Neoliberalizing Higher Education in Greece: new laws, old free-market tricks

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ABSTRACT Amid a financial crisis that has shifted politics in Greece to conservative market-driven ideologies and policies, specific major changes are proposed by the Greek Ministry of Education for primary, secondary and higher education. With the gradual disappearance of public space and of the welfare state, under the pressure and the auspices of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), education becomes one more space quickly geared up towards privatization, marketization of learning and educational goals while the character of free public education is radically redefined. This article addresses the changes in higher education legislation and policy in Greece and analyzes the discursive constructions that legitimize such a change.

Introduction
There is a growing worldwide tendency to open public education to different degrees and forms of commercialization and privatization. This tendency has its roots in neoliberalism - that is, the economic, political and cultural practices that give primacy to the market order where profit and consumption are the defining factors of reality – a reality where corporate greed is given primacy over collective good (Leys, 2001). In neoliberalism we are witnessing ‘the financialization of everything and the relocation of the power center of capital accumulation to owners and their financial institutions at the expense of other factions of capital. For this reason, the support of financial institutions and the integrity of the financial system becomes the central concern of the collectivity of neoliberal states’ (Harvey, 2005). Almost forty years after the first well-documented neoliberal experiment with the overthrow of democratically elected Salvador Allende in Chile in 1973 (Letelier, 1976; Harvey, 2005, 2006) and the establishment of free-market rule, neoliberalism as an economic and political doctrine is still testing the limits of humanity worldwide (George, 1999; Harvey, 2005; Klein, 2008) while professing deregulation, privatization and release of the State’s social and welfare responsibilities. After the catastrophic consequences of neoliberalism on an economic, social and cultural level in different parts of the world - for instance, Latin American countries such as Mexico, Brazil, Equador, Argentina, Uruguay and the Dominican Republic (e.g. Huber, 2004; Larrea, 2006; Margheritis & Pereira, 2007; Chomsky, 2010; Harnecker, 2010; Grugel & Riggirozzi, 2012) - in May 2010 Greece joined the long parade of countries receiving ‘help’ from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) so as to avoid national bankruptcy, prompting Greek economist Savvas Rombolis to talk about the creation of a ‘Latin Europe’ (Greek Labor Institute, 2011). The resort to this ‘rescue’ mechanism signaled a radical turn to neoliberal policies that became official under the auspices of transnational capital in the form of Greece’s lenders with the collaboration of domestic corrupted politicians (Stilianakis, 2011; Doxiadis, 2012). In the last two years, under the guidance of IMF officials, the European Central Bank and the European Union, and abiding to unprecedented loan terms for a debt that has been accumulated through illegal and fraudulent practices and dates back to the 1800s (Lynn, 2011; Reinhart & Rogoff, 2011), the Greek
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social and welfare state has been collapsing through what is known in the neoliberal discourse as ‘austerity measures’. Under the label of ‘rationalizing and restructuring an ill system’, Greeks have been experiencing draconian cuts in wages and pensions, and the violation of vested rights, of labor laws, and of collective bargaining rights that are accompanied by massive layoffs (Rombolis, 2010; Euronews, 2012; Kritikidis, 2012; Smith, 2012). The war on the public good, as a central strategy of the neoliberal dogma, has resulted in rampant unemployment, a hostage situation for many employees who have no alternative but to agree to ‘flexible labor’, reduction of their income and loss of their benefits, national depression, and, of course, stagnation of any type of real economic growth and development (Stiglitz, 2011; Krugman, 2012; Varoufakis, 2012).

Public education, as a public good par excellence in Greece, could not escape or remain immune from this vicious neoliberal attack on the welfare state and the public good (Butler, 2011). Following the reform of primary and secondary education labeled ‘The New School’ (modelled on the failed American ‘No Child Left Behind’ Act; see Meier & Wood, 2004), higher education was next in the ‘neoliberalization plan’. The decisive blow, altering its public mission, vision and goals, came on 24 August 2011, when the Greek Parliament voted on and passed a new law for higher education, 4009/2011.[1] This bill replaced the popular 1268/82 law On the Structure and Operation of the Institutions of Higher Education (Greek Parliament, 1982), admittedly by international comparison one of the most progressive laws on higher education, especially in terms of participation of the student body in institutional decision making.

