in content and in appearance: in content, courses pander to anyone who can pay (Cruikshank 1993, 180); in appearance, materials are covered, like sports figures, with corporate logos.

As Cruikshank (1993, 181) has argued, teaching in adult education under the corporate globalization agenda is done by academics reduced to neutered technicians helping to maintain and reproduce the existing power relationships in society. And, as teaching becomes more consumer-oriented, is the customer always right in adult education under the corporate globalization agenda? Likewise, learning in adult education under this agenda narrows to the purely instrumental, without any critical or transformative potential. Learning for earning will dominate, with an emphasis on professionalization and credentialization. Life-long learning becomes "life-long adaptation to the 'needs' of the 'new' global economy" (Welton 1997, 33).

Technology plays a more important role in adult education under the corporate globalization agenda. Choices involving the use of technology are driven by system values, such as increased cost-effectiveness, rather than lifeworld values such as enhanced communication. As technology assumes a place of cultural dominance, the educator is

reduced to being simply the *manager* of the educational space, and expected to have nothing of particular importance to say on any topic, other than being

able to point the way to a good Internet site, or set up project groups, manage 'behaviour problems,' and be strictly obedient to all state directives (Smith 1999, 5).

Outcomes for an adult education under this agenda involve quantification and ownership. As Cruikshank (1993, 180) has argued, an overriding philosophy is the counting of anything that can be counted: How much money? How many students? The only knowledge that is recognized is knowledge that can be privatized, commodified, and sold in the global market, eliminating the free exchange of knowledge that characterizes the lifeworld. And, following Freire's (1996, 53) banking model of education, that knowledge product will be deposited in the heads of students who can afford to pay for it.

Alternative Roles for Adult Education

Serving the system by adapting to corporate globalization is not inevitable, in spite of market rhetoric to the contrary. Although Welton (1997) argues that adult education has always been torn between serving two masters, the system or the lifeworld, he maintains that the core value structure of a socially responsible adult education is

the affirmation that the life-world is the foundation of meaning, solidarity and stable personality; our commitment to the enlightened, autonomous and reflective learner; the centrality of social learning processes to the formation of the active citizen; and the fostering of discussion, debate and dialogue amongst citizens. (p. 28)

He notes that within civil society, Canadians have always struggled to create communicative space. Grassroots groups are one instance of what Welton refers to as "cracking open blocked public space" (p. 36) and ensuring that reflective learning processes occur outside the control of government and private corporate interests. Two examples of grassroots groups opening up blocked public space in Canada include David Orchard's bid for the national leadership of the Progressive Conservative Party (Camp 1998), which forced open public debate about the effects of the North American Free Trade Agreement, and the Council of Canadians' opposition to the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (Clarke and Barlow 1998, 3), which helped to expose that secret treaty to public scrutiny and to block its enactment.

Adult education has a role to play in supporting the opening of blocked public space. It can be instrumental in helping to build civil capital (Sumner 1999, 203-204). Civil capital is not based on money capital but on real capital, which is understood as wealth that creates more wealth. Civil capital has its roots in what

philosopher John McMurtry (1999b) calls the civil commons—"any co-operative human construction that protects and/or enables the universal access to life goods" (p. 1). McMurtry (1998) describes the civil commons as "the vast social fabric of unpriced goods, protecting and enabling life in a wide and deep seamless web of historical evolution that sustains society and civilization" (p. 25). One example of the civil commons in collective thought and action is democracy—the self-government of a society by its people in participant decision-making (p. 371).

Civil capital can help people and communities build the healthy civil society they require to resist the colonizing effects of the cancer of corporate globalization. Although human capital is individualistic and has been co-opted by the system, civil capital is collective and serves the lifeworld. Whereas social capital is social solidarity (Welton 1997, 36) that is local but not necessarily political, civil capital is avowedly political, building bridges in the lifeworld among local groups as well as national and international groups. Civil capital is built, maintained, and passed on to future generations through democracy, brought about by people coming together to negotiate which actions to take about the problems they share—in essence, communicative action.

Communicative action creates a link between adult education and democracy. Collins (1991) explains, "What the theory of communicative action provides is access to a realm of rational discourse, nourished by aspirations to genuine participatory democratic action, in which adult education practice and research can meaningfully participate" (p. 30). Indeed, education becomes firmly linked with democracy when it involves what Welton (1995, 134-135) calls democratic learning communities. Although this linkage can be blocked by an adult education under the corporate globalization agenda, it can be enhanced by critical adult education—adult education that serves the lifeworld and rises out of the civil commons. Collins (1991, 114) affirms the role of critical adult education when he asserts that "the efforts to open up and maintain genuine participatory democratic discourse about a vital community concern is in keeping with the intent of a critical practice of adult education."

Thus, adult education can help community groups to counter the totalitarian drive of corporate globalization, a drive foreshadowed in the words of the Trilateral Commission (a transnational think-tank composed of corporate CEOs, former US presidents, and academics). The Commission declared in 1975 that there was an "excess of democracy" (Steinfelds 1979, 262). This excess had to be countered by mechanisms such as trade agreements, defended by Canada's *Fraser Institute* as simply the means to limit the extent to which governments may respond to pressure from their citizens (Calvert 1993, 158). With governments

thus hobbled, the transnational corporations could move forward to impose their globalization agenda. The last line of defence of the lifeworld against total colonization by the system is the civil commons, represented by community groups that are learning to stand up and fight against ravages brought about by corporate globalization—such as factory closings, health and education restructuring, and social service privatization.

By supporting these democratic learning communities, adult education can help to create that dialogical space where opposition to corporate globalization can grow. It can also help to build and maintain civil capital. In this way, adult education can act as a “social immune response” (McMurtry 1999a, 89) to the cancer that is corporate globalization, providing an opportunity for an education that serves the lifeworld, not the system, through the privatizing agenda of the World Bank and transnational corporations.

Conclusion

Corporate globalization promoted by transnational corporations and economic institutions such as the World Bank is having profound consequences for all facets of the lifeworld, including adult education. The rhetoric that promotes this agenda repeatedly emphasizes its inevitability. For example, Denning (1997, 3) admonishes educators to face the new realities—it is “fruitless to deny them and pointless to despair over them.” It seems unavoidable that adult educators, to survive, must learn to pimp off the system, which produces so much misery for so many people.

But an adult education colonized by corporate globalization is not inevitable. It is the outcome of human choices driven by system values, not lifeworld values. Recognition of this stitch-by-stitch choice matrix is the first step in understanding how we have arrived at this crisis in adult education. Taking on the role of social immune response is the next step: helping to build civil capital by guiding, supporting, and reinforcing choices driven by lifeworld values. These choices may seem small at the time, but they weave a civic understanding of what it means to be more than a consumer in the global market.

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