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African Roots of US University Struggles

From the Occupy Movement to the Anti-Student-Debt Campaign

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In November 2011, in Liberty Square, the ground of the Occupy Wall Street movement, before the encampment was brutally destroyed by the police, a student campaign against student debt was launched, now spreading to other parts of the US and possibly beyond its borders. The campaign is the latest manifestation of several years of student mobilization across the country, spreading from California to the Northeast, along with similar struggles in Central and Latin America, Asia and more recently Europe, all against the increasing commercialization of the university and the skyrocketing cost of education. The literature on this movement is already very broad and growing, but to fully understand its prospects and motivations, we must also place it in the broader context of the long cycle of struggle against the neo-liberal restructuring of the global economy and [its corollary] the dismantling of free public education that began in Africa in the mid-1980s, and has since spread across the world, as the recent student revolts in England and Chile (among other places) have demonstrated.

There has been more at stake in each case than a resistance to the "commercialization of knowledge." The struggles of African students in the 1980s and 1990s were particularly intense because the students realized that the drastic university budget cuts, which the World Bank's Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) demanded, signaled the end of the "social contract" that had shaped their relation to the state in the post-independence period, which had made education the key to social advancement and participatory citizenship. They also realized, especially on hearing World Bankers argue that "Africa has no need for universities" (as some did in a meeting in Harare with African vice-chancellors, in 1986), that behind the cuts a new international division of work was being re-articulated, re-colonizing African economies and accordingly devaluing African workers' labor.

In many ways the African experience was the beginning of a process that within three decades was to affect educational systems across the planet; thus there is much we can learn from it.

Essentially, SAPs *made it a condition for African governments receiving loans from the World Bank and IMF to pay off their foreign debts*[1] so that they cease financing university education. This request reversed the policy African nations had established at independence, when the expansion of the university system was considered by all social forces the precondition for economic and political progress (Carnoy and Samoff 1990). Starting in the early 1980s, in report after report, international financial agencies like the World Bank condemned this policy. Though it was likely one of the African states' main post-colonial achievements, for in the space of a few decades, with a tempo some have defined "unprecedented" (Jahoda 1968:161), despite the difficulties African economies faced, a tertiary education system was created, assuring

Africans a presence on the international intellectual scene in every field.

Officially the "adjustment" of African universities was justified as a means to provide a more equitable and efficient allocation of resources. World Bankers insisted that too much public funding was allocated to the universities at the expense of primary education, and that the new measures would not affect enrollment, because mechanisms would be put in place (loans and credit schemes) ensuring that students could continue their studies by means of private funds. Introducing "cost sharing" and "user's fees" and making students responsible for the financing of their studies – it was argued – would guarantee a better student selection, and ensure that only those motivated would seek a university degree.

But such arguments were disingenuous, presuming a prosperous population with untapped financial resources, and not a population like Africa's after the 1980s, where the combined effect *of* Structural Adjustment Programs caused widespread unemployment and placed even the most basic necessities – food, housing, transport, health care – out of reach for the majority. This disregard for the financial state of most Africans was all the more peculiar since World Bank studies painted Africa as a continent of "diminishing resources," where the first mandate of educational policy was not to raise expectations (World Bank 1989). How indeed could a population *that was* de-monetarized and barely capable of feeding itself find the resources to pay for university tuition, accommodations, food, transport, educational materials or qualify for bank loans? *Many parents found it difficult even to meet the costs of elementary school.* In *Ghana, the World Bank and IMF's "success story" at that time, in the aftermath of structural adjustment, enrollment in elementary schools dropped for the first time since*

independence, although subject to a modest fee of 200 Cedis, a sum equivalent to one day of work at the minimum wage.

What the rhetoric of efficiency actually masked was on the one side a policy of retrenchment phasing out low income students, as well as educational programs deemed unprofitable from the viewpoint of international agencies' long-term economic goals; on the other, the full marketization of the university systems that, in order to survive, had to open their gates to business and to a host of foreign NGOs directly financed by the very same governments imposing the budget cuts demanded by the World Bank.

Thus, while the most apparent consequences of the restructuring of African universities were an unprecedented brain drain and the collapse of their physical and pedagogical infrastructure (overcrowded hostel rooms, the lack of educational materials, frozen-below-subsistence faculty wages); its most important long-term effects were what some described as "studying under the link" – the link being dependence on "donors," agencies, NGOs, foreign universities and first and foremost business – and others as "scholarship in the market place."[2] In either case, making academic departments and programs "pay for themselves" has brought business-like concerns and competition to the heart of universities, pitting one department against another for the most money-making courses and programs, turning teachers into business consultants (often with the collaboration of their classrooms), letting international agencies and NGOs run programs, shape curricula, selectively supporting departments.