In this article, I am discussing the emerging neoliberal landscape in higher education in Greece, as it is illustrated both in the public discourse, as well as in the text of the new law 4009/2011. There are interesting patterns in the discourse of the law that signal new practices that are not necessarily clearly spelled out. Hegemony over the discourse is an important neoliberal strategy because in this way public consensus is gained (Fairclough & Chouliaraki, 1999; George, 1999). The current discourse on higher education is taking shape along the lines of a market-driven society, and seems unapologetically to espouse a neoliberal dogma that turns education into training, universities into corporations, knowledge into service or commodity, and students into clients. As the current neoliberal experiment is under development in Greece, I am also looking at the context of a larger assault on the welfare state and the public good, as a strategy of submission for the imposition of the logic of the market, while I attempt to explore an alternative notion of democratic politics.

The New Law 4009/2011 on Higher Education

Before I set out to discuss the current reform in Greek higher education, I want to make two short introductory points about the constitutional status of education in Greece. According to Article 16 of the Greek Constitution (Greek Parliament, 2008), ‘Education constitutes a fundamental mission of the state and its aim is the ethical, intellectual, professional and physical formation of Greeks, the development of their national and religious [sic] consciousness and their shaping into free and responsible citizens’ and ‘all Greek people have the right to free education in all levels in State institutions’ (emphasis added). The Constitution also stipulates that higher education ‘is provided exclusively by institutions that are legal entities of public law with full self-governance. These institutions function under the oversight of the State and have the right to be funded by it and function in accordance with the laws that concern their organizations.’ Self-governance is an international practice for institutions of higher education that guarantees free circulation of ideas and academic freedom. According to constitutional law professor Costas Chrysogonos (2011), the self-governance of the universities has a dual basis: on the one hand, it is an individual right since it is a natural extension of Paragraph 1/Article 16 of the Constitution on academic freedom; obviously, academic freedom would be jeopardized if universities were integrated in the state mechanism where primary and secondary schools belong. Universities are public but not state institutions. They enjoy a particular concept of autonomy that safeguards academic and scientific freedom. On the other hand, self-governance is an institutional guarantee, since the self-governed university is institutionalized in order to contribute to disciplinary growth and educational development. As a matter of fact, while academic freedom can be exercised individually by the members of an academic community, the exercise of full self-governance presupposes the
collective, *ab indiviso* participation of these members. These initial points are important to the degree that the new law has already raised many issues of unconstitutionality. While I do not want to defend the old educational system in place and claim that it is flawless, as it could improve on many levels, I want nevertheless to point out that the current reform is not an improvement of a dysfunctional system. It is, in essence, a carte blanche for the private sector to enter a traditionally public space and a ticket for the debasing of degrees and the fragmentation of disciplinary fields. Here, I should also note that the Ministry of Education has not conducted any sort of in-depth, systematic assessment of existing structures where it would base its new propositions. It mostly relied on a discourse of debasing universities, professors and curricula without any real data on what it called ‘pathologies’ of higher education.

In connecting the word with the world, as Brazilian educator Paulo Freire has always encouraged us to do, we cannot miss the fact that there is a lot in the word that pre-casts and shapes the world. What follows is an analysis of the discourse found in the text of the new legislation. In order to mark the shift in discourse, I also draw some comparisons with the text in the old law that was abolished in favor of the new one.

