Title: A Destructive Vacuum: The Marginalisation of Local Knowledge and the Reassertion of Local Identities

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Keywords

Higher education, globalisation, local knowledge, private and public goods, education about Islam

Article

Recent decades have seen many countries undergo politico-economic change brought about by the state's ostensible retreat and the market's gradual expansion. These changes are promoted by their advocates as an overdue reduction in the power of the state and its satellite bureaucracies, and consistent with assumptions about the ability of institutions and individuals to perform efficiently (Jonathan, 1997). Social sectors such as health, housing and education which were formerly run on social development consensus, requiring public regulation and resources, have been deeply affected. In the realm of education, words such as 'privatisation', 'export of education', 'triumph of the market' and 'consumer choice' have become increasingly common. Education has been re-branded as a trade item, earning increasing amount of revenue for the producers (Altman, 2006; Czinkota, 2006; UniversitiesUK, 2007). In this trade, the exporters are usually the developed countries and the importers the developing countries.

Conceptualisation of education as a service and a trade item is underpinned by a normative understanding of the relationship between education and society. In this regard, education is mainly understood as a private good, useful to individuals for acquiring skills saleable in the market. Increasingly, this market is

not local or national but global. Particularly, the management of technology, people and finances are seen as trans-cultural activities, thus enabling people with specific skills to become members of a global labour force. A case in point is the rapid emergence of franchised higher education institutions in major cities of developing countries (from Cairo to Kaula Lumpur) offering almost uniform degrees in information technology, human resource management, business studies, etc. This trend has created a need for uniform or at-least comparable methods of assessing educated human resources from across the world for participation, or utilisation, in a global market. It is also the motivation behind various recent endeavours to create homogenising quality control mechanisms and indicators, either at regional or global levels.

The orientation of education as a private good and, indirectly, the impact of internationally calibrated quality control standards are increasingly disassociating education, particularly at tertiary levels, from local and national contexts. At the same time, we are living in an age when this very process of homogenisation is creating its reaction in the form of the regeneration of local identities, as persuasively shown by Barber (1995). These linguistic, religious or ethnic movements are often rooted in the fear of the obliteration of the local by the global. The participation of young people in such movements across the world has been recognised by several scholars (Epstein, 2001; Miller, 1994; Rucht, 2002). With the continuing intensification of globalisation, it is reasonable to assume that opposition to it as well as the participation of young people in it will continue.

What happens when the education systems increasingly prepare young people for a global economy, marginalising local forms of knowledge in a time that also recreates and revitalises local identities? How does the resulting gap between local identity and local knowledge get filled? Who or what fills this gap? These questions have not received sufficient attention.

The study of Islam in educational systems can be considered as a case study in this regard. Surprise is often expressed at the participation of well-educated young people in movements propagating Islamism or political Islam. While only a fraction of young Muslims become part of such movements, the underlying a-historical and absolutist understanding of Islam is more widespread. It is common to meet Muslim doctors, computer experts and engineers, who carry strikingly a-historical views about their religious traditions. These young professionals, equipped to participate in the global economy also reflect the gap between local identity and local knowledge.

Some light can be shed on this situation by noting that while these persons acquire state-of-the-art knowledge of their own professions, their knowledge of their religious tradition comes either from the early education in *madrasas* of various shades, emotionally powerful but intellectually deficient state-sponsored Islamic Studies, and the sound bites of the media. They often enter higher educational institutions with emotional attachments to Islam and a rudimentary knowledge of terms such as *Shari'a*, *Jahiliya* and so on. Their higher education is often bereft of any systematic, scholarly study of their religio-cultural traditions;

rather it is dominated by a technical education combined with, in some cases, a sprinkling of 'easy to pass' courses on Islam. Consequently, when, propelled by a variety of factors, they often find it not in the educational institutions but in the pamphlets, booklets, websites and gatherings of Islamists. Here they find religious terms already familiar to them re-interpreted into a modern dictum.

The advocates of a 'return' to Islam have been able to make religious values, however rigid, seem relevant to modern society. They have been able to bridge traditional and modern segments of society. They have both articulated the manner in which these symbols should serve political ends and convinced large number of citizens that 'Islamization' is a necessary and beneficial process (Nasr, 2003, p. 70).

By successfully re-interpreting traditional concepts, Islamism's discourse is able to give the people both the assurance of tradition and hope for the resolution of modern problems such as unemployment, lack of social services, police state, corruption, cultural imperialism, etc. In other words, it is able to fill the gap between local knowledge and local identity. Many young men and women who are attracted to Islamism's discourse do so in the belief that they are following the essential teachings of their faith. Instead of knowing the plurality and contested nature of norms and institutions, many believe them to be eternal and monolithic from the time of the Prophet. The emotional identification with Islam is thus often conjugated with a superficial and ideological knowledge about the object of attachment. The resulting cycle feeds the *Jihad versus McWorld* battles that we see all around us.

To break this cycle, first at a philosophical level, Ruth Jonathan's insight can serve as a useful beginning: "The merits of the free market as a principle for the distribution of 'goods' in society cannot rest on an ideological justification which seeks to legitimate a universal, all pervasive set of distributional arrangements, irrespective of contingent conditions in the society in question and regardless of the logical features of the goods at issue"(Jonathan, 1997).

This means that one needs to re-assess whether educational practice lends itself to be a wholly or mainly a private good. Contrary to the current dominant understanding, education is both a public and a private good. Education is a social practice whereby individual minds are nurtured, not individually, but through a collective process. This means that what an individual gets educated about depends on how others are educated and how much they are willing to share it, and how much of that education the individual is able to access. All this then presupposes the social, cultural and economic preconditions of learning. Hence, contrary to the current dominant understanding, education needs to be understood as both a public and a private good.

Conceptualising education both as a public as well as a private good is a necessary step towards constructively bridging the above-noted gap between local identity and local knowledge. One of its implications is that the role of higher education institutions cannot solely or primarily be to prepare young people for selling their skills in the market. They must also help students gain

academically sound acquaintance with the traditions of the societies of which they are a part as well as of the wider human cultural heritage. The need for a well-rounded education that prepares young people not only as producers of skills and consumers of goods but also as heir to complex and multi-faceted human cultural heritage has perhaps never been greater. Armed with such a conception of education, a positive role can be played by international quality control institutions and instruments. If the quality control and quality assessment of higher education will incorporate both the local and global knowledge, it may lead to rethinking of education across the globe.

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