

Amit Basole contribution

Contributed by Amit Basole
Monday, 21 January 2008

My fundamental

concern in my own work lies in knowledge production outside the

University and in unsettling the real and perceived hegemony of the university as a privileged site of knowledge production. I see social theory produced within the western Academy and its satellites all over the world as unable to break the hold of European liberal-radical thought and hence look to see if other types of emancipatory/liberatory discourse can come from non-university sites. So in a sense, the first hierarchy I concern myself with is that between different types of knowledges as defined by their institutional sites of production. Since knowledge produced in different locations in society also acquires labels such as "serious knowledge" versus "trivial knowledge", formal versus informal/tacit, etc, I am interested in investigating these labels. My first edu-factory post on Eurocentrism and the multiplicity of knowledge production sites was reflective of these concerns.

So while I am not insensitive to the debates on the changes in higher education systems in the neo-liberal period, my interest in them is located within this "larger" framework.

Since

this round of the Edu-factory discussions is supposed to focus on "hierarchy within the higher education market, and the university as a place of hierarchisation in the labor market" my first thought was that I would not have much to contribute towards this, particular given that many people on this list have done excellent work on this issue. I have been reading Marc Bousquet's "How the University Works" with great (and morbid) interest. Being a graduate employee myself, and also somewhat active in the grad employee union on campus, I recognize the importance of such struggles. The capitulation of faculty-student body to the "will of the administration" is depressing. One anecdote will suffice. Last Spring, my institution, the University of Massachusetts decided (that is, some top manager decided in the collective name of the University) to award

an honorary doctorate to Andrew Card, a close associate of George W. Bush and one of the pre-eminent architects of the War on Iraq. It is hard to call

this a "controversial decision" because barring a few hard republican party supporters, the faculty and the graduate and undergraduate student bodies were quite united in their opposition. Despite repeated demonstrations and protest, including booing and placards

inside the hall as Card was awarded the degree (see

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D(["mb", "\u003ca href\u003d\"http://www.youtube.com/watch?v\u003ddp4MYii7MqA\" target\u003d\"_blank\" onclick\u003d\"return

top.js.OpenExtLink(window,event,this)\u003ehttp://www.youtube.com/watch?v\u003cWBR\u003e\u003ddp4MYii7MqA\u003c/a\u003e) the administration went\u003cnahead with its plan. To me this blatant disregard of student and\u003c/faculty opinion was emblematic of the process of change described by\u003c/nBousquet. This was in Spring 2007. School resumed in the Fall with hardly a whisper about this whole fiasco. Only after decades of restructuring (of both organization and\u003c/ndiscourse) could the management have such confidence, confidence in the\u003c/npliability or ineffectuality of the faculty and the student body.\u003cbr\u003e\u003cbr\u003eBut all this is not news and is only preface to my main point. I persevered in submitting a post because of the second aspect of the question raised by Edu-factory editors. \u003cspan style\u003d\"font-size:10pt;font-family:Arial\" lang\u003d\"EN-GB\" \u003eH\u003c/span\u003e\u003cspan style\u003d\"font-size:10pt;font-family:Arial\" lang\u003d\"EN-GB\" \u003eow to construct an autonomous university?\u003c/span\u003e The first part of the discussion on hierarchies is supposed to inform the second part on

autonomous universities. Here I believe that some lessons from the Indian experience could be the more relevant rather than my own experience in the Western Academy. In the context of India, this discussion on hierarchies and autonomous university assumes a different guise. We are now speaking not only about hierarchies created by higher education institutions in the formal labor market (the world of written contracts, tax-paying firms and employees), but also in society at large, where a vast number of individuals will never go to university or participate in the formal labor market. Yet their lives will be shaped by the university. A farmer has never gone to agricultural college where an agricultural scientist works. Both have knowledge but the knowledge of both is valued differently by society and by the market. These two will never compete directly for the same job (can the farmer be a visiting professor at our hypothetical university?). The scientist produces knowledge in the form of scholarly publications. The farmer produces knowledge in the activity of growing his crop. The veracity of the scientist's knowledge is tested by peer-review and replication in the laboratory or field. The veracity of the farmer's knowledge is tested by nature's "review" and replication in life. In response to a mistake, the scientist retracts his research paper/finding, in response to a mistake a farmer may lost a significant proportion of his income and go into lifelong debt. Further the farmer's knowledge activity feeds me, yet I value his knowledge less. Why?" ,1]