New educational policies in the past two years have been contextualized in the framework of the demands of a ‘new modern era’ of technological progress and competition. In the dominant discourse as expressed by the Greek Ministry of Education, we live in a competitive modern world, where new technologies largely define the future of life as we know it. Our world is made up of ‘knowledge societies’ that don’t have material existence, or if they do, it is not made explicit in the official texts. In these societies, knowledge is central as it is projected as holding the promise of the future. This kind of knowledge is transparent and neutral and it equips individuals with the skills and competences they need to operate in professional, cultural and social contexts. This knowledge can take many different forms, including e-learning or lifelong learning. The only knowledge that counts is that which is practically useful and applicable (Gounari & Grollios, forthcoming). One can also locate a discourse of scientism with an insistence on the ‘scientific method’ that legitimizes standardization, quantification and observable and measurable outcomes.

The new law’s title resonates more with an operating manual than with legislation that articulates and defines one of the most important arenas of human activity. Both in the initial draft title ‘Organization of Higher Education, and Independent Quality Assurance and Accreditation Agency (HQA) in Higher Education’ as well as in the final 4009/2011 title, ‘Structure, Operation, Quality Assurance of Studies and Internationalization of Institutions of Higher Education’ (Greek Parliament, 2011b), words of the new world order such as ‘quality assurance’ and ‘accreditation’ found their way in, resonating with the kind of language found in the Bologna Process:

> Institutions should have a policy and associated procedures for the assurance of the quality and standards of their programmes and awards. They should also commit themselves explicitly to the development of a culture which recognizes the importance of quality, and quality assurance, in their work. To achieve this, institutions should develop and implement a strategy for the continuous enhancement of quality. The strategy, policy and procedures should have a formal status and be publicly available. (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, 2005)

A central value in all this is ‘quality’. Quality education, claim the law sponsors and the Ministry of Education, should be based on internationally accepted criteria, as if these are by default appropriate, and the local socio-political context seems to be ignored. The term ‘quality’ acquires a transcendental meaning in most policy documents, since what it really means is not defined. The omission of any content for quality raises questions because it is not self-explanatory. When we talk about ‘quality’ education we should ask pertinent questions such as: what socio-political goals is this quality serving?; what are considered ‘quality curricula’?; what are their goals, vision and underlying political philosophy?; and so forth. Quality is not a technical issue. For example, for a critical educator, quality might mean exposing students to alternative, subjugated versions of history, raising awareness for social issues, and the ramifications of science for human life and social organization, challenging any and all authority by questioning self-evident truths and enabling students to exercise their agency. In international experience (see the United States, but also New Zealand and the UK), the call for quality usually calls for a heavier emphasis of technical knowledge and skills acquisition in a social efficiency model that aligns with the job market and social
stratification at the expense of less ‘commercial’ subject matters, such as humanities (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1985; Ball & Youdell, 2007). ‘Quality’, however, is not a transparent, neutral term. It is situated in specific socio-historical contexts and defined by the particular mission of education and the goals of the educational practice.

Essentially, the new law, in a clear technocratic turn, opens the door to standardization (in line with the general European Union [EU] guidelines and practices), the privatization of the Greek public university, and the commodification of knowledge through: (a) the reduction of the already small state funding [2] that forces universities to seek alternate sources of money in the private sector and the business world; (b) the reorganization of curricula on the basis of an instrumentalist approach, so that students gain skills and competences to fill necessary positions in the job market but also in the prescribed social stratification; (c) the introduction of tuition fees in what historically has been free and public education for all; and (d) an oligarchic management of institutions of higher education with the participation of members outside the academic community that abolishes the democratic self-governed character of the institution (Gounari & Grollios, forthcoming).

Most importantly, the new law signals a marked shift from the university as a public good to the university as a private enterprise, in a general context of privatization and sell-out of national resources and public goods. The discourse used and the policies included set the stage for an education where the individual will thrive through relentless competition, where collectivity is abolished, where only ‘useful’ knowledge counts, and where ‘quality’ and ‘excellence’ serve as the excuse for a corporate standardization of the university, as well as academic life and thought. To that effect, references to social and political consciousness are removed from the text, and the term ‘people’ (‘continuing education and ongoing formation of the people’) originally used in Article 1.3 in the 1982 law is now absent.

