



**Urciouoli, B. (Ed.) *The experience of neoliberal education*. New York: Berghahn Books.**

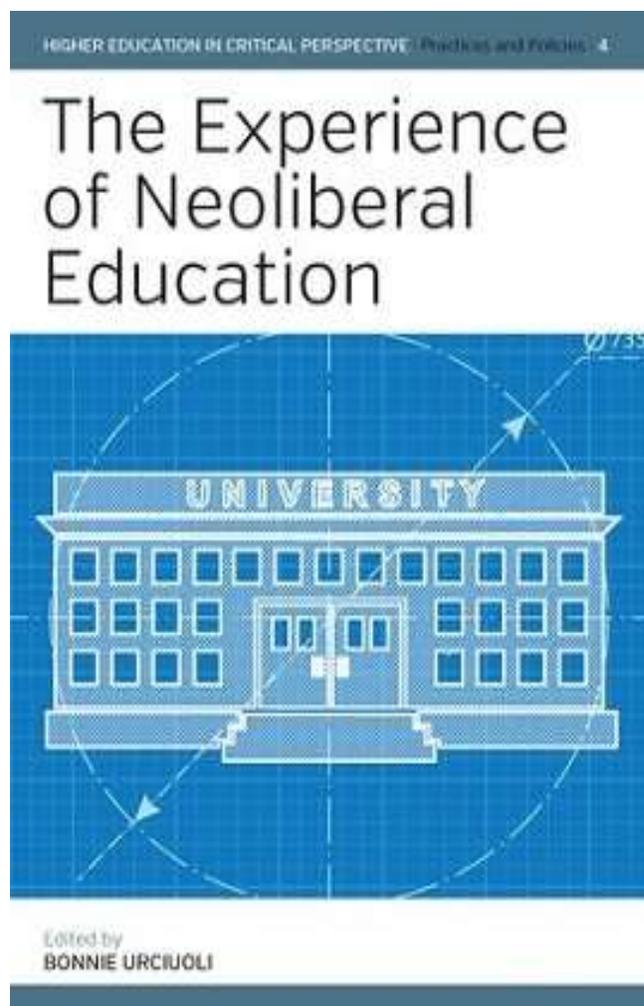
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What are we exactly talking about when we talk about neoliberalism? That same question was asked by David Harvey in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2005), where he defined it as a political project to recover the rates of profit by the more affluent classes after the economic crisis of the 1970s. Harvey also emphasized the symbolic-cultural attributes of neoliberalism: neoliberal discourse is part of this political project to the extent that permeates subjectivities within all areas of social life.

According to Harvey, neoliberalism is a mode of government that delimits the citizen as an individual, and establishes the market as the arena in which citizens must act as consumers. It is the withdrawal of the state from different areas of social management for the benefit of the market. However, in each area of social life, for example education, neoliberalism acquires specific characteristics. How is neoliberalism present in the university? How is neoliberalism embodied in the subjectivity of the student body? How does neoliberal thought shape, explicitly or surreptitiously, university policies and administration? These and more questions are



what *The Experience of Neoliberal Education* seeks to answer.

Compiled by Bonnie Urciuoli, the book is organized into 11 chapters that present three different research themes. The first set of chapters describe the relationship between neoliberalism and university as a philosophical tradition, based on historical analyses of particular phenomena. These chapters seek to compensate for the gap that Aihwa Ong (2006) noted: that critical analyses of neoliberalism in many cases have little theoretical basis. In chapters 1, 2, 4 and 11, the authors explore the conceptual origins of (neoliberal) experiential learning over time within higher education institutions within the works of John Dewey, Thorstein Veblen, Mikhail Bakhtin and other authors who combine linguistic analysis with class and race differences. For example, Pauline Strong describes the conceptual origins of experimental learning in Dewey's philosophy and analyzes how it was reinterpreted to adapt to neoliberal ideology.

A second set of chapters contain empirical analyses of different U.S. universities and give an account of some mechanisms through which the university experience is neoliberalized. With this objective, the authors studied certain university projects, such as “service-learning” or “First Year Experience” (FYE) programs and explained how these neoliberal programs publicize the university as a socially committed institution that provides a service to society or students.

Finally, a third set of chapters presents self-ethnographies of former university students who observed how certain policies and procedures within university administration neoliberalize the student experience. These contributors mainly analyze programs that finance student voluntary work or social projects in different communities and how they are used as a way to enhance the image of the institution.