The most immediate result of these developments has been the breakdown in the type of intellectual cooperation that is essential to academic life.[3] But the physical and administrative degradation of African institutions, and their enforced dependence on business

and foreign agencies, have also cleared the way to the appropriation by multinational corporations (agribusiness and pharmaceutical companies in particular) of indigenous systems of knowledge, and the application of Intellectual Property regulations. For less and less, have the universities been able to scrutinize and oppose the foreign companies' operations. To this process has contributed the World Bank's "African Capacity Building Initiative," which has proposed the formation of regional centers, directly sponsored and controlled by external "donors," in charge of preparing state personnel, a role fulfilled in the past by academia (World Bank 1991). In the words of the Bank, the purpose of these centers is to "capture the elite," and train cadres of technocrats-economists and policy analysts identifying with the goals of international capital and capable of functioning as transmission belts between the circle of international finance and the African states. Not surprisingly, while African teachers have migrated in droves, expatriate personnel are now employed in every sphere of Africa's educational systems at wages far higher than those African teachers have so long fought for. Indeed, according to the UNDP, by the 1990s, African countries were receiving more foreign "advice" per capita than any other continent. And "the IMF, multilateral financial institutions, the UN system of agencies, and bilateral donors are deeply involved in the formulation of [its] economic policy" (UNDP 1992: 40).

In sum, the restructuring of the African educational systems has tried to ensure that Africans should not become autonomous producers of knowledge and have a free hand in the shaping of their societies, but should instead enter the new century politically and economically re-colonized. Academia has been restructured according to the prospected manpower needs of African economies, in a context where the latter are being demoted to the lowest

echelon of the international division of labor, as economies primarily based on mineral extraction and commercial agriculture, which means that Africans are expected to participate in the world economy mostly as providers of cheap labor.

This project has not gone unopposed however. By the 1980s and 1990s, student struggles spanned the African continent, with constant strikes and demonstrations against the imposition of SAPs. This opposition has been so effective that the World Bank's initial attempt to reduce the enrollment and close many universities has failed. Though the present enrollment rate in Africa is 5%, much lower than any other region of the world, the number of university students is still doubling every five years. Somehow, all the beatings and arrests of students in the last 25 years have not managed to defeat the desire of African youth to gain a college degree and use the university's resources to that end. [4]

US University Struggles

As in Africa, in the US as well, the gutting of public higher education over the last decade must be placed in the context of economic globalization. Companies can now draw workers from across the world. They can make precarity a permanent condition of employment and they can enforce constant re-qualification, so that education becomes an endless, life-long process of trying to catch up with the demands of the labor market. The financial crisis compounds the university crisis, projecting trends in the organization of work that places future workers in a state of permanent subordination and continuous devaluation of the knowledge acquired as the only prospect for the future. In this sense, students today are struggling less to defend public education

and more to change the power relations with capital and the state, and to regain some control over their lives.[5] We can draw here a parallel with the revolt of French workers and youth against the decision by the Sarkozy Government in 2010 to expand working-life by two years. We could not understand the vehement opposition this decision generated if we only focused on the time-span workers would have had to forfeit on the path to pension. Clearly, what brought millions to the streets was the realization that what was really at stake was the loss of any hope for the future, which is the reason why so many young people also joined the barricades.

The same understanding is what makes the present cycle of university struggles different from those of the past and gives them a more open anti-capitalist dimension. This is the significance, in my view, of the circulation of the idea of the common/s in the rhetoric of the student movements internationally. The call for "knowledge commons" reflects not only a resistance to the privatization and commercialization of knowledge. It reflects the growing awareness that an alternative to capitalism and the market must be constructed starting from the present, because engagement in a collective process of knowledge production is not possible in today's academic environment. Skyrocketing fees, courses tightly tailored to narrow economic goals, oversized classes and overworked, underpaid, precarious teachers (all the ingredients of Africa's "adjusted" universities) – degrade the learning process, calling for the creation of alternative forms of knowledge production and of spaces where they can be organized. This, perhaps, is how we can begin to think of the "politics of occupation," i.e. as a means to take over spaces needed for the creation of new commons.