Following an Anglo-Saxon model of training for skills and competences, Law 4009/2011 seems to aim at gradually transforming universities into incorporated organizations whose function, mission, goals and research will be largely dictated and guided by the market, ‘to meet the needs of the job market and professional fields, as well as to the growth needs of the country’. The State is basically failing its responsibilities, and discursively this can be illustrated by the fact that the relevant stipulation that could be found in the introductory paragraph in Article 1 in the old higher education law (1268/82) - ‘The State is mandated to provide higher education to every Greek citizen who wishes to do so, through the processes stipulated each time by the law’ - is missing from the new law.

According to prominent academics and professors of constitutional law (Chrysogonos, 2011; Stamatis, 2011), there are at least twenty-three clauses deemed unconstitutional and in direct violation of Article 16 of the Greek Constitution. In the next section, I will outline some of these points that raise issues of unconstitutionality and I will discuss the new emerging discourse on education.

Education vs. Training: redefining the character of public education

In the language used in Law 4009/2011, there is an obvious focus on aligning the university product with the needs of the job market. Any language about collective consciousness is abandoned, and ‘scientific, social, cultural and political consciousness’ is replaced with ‘responsible citizens capable of meeting the demands on all fields of human life with scientific and professional adequacy’. The product of the university formerly known as ‘knowledge’ is now for the first time called ‘service’, and this ‘service’ now really means ‘training’: ‘in order to fulfill their mission, institutions of higher education must ensure and improve the quality of the services [emphasis mine] they offer’. In contextualizing the word ‘services’, we are directed to the business world: this is the place where ‘services’ are customarily offered. The choice of words here points to a not-so-hidden agenda, since discourses are reflective of particular social and economic practices. Institutions have specific meanings and values that are expressed in language in systematic ways. Higher education here seems to be redefined as a ‘business’ whose goal is ‘training’ for the job market and the demands of a technologically advanced society that is informed through the principles of ‘accountability’, ‘excellence’ and ‘quality assurance’. However, the standards and
goals for these are not listed - they are instead used as catchphrases that sell a ‘good’ product. In the new ‘training’ context, ‘knowledge is privileged as a form of investment in the economy, but appears to have little value in terms of self-definition, social responsibility, or the capacities of individuals to expand the scope of freedom, justice, and democracy’ (Giroux & Searls-Giroux, 2004, p. 263). As Ball and Youdell insist, ‘these are not just technical changes in the way in which education is delivered. Privatisation tendencies provide a new language, a new set of values, incentives and disciplines and a new set of roles, positions and identities within which what it means to be a teacher, student/learner, or parent, are all changed’ (2007, p. 38).

In the text of the new law (4009/2011), there is a conflation of training with the mission of higher education especially since the idea of ‘application of knowledge in the professional field’ is introduced in Article 4.1.a as part of the mission of institutions of higher education (IHEs): ‘to produce and disseminate knowledge through research and teaching, to prepare students for its application in the professional field and to cultivate the arts and culture’. The new instrumentalist mission is further articulated in Articles 4.1.d and 4.2: continuing education through distance learning on the basis of scientific and technological research in the highest level of quality based on internationally acknowledged standards; addressing the needs of the job market and professional fields as well as addressing the growth needs of the country. Here we are witnessing a separation of intellectual culture and professional skills and competences as the foundation of the new "paideia" of our neoliberal times. Despite the acknowledgment of the ‘need to form responsible citizens,… with respect to the values of liberty, democracy and social solidarity’ civic education appears to be reduced to job training with an overemphasis on the professional field in every single paragraph referring to the mission. As Giroux and Searls-Giroux (2004, pp. 251-252) note, ‘Within neoliberalism’s market-driven discourse, corporate culture becomes both the model for the good life and the paradigmatic sphere for defining individual success and fulfilment.’ They use ‘corporate culture’ to refer to an ensemble of ‘ideological and institutional forces that functions politically and pedagogically to both govern organizational life through senior managerial control and to fashion flexible and compliant workers, depoliticized consumers, and passive citizens’. Through a deepening of entrepreneurial function, the dominant neoliberal anti-statism fully aligns with the markets and frees up education from the state monopoly, allowing private parties to promote their interests.