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all this is not news and is only preface to my main point. I persevered in submitting a post because of the second aspect of the question raised by Edu-factory editors. How to construct an autonomous university? The first part of the discussion on hierarchies is supposed to inform the second part on autonomous universities. Here I believe that some lessons from the Indian experience could be the more relevant rather than my own experience in the Western Academy. In the context of India, this discussion on hierarchies and autonomous university assumes a different guise. We are now speaking not only about hierarchies created by higher education institutions in the formal labor market (the world of written contracts, tax-paying firms and employees), but also in society at large, where a vast number of individuals will never go to university or participate in the formal labor market. Yet their lives will be shaped by the university. A farmer has never gone to agricultural college where an agricultural scientist works. Both have knowledge but the knowledge of both is valued differently by society and by the market. These two will never compete directly for the same job (can the farmer be a visiting professor at our hypothetical university?). The scientist produces knowledge in the form of scholarly publications. The farmer produces knowledge in the activity of growing his crop. The veracity of the scientist's knowledge is tested by peer-review and replication in the laboratory or field. The veracity of the farmer's knowledge is tested by nature's "review" and replication in life. In response to a mistake, the scientist retracts his research paper/finding, in response to a mistake a farmer may lost a significant proportion of his income and go into lifelong debt. Further the farmer's knowledge activity feeds me, yet I value his knowledge less. Why?

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always and everywhere considered inferior to knowledge produced in the university or in the laboratory. But it is sufficiently general a phenomenon to warrant interest. Particular when we think about the characteristics of an autonomous university, I think we should think about how it will incorporate different types of knowledge. In India at least, a very large part of knowledge production and transmission, particularly of the kind that is directly relevant to sustaining livelihoods, takes place outside the university. An autonomous university would be required to be conscious of the multiple locations of knowledge production in society, be they with farmers, artisans, women, indigenous peoples. As Gigi Roggero noted, "The division between intellectual and manual labor...is not objective, but a device to hierarchize and to control labor power." An autonomous university would be founded on a non-distinction between the two, at least as far as respect for knowledge goes. It will recognize that all work is "knowledge work." At the Vidya Ashram in Varanasi, via the concept of dialog on knowledge in society, we have arrived at a concept of a "lokavidya academy" (loka = people/world, vidya = knowledge) which will be an academy that attempts to recognize and represent all types of knowledge in society.

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On a related note let me bring in the issue of language here. The role of language and translation and of global English, has already been brought up several times in this round. To this discussion, I would like to add another dimension of language, namely, the role of language in formalization of knowledge, in making informal knowledge formal. The university, almost by definition produces and distributes formal knowledge. This question is particularly relevant in the Indian context because the language of higher education is English but this language is spoken by a very small minority of Indians. The University is complicit in maintaining this hierarchy of languages. This is a very old and heavily debated issue in the post-colonial context. Ngugi wa Thiong'o has written about it, as did Gandhi and Ram Manohar Lohia in their day. Thus a very important challenge facing the autonomous university is the issue of the language in which education will be imparted, knowledge will be produced. To restore prestige to people's knowledge, prestige will have to be restored to their languages. I am not saying anything terribly new. In the current climate, as India becomes more and more dependent on insertion in the global economy to sustain her "magical" rates of economic growth, English language training centers are booming. But the new economy only has place for so many. The majority is once again

excluded and it is their own knowledge in their own languages that sustains them. The medium of instruction for higher education remains an extremely complex and controversial question today. And again I don't pretend to have an answer.

This brings me to the final and perhaps controversial point on localism and the autonomous university. Jon Solomon in an early post raised this issue and it was brought up again in a later post, from where I quote. The worry is "that the various attempts to construct alternative or nomadic university experiences might end up reproducing ossified forms of national and cultural resistance to the neoliberalization of the university."

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This statement needs some unpacking. It is clear that many forms of resistance to neoliberal globalization are in fact national/cultural (even the preeminent challenge of Islam, can be interpreted along culturalist lines). Which of them are "ossified" and which are not? By what criterion do we distinguish the two? While Jon may have intended something different, in the liberal/radical European tradition of social thought (in which we may include Marxism) there is a tendency to frown upon cultural/nationalist resistance. It is equated with conservatism, parochialism and backwardness. It is somehow inferior to cosmopolitanism, internationalism, globalism. We want to be culturally global (but not economically global, at least not in the current form of globalization). Of course we are sophisticated enough to distinguish between being culturally global and being culturally the same. We don't want homogenization (mcdonaldization) but neither do we want insularity. But to me there is nothing a priori objectionable about either. We have seen malignant forms of both, benign forms of both. Resolving the tension between a locally culturally grounded worldview (which may form the basis of the resistance) and a benign view of other cultures with a respect for their own struggles, their own existence (in other words a benign ethnocentrism), is a major challenge today. Unfortunately there is not much in the European experience to help us in this regard. All we find is a

parochialism of universals (to use Immanuel Wallerstein's phrase) and an ethnocentrism in denial. An autonomous/open university must also be a local, non-parochial university. I stress the local as much as the non-parochial.

Hopefully the foregoing is not entirely out of place.

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