I am going to come back later to this point. Here I would like to stress that what motivates the changes that are taking place in the universities are not only the demands emerging from the new forms of production (like the computerization of work) but, more importantly, the challenges posed by the "reproduction of labor power." The introduction of fees and the commodification of education must be read as part of a process of disinvestment in the reproduction of the work-force that began in the late 1970s, with the abolition of open admission, in response to the 1960s' campus revolts and the general surge of social insubordination, of which youth were among the main protagonists. Forcing students to pay for their education is in fact a radical departure from the policy that prevailed in the post-WWII period, when investment in education was seen as productive of social discipline, increased labor productivity, and (like education in post-colonial Africa) a training in citizenship and democracy. As already mentioned, the student movements that spanned in the late 1960s from France to the US, challenging the authoritarian character of schooling, the use of universities for military ends, and the "productivity deal" at the heart of the investment in education, dispelled that illusion. Making students pay for their training as future workers is thus an attempt not only to discipline the student body and the future labor force with the burden of loans and debt, but to *make of education a commodity and a direct means of accumulation*, and turn the university into a site of immediately productive work activities.

It is in this context that the neo-liberal strategies that we saw implemented in Africa in the 1980s and 1990s are now being applied back in the "center." But just as they have not completely succeeded in Africa, it is doubtful that these strategies will succeed in the US.

In Africa, the main focus of student struggles was opposition to the repayment of the sovereign debt that was used to impose SAPs. In the US, instead, the target is directly the individual debt which students accumulate to pursue their studies, and the consequences of defaulting, a phenomenon which has continued to increase, especially at for-profit colleges, where it has topped 11.6%.

Discussions with students suggest that debt is an issue that tends to be evaded, at least in the immediate present. Many don't like speaking about it. Weighing on them is relentless neo-liberal propaganda portraying education as a matter of individual responsibility. As Alan Collinge writes in his *Student Loan Scam* (2009), many are ashamed of admitting that they have defaulted on their student loans. The idea that (like social security pensions) free education should no longer be a social entitlement is seeping into the consciousness of the new generations, at least as a form of intimidation, contributing to blocking any attempts to make abolition of debt an open movement.

Still, the Edu-Factory network, a network of university teachers and students from around the world taking the struggles in the universities to be as important to this period as the factory struggles were for the late 19th and early 20th century, was right in making debt a central rallying point for the international student movements. Opposition to debt has strategic importance. As Jeffrey Williams points out, debt is a powerful instrument of discipline and control and a mortgage on the future (Williams 2009). Fighting against it is about reclaiming one's life, and breaking with a system of indentured servitude that casts a long shadow on people's lives for many years to come.

How can we build a movement capable of imposing a jubilee on student debt, as well as restoring free public education, and

(equally importantly) question what we mean by "knowledge" and which knowledge is worthwhile for us to gain? I think achieving these objectives will require a long mobilization involving the cooperation of many social subjects. A key step towards it is an education campaign about the nature of debt as a political instrument of discipline, dispelling the assumption of individual responsibility and demonstrating its collective dimension. The moralism that has been accumulated over the question of indebtedness must be exposed. Acquiring a degree is not a luxury but a necessity in a context where for years education has been proclaimed at the highest institutional levels as the fault line between prosperity and a life of poverty and subordination. But if education – as we are told – is a must for future employment, it means that employers are the beneficiaries of it.

From this viewpoint, student debt is a work issue that unions should take on, and not academic unions alone. Teachers too should join a debt abolition movement, for we are now on the frontline: we must save appearances and assume that for the university, cultural formation is of the essence. Yet, we must accommodate to profitability requirements, such as oversized classes, the gutting of departments, overworked students, carrying at times two or three jobs. Debt is also a unifying demand; it is everybody's condition in the working class worldwide. Credit card debt, mortgage debt, medical debt: across the world, for decades now, debt has truly become our main "common." Debt, therefore, can be a universal signifier and a terrain on which a re-composition of the global work force can begin.

We are only at the beginning of this process. A group organizing around student debt in this spirit is the Occupy Student Debt Campaign (www.occupystudentdebtcampaign.org); which is asking student loan debtors to pledge to withhold their debt payments

once a million other debtors make the pledge. So far the campaign, in which teachers too can participate, is primarily based in New York, though in the months to come we expect to see it spread to other states. In the meantime, we can anticipate that, if successful, the anti-student debt movement will be met with stiff repression, especially penalizing students of color or from immigrant communities.