The influence of market penetration is manifested on multiple levels in the new law for higher education where the over-celebration of ‘new practical knowledge’ is attempting to take over the last inches of pedagogical spaces where true ‘higher learning’ is supposed to take place. This standardization of the educational practice, the centrality of the ‘scientific’ method in producing measurable results, and the fascination with quality without specific content resonate with Stanley Aronowitz’s ‘knowledge factories’ (Aronowitz, 2000) or ‘diploma mills’ (Noble, 2001).

The de-basing of the pedagogical mission of universities so as to create a fertile ground for management schemes that answer to the imperatives of corporate order is evident in the Greek Education Ministry’s vision for higher education. For instance, there is only general mention of how graduates will be ‘absorbed’ in the economy as well as of the connection of those with degrees with the market, but there is a lot more detail on the ways the private sector will have access to higher education and to the intellectual work of the academic community.

The mission of the university is subtly being re-articulated in terms of job market/stock market; knowledge now is perceived as a commodity, a product, and the only knowledge that counts is that which is directly applicable and marketable; curriculum will soon be subordinated to specific corporate needs, and also research; tuition fees could be introduced that would serve as a premium for the university’s product; students are seen as clientele, and assistants and lecturers as cheap disposable labor, with the eradication of any rights or participation in decision making. Power is shifting from faculty to administration and, simply put, the present higher education discourse is shifting from the pedagogical to the corporate, a quite common trend around the world. In addition, as I will discuss in the next section, the new managerial scheme proposed is converting public universities into market-driven enterprises and, coupled with the fact that state funding is cut to the bare minimum, institutions of higher education must seek and secure funding through business endowments and other ‘gifts’, and also exchange research and knowledge produced for this funding. This way, the public and democratic character of the university is undermined, while humanities and social sciences which, by their very nature, cannot attract
market interest are marginalized. As a result, and along the lines of what has happened in other countries (the United States being the prime example), research will be driven by what’s more marketable, what kind of knowledge is the best commodity. This will inevitably lead to fragmentation of knowledge into small instrumental, observable and measurable bits; studies and degrees will be devalued and research will be destroyed.

The Board: oligarchy and legitimization of corporatization

We trust that academics will choose renowned figures for the Board - intellectuals, artists, important businessmen. Why shouldn’t a ship owner be a member in the Board of the University of Piraeus, that is the maritime university? (Sophia Giannaka, member of the Greek Parliament, sponsor of the new law [Greek Parliament, 2011a])