As I read this last set of chapters, I recalled Pierre Bourdieu's essay, “Is a disinterested act possible?” in which he criticized the Rational Actor Theory (RAT). According to RAT, the behavior of individuals in a society is similar to that of agents in the market. Bourdieu mentioned that social agents, depending on the field in which they act, will handle a disposition or a *habitus* based on their experience. This experience, which will enable them to a greater or lesser extent to operate in that scenario, in turn, is based on the interest that guides them to be there in the first place.

Bourdieu noted that a disinterested act is possible, but only if there is an encounter between the habitus predisposed to disinterestedness and universes – or fields – in which disinterestedness is rewarded. The students who did the self-ethnographies narrated individual experiences in which they performed a disinterested act and thus moved away from the logic of Rational Actor Theory. At the same time, their disinterested acts were echoed in a field where they were rewarded by the research team led by Urciuoli.

In general terms, the different chapters have a common analytic approach that involves crossings with linguistics (i.e., the theme of voluntary work as part of an aesthetic story about the university). They also give accounts of the various ways in which inequality is expressed in the university setting (particularly from the perspectives of class, race, and gender theories) and explain the specificity of the neoliberal matrix in some North American research universities (with references to the contributions of Harvey).

Specifically, I would like to highlight some aspects in which this book contributes to the field. First, the contributors collectively provide reflexive accounts of how neoliberalism incarnates in subjectivities. The analysis does not simply present the commercialization of the university, such as the selling of certain services to companies,

the research patents, the university ranking, or the publications circuit. Nor do the authors leave them out. However, the focus is on how neoliberalism embodies the subjectivity of the actors who participate in the university environment.

Second, the authors analyze institutionalized mechanisms that allow for the commercial actions of the subjects within the university. An example of this can be seen in the way in which community service projects carried out by universities are quantified. The only quantifiable results from this service are the hours of work voluntarily performed by the students (to whom administrators give course credits in compensation for said “voluntary work”). In this case, the authors emphasize that some qualitative aspect of the type of work that is carried out disappears. As Bondiger de Uriarte and Jacobson observe: “Although the ten thousand, twenty thousand, and fifty thousand annual hours of service appear as legible and like entities – countable, manipulable, exchangeable, and transparent – they say nothing about the causes and consequences of human suffering, nothing about ameliorating the systemic sources that generate and animate misery, and nothing about transformation on the part of either the recipient or the student-server” (p. 93).

What ends up being seen by the general public is the amount of hours that their students work to make these visible, publicized data. In short, one of the main contributions of the book is that the authors demonstrate how the university experience can also be a commodifiable object.

As a critical contribution, I understand that the scope of the book is focused on a small set of research universities in the United States. Although the editors clarify this point in the introduction, the consequences of neoliberalism on a global scale and its specific impact at the local level are not always well documented throughout the book.

The relationship between neoliberalism and education, although a global phenomenon, is expressed differently in different settings, depending on the type of institution, the characteristics of each national or regional education system, and the characteristics of each community that lives that neoliberal expression. Of course the authors cannot account for all those differences. An analysis of a very small number of elite education institutions located in a few states in a single country does not account for the complexity of the phenomenon of the neoliberal experience of higher education.

A second aspect that I would like to highlight as a constructive critique is that the authors almost exclusively point to the university as the institution contributing to the neoliberalization of the student experience. They examine how the university expresses a neoliberal ideology through the curricula or through its university extension projects and tutoring, among other aspects.

The authors’ critiques of the university are valid, but the university is not the only source responsible for the neoliberalization of the student experience. This phenomenon has to be put in context. In this sense, I believe that there are some unanswered questions. What role does the state play in the neoliberalization process of higher education? How do the companies that finance part of the university apparatus influence it? How do various public and media discourses generate demands for what is expected of the university? How does the non-academic community respond to those demands? How do global metrics intervene in the decisions made by the university?

Some answers to these questions are briefly mentioned in different chapters: For example, Laviolette mentions the exemption of taxes from Pennsylvania University, and Cai and Majumdar acknowledge that neoliberal discourse and its influence are not only the responsibility of the university but also of key

actors, such as parents. But in general, the authors focus their criticisms of the neoliberalization process almost completely on the institution of the university.

The contributions in *The Experience of Neoliberal Education* help us to understand the surreptitious path of the neoliberalization process within U.S. research universities, and how neoliberal policy negates previous

inequities (in many cases, presenting them as a lack of merit). At the same time, the authors situate elite individuals and institutions in a place of greater advantage in relation to the whole. Through criticism of, and increased visibility of these mechanisms of exclusion, inequality and commodification, perhaps we can generate effective solutions that seek to overcome neoliberal impacts on social life.

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