This is an issue the student movement must confront. Mass direct action has a long history in the US, despite the existence of a repressive institutional machinery operating through the police, the courts, the prison system and even the death penalty. The Civil Rights Movement and later the Black Power Movement confronted the police, with its hydrants and dogs, they confronted the Klan and the John Birch Society. Still, the differences in the power with which students from different communities face the university authority and the police must be brought out in the open and politicized. Organizational decisions must take them into account, keeping in mind the great diversity of conditions in which students find themselves. In addition to the higher risk incurred by people from communities of color we must also take into account, in every type of mobilization, the students who cannot afford being arrested because they have children at home, they have families who depend on their presence, or have illnesses and disabilities preventing them from participating in certain types of actions. These are matters of paramount importance in a movement, and they concern all students. The capacity to protect those who face the harshest consequences and to accommodate different types of initiatives is a measure of the strength and seriousness of a movement, without underestimating that struggles are always fluid and transformative, and those who may have not participated yesterday may be the first to “occupy” tomorrow.

The situation in the US is not unique. Today students are engaging in "occupations" all over the world to make their protests visible, though it is no accident perhaps that the two countries where the present cycle of "occupy" struggles ignited, Tunisia and Egypt, are African. The challenge now, I believe, is to develop a long-term vision of what the struggle must accomplish beyond the abolition of the debt and the return of free public education. For in the absence of broad long-term objectives what has often come to the foreground in some university occupations has been the glorification of risk-taking.

The broader question is the persistence of sexism in today's radical politics (both in Africa and the US as well as other parts of the world): that is, the fact that as in the 1960s, radical politics continue to reproduce the sexual division of labor, with its gender hierarchies and mechanisms of exclusion, rather than subverting it. We certainly confront a different situation from that described by Marge Piercy in *The Grand Coolie Damn*, which portrayed the role of women in the anti-war movement as that of political housewives. But what has been attained is a situation of formal equality that hides the continuing devaluation of reproductive activities in the content, goals, and modalities of radical work. Crucial issues like the need for childcare, male violence against women, women's broader responsibility for reproductive work, what constitutes knowledge and the conditions of its production, are still not a significant part of radical discourse. This is the material basis of sexist attitudes.

We need a radical movement that programmatically places at the center of its struggle the eradication of social inequalities and the eradication of the divisions between production and reproduction, school and home, school and community, inherent to the capitalist division of labor. I hope I will not be charged with gender bias if I

say that it is above all the task of women to ensure that this will occur. Liberation begins at home, when those who are oppressed take their destiny into their hands. Challenging sexism and racism cannot be expected from those who benefit from them, at least in the short-term, although men should not be exonerated from the responsibility of opposing inequitable relations. In other words, we should not expect that, because we are in a radical setting, the forces that shape relations between men and women in broader society will have no effect on our politics. This is why, despite the leap in the number of female students in classrooms, the terms of women's presence on campuses and in radical groups has not qualitatively changed. What has prevailed has been the neo-liberal ideology of equal opportunity that has validated gender and racial hierarchies in the name of merit and valorized the social qualities needed for competition in the labor market. These are all essentially the traditional attributes of masculinity: self-promotion, aggressiveness, capacity to hide one's vulnerability. I cannot stress enough that radical politics cannot succeed unless we challenge the existence of these attitudes in our midst. It is time, then, that the broader transformative vision which feminism promoted at least in its initial radical phase, before it was subsumed under a neo-liberal/institutional agenda, be revitalized. This time, however, we must fight for the eradication of not only gender hierarchies but all unequal power relations in our schools, in this process also redefining what knowledge is, who a knowledge producer is, and how intellectual work can support a liberation struggle rather than function as an instrument of social division.

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[1] *These debts had presumably accrued to finance development programs.* On this subject, see Silvia Federici, "The Debt Crisis, Africa, and the New Enclosures." In *Midnight Notes* N.10, 1990. Republished in Midnight Notes Collective editor, *Midnight Oil: Work, Energy, War. 1973–1992*. Brooklyn, New York, Autonomedia, 1992.

[2] I am referring here in particular to Mahmood Mamdani, *Scholar in the Marketplace. Dilemmas of Neo-Liberal Reform at Makerere University, 1989–2005* (Kampala: Fountain Publishers, 2007) one of the best sources for the effect sof neo-liberal restructuring in African Universities.

[3] Mamdani speaks in this context of the "Balkanization" of African universities, in the sense of an increasing dis-integration, motivated by an unequal level of economic success and reluctance on the side of more well-to-do departments and programs to share their wealth with the rest of the university.

[4] The period of struggles between 1985–1998 is chronicled by Alidou, Caffentzis, and Federici in *A Thousand Flowers* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2000). On this subject see also Alidou, Caffentzis and Federici, "We No Go Sit Down: CAFA and the Struggle Against Structurally Adjusted Education in Africa." In *Journal of Higher Education in Africa*, Special issue on Student

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