What happens when power shifts from faculty and students to administration? Law 4009/2011(Article 8, para.1), in an unprecedented anti-democratic move, introduces a new overarching authority: the Board of the Institution, that will run, oversee, approve and rule the new university. As mentioned earlier, Greek public universities, like most institutions of higher education worldwide, have been constitutionally bound to be self-governed; their governing bodies are made up of elected members of the academic community solely. When elections become appointments, there is something very dangerous threatening the democratic processes of an institution. The democratic and participatory governance in universities established in the former 1268/1982 law is abolished under the new law. The new (paid) board not only invites outsiders to the governance of the institution, it also acquires superpowers, in terms of both responsibilities and authority, which necessarily shrinks the participation of other constituencies that are now relegated to an advisory role. The board is constituted of fifteen or nine members, depending on the size of the university. Eight (or five) are members of the academic community, and seven (or four) are external members who have no organic relation to the institution. This clause violates the constitutionally protected self-governance of the university by introducing to its governance people who are unrelated to the institution. Beyond that, the new administrative model keeps out of the governance the majority of university educators (lecturers and adjuncts) since they can elect but not be elected (only full-time assistant and associate professors are eligible for office), and it minimizes the participation of students. By concentrating power in the hands of a 15- (or 9-) member board, it abolishes the self-governance of the different colleges (schools), since these are not represented any more in the central governance of the institution. In addition, these outsiders are in essence imposed and not elected and are only accountable to the Ministry of Education, which points to the anti-democratic nature of the new governance scheme and uncovers a fertile ground for favoritism in terms of appointments. These ‘appointments’ hardly guarantee the meritocracy, accountability or transparency that seem to be the ‘hallmarks’ of the new law. The basic conditions for the election of an external member are his/her broad recognition in science, humanities or arts and/or recognition in social, economic, political or cultural life on a national or international level. Furthermore, the 4009/2011 law also allows the founding of endowed chairs with funding by any natural or legal entity. These do not constitute a problem as such, since outside expertise can always be valued in terms of the ‘know-how’ or the ‘applicable’ part of knowledge. However, when ‘outsiders’ serve with more than an advisory role and have power over the curriculum, disciplinary knowledge, and particularly funding, then this can become a major problem. Often ‘outside’ members might not have knowledge of the workings and nature of education, particularly the pedagogical aspect of it, and they will want to push a particular agenda that benefits them in some way. The participation of outsiders implies that ‘outside’ interests will also find their way into the institutions of higher learning, as two examples demonstrate. The donations that Nike founder Phil Knight made for the Knight Library, the Knight Law Center and numerous endowed chairs at the University of Oregon stopped when it was revealed that the university was a member in a student-driven labor rights organization that had publically criticized Nike. The ties of corporate culture with institutions of higher education are also obvious in a recent ‘ethics quandary’ (Wilson, 2009) at Harvard Medical School in the case of Matt Zerden who, while attending Harvard Medical School, grew wary as one of his professors promoted the benefits of cholesterol drugs and seemed to belittle a student who asked about side effects. After some
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research, Zerden discovered that the professor in question was a paid consultant to ten drug companies, including five makers of cholesterol treatments, in addition to being a full-time faculty member at Harvard Medical School. Harvard Medical School received in 2009 alone $8.6 million from pharmaceutical companies for basic science research and $3 million for continuing education classes on campus.

I would like at this point to return to the question in the opening quote of this section - ‘why shouldn’t a ship-owner be a member in the Board of the University?’ - and uncover some layers of meaning. While in principle I have no objection on the involvement of non-academics in higher education in an advisory/consulting role, I think it is a legitimate question to ask what qualifications a well-known ship-owner has that make him [sic] eligible to be a member of a higher education board, other than the fact that he [sic] has been extremely successful in accumulating money for himself and the shareholders in his companies. What experiences would representatives of this particular profession have to contribute to public education when, more often than not, they themselves have had no ties to it? It is common practice for Greece’s privileged classes to go through elite education in private institutions abroad. Giannaka’s quote acquires even more weight when contextualized historically: there is a long history of ship/maritime industry in Greece that provides evidence that ship-owners, by and large, are the kind of employers who employ underpaid workers in their shipyards/ships, who opt for low-paid, often undocumented immigrants, who exploit workers by providing minimal safety, often resulting in numerous labor accidents yearly. It is the same caste of employers who lobby to the government to violate longshoremen’s vested rights, labor laws and collective bargaining rights. Amid a financial crisis that has pushed to despair and poverty the majority of the Greek population, Greek ship-owners remained in 2010 at the top of international shipping, controlling 15.6% of worldwide tonnage. They have been and continue to be the most affluent class and those benefiting most from tax cuts and favorable law amendments.[3] As these lines are written, 654 ships ordered by Greek ship-owners are being built in China and Korea (one wonders why not in Greece, since it also has state-of-the-art ship-building facilities and this would provide new jobs for a population that is plagued by unemployment). These ‘successful’ ship-owners owe millions to the Pension Fund for Longshoremen and Seamen, who, when unemployed, receive a stipend of 298 euros per month.[4]

To summarize, in the Ministry of Education’s ‘connection’ of the university with the workforce through board members, there is an expectation that these representatives of capital will invest in the public good and care about unemployment. Clearly, any radical intervention in the division of labor will take place first and foremost at the expense of workers. The push to align the universities with the needs and demands of the market and to include its representatives in decision making conveniently ignores that the people behind these markets (bankers, managers, CEOs, ship-owners), beyond a shared privileged class position, have distinct goals and aspirations in the framework of competitive capitalism. In that sense, the university could potentially become the arena of clashing market interests. However, in the discourse of the Greek Ministry of Education, this is called ‘creative competition’, which brings to mind David Harvey’s (2005) ‘creative destruction’, where he talks about the process of neoliberalization. Creative destruction translates into destroying, for example, a public education system in order to prove that it can operate successfully only when it is run by the private sector and when its curricula are dictated by the markets. The ongoing assault on Greek public higher education should be seen in the framework of developing a market society in a country where the public good was left to deteriorate beyond repair so that it can be easily transferred to the hands of the private sector.[5] The ‘reform’ of public education is in reality a massive new profit opportunity for business.

Conclusion

The neoliberal higher education reform, part of which has been discussed in this article, is in line with what former Greek Prime Minister George Papandreou called the ‘revolution of the self-evident’. Discursively, the ‘revolution of the self-evident’ ushered in a new era, where the most reactionary, anti-social policies have been promoted under the label of ‘revolution’, with the argument of ‘self-evidence’. This is also manifested in the discourse of the sponsors of the law who went as far as to call it a ‘great reform’ that will fight the ‘crisis of values’ and ‘a great undertaking
that has an ideological and political basis, ... has national responsibility, respect to the public interest, a vision and faith that something will change' (Greek Parliament, 2011a). Pertinent questions here would be: Great reform for whom? Who benefits from this new law? What is the ‘crisis of values’ (and whose values)? How was this crisis created? And how do lawmakers define ‘public interest’ (and is it really in the interest of the many)?

Here we are witnessing a glorious implementation of the Gramscian ‘common sense’ concept. The Greek Ministry of Education’s regime of truth and its discourses are redefining what is ‘common good’ and ‘public interest’. In this discursive framework, it is considered self-evident to make ‘sacrifices’ for the sake of optimizing capital accumulation through privatization of the public good. The language of common sense (or self-evidence) appears to be natural (and neutral) and works to justify policies, political decisions and practices that are largely designed to oppress, debase and block dissent while imposing the logic of the market. This is why these extremely important changes in higher education are presented as ‘technical recommendations’, using the language of quality and excellence. The goal is for people to not only embrace this common-sensical, self-evident language but, at the same time, recreate and reproduce it along the same lines. It is through the construction of consent that neoliberalization gets accomplished - that is, by ‘democratic means’ (Harvey, 2005). Interestingly, the current neoliberal takeover of higher education is promoted as ‘progressive’ since it also aligns with the Bologna Process, and Greek higher education can finally pride itself that it is part of the European higher education ‘family’.

The current crisis of politics in Greece and the neoliberalization of higher education constitute a pedagogical challenge for a very important reason; they force us, while acknowledging that education alone cannot change society, to rethink what kind of education we really need, with what mission and what goals, especially at a time when neoliberal significations and semioses seem to become the norm in all areas of human life and activity. While critiquing and challenging the new law for higher education, we should also work on building a counter-project for public higher education (Bourdieu, 1999; Fotopoulos, 2007).

In order to address the question ‘what kind of education do we need’ it is necessary that we first address what kind of ‘democracy’ and what kind of politics we want, asking in what type of society these are possible and through what processes they come into life. Most anti-social measures passed since the neoliberalization of Greece are, in fact, promoted under the label of ‘democratization’, where democratization means the loss of autonomy and academic freedom, devaluing studies and degrees, increase policing of academic space, privatization - and the list goes on. Hence, the discussion on education presupposes the discussion on ‘democracy’ which, in turn, means discussion of politics and desired socio-political structures. In order for the people of a particular society to be able to put democratic processes into practice, an important part of the work of the society should be directed towards the ‘production’ of people who would embrace a vision of liberatory education, that prioritizes human values and envisions and works towards a radical transformation of society, ending all forms of injustice and oppression. The ‘democracy’ I refer to has, among other things, a spatial dimension since, according to Cornelius Castoriadis, it is directly linked to the concept of public space; it is a democracy whose bedrock is autonomy and freedom, where human beings are seen as critical actors: ‘Only the education (paideia) of the citizens as citizens can give valuable, substantive content to the public space. This paideia is not primarily a matter of books and academic credits. First and foremost, it involves becoming conscious that the polis is also oneself and that its fate also depends upon one’s mind, behavior and decisions; in other words, it is participation in political life’ (Castoriadis, 1991, p. 113). Along these lines, Giroux also stresses that ‘[d]emocratic politics and the struggles informed by such a politics cannot come about without putting into place these spaces, spheres, and modes of education that enable people to realize that in a real democracy power has to be responsive to the needs, hopes, and desires of its citizens and other inhabitants around the globe’ (Giroux, 2009). Both Giroux and Castoriadis stress the importance of ‘public space’, one of the first things to disappear under neoliberal rule. Given the profound crisis of economy and politics, the deterioration of social and...
civic engagement, and the general public’s alienation from the political system, the challenge to reinvent a decommodified, historical and political public space is more pressing than ever.

Since April 2009, protests in Greece have been creating a new pedagogical space that needs to be taken into account and analyzed by educators. In this space, a new type of democracy is practiced, in open assemblies in neighborhoods, towns, and cities throughout Greece where people from all walks of life, urged by a sense of responsibility, assume agency and become participants in the public life. These people realize that they are the ‘polis’. They apprentice themselves to self-governance, self-organization, autonomy and participatory processes; they are learning by doing. This is a form of public pedagogy that breaks down the walls of educational institutions and is worth exploring, in order to see what is pushing people to exercise their human agency in these particular instances. Part of it could be attributed to a newfound realization that their private troubles are connected to public issues and that there is a dialectical relationship between the two. In these spaces their voice is heard and they do not need legitimization by any authority. They are giving life to public places, such as central squares, town squares and abandoned buildings, reclaiming them as new agoras for debate and dialogue. This is an example of the ‘political’ becoming ‘pedagogical’ and vice versa.

The Greek university has long served as a similar public space where the political met with the pedagogical. That is why higher education is definitely now an important arena for resistance and change, especially with the implementation process of the new law, without the consent of the academic community, and while its constitutionality is still under scrutiny. It is also an important arena for reinventing democratic politics, and re-appropriating the language of critique and dissent. It is a space where we can question the inherent contradictions of neoliberalism as a political, economic and cultural doctrine; being a consumer is not synonymous with being a citizen, and unregulated free markets cannot produce democracy, equity, social justice, a sustainable environment, and welfare for everybody (Barber, 2001). Another important battle has to take place on the discursive level, in uncovering and questioning the ‘common sense’, self-evidence and naturalness of the neoliberal discourse present in the official educational policy documents and connecting the ‘word’ with particular material practices that re-articulate relations of production, knowledge and collectivity in the context of casino capitalism. Pierre Bourdieu (1998, 1999) has made the case that neoliberal discourses are a significant weapon of implementation of neoliberal policies. By the same token, critical, liberatory discourses that challenge them, make bare their contradictions and ultimately subvert them could be another critical weapon in the hands of those who resist.

Notes


[2] Public funding for higher education for 2004-2005 was 1.22% of Greek gross domestic product (GDP), which translates into 4160 euros per student, compared with the average 7890 euros per student in the European Union.


[4] The quest for cheaper labor has resulted in a dramatic decrease from the 1980s, when longshoremen and seamen numbered 200,000, to 20,000 today.

[5] In the general context of devaluing everything public, the Ministry of Education has demonized professors and universities alike. Among the arguments put forth by the Greek Ministry of Education for the sell-out of public higher education have been the following: funding is not been used properly; there is no accountability or transparency; professors are corrupted and squander money, ignoring the fact that publications by Greek academics are on the rise, with Greece having the highest increase rate among EU countries. In 2007, Greece ranked 17th among the country members
of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and the Greek Polytechnic School of Athens ranked 17th among the top 100 best research institutions in Europe.

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