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The politics of privatisation: insights from the Central Asian university

Dr. Sarah Amsler
Reader in Education

Centre for Educational Research and Development
University of Lincoln
Lincoln LN6 7TS
United Kingdom
+44(0)-771-785-5027

samsler@lincoln.ac.uk

Abstract

The origins of this chapter lie in an informal discussion about the ‘crisis of the university’ organized for social scientists and humanities scholars who were participating in an Open Society Institute seminar from universities across post-Soviet Central Asia, the Caucuses and Afghanistan. The purpose of the seminar was to discuss what I had presumed would be shared experiences of ‘becoming academic’ in universities being transformed through the various policies of privatization and marketization that have come to dominate higher education reform both throughout the region and internationally. The discussion, however, evoked a more provocative decentring of some of the principal criticisms of privatized education now circulating within Anglo-European intellectual space, and a challenge to the transnational alter-education movement to clarify its critiques of privatisation and give texture to the alternative visions being produced. For, in circumstances where privately-owned and operated universities may appear to be the only institutional formations in which learning and knowledge production are not transmogrified through state control, wage poverty and petty corruption, arguments against privatization are harder to sustain at a superficial level. In Central Asian societies, liberal forms of privatized education are therefore often represented and experienced as viable means to eke out narrow forms of intellectual and professional autonomy, even while being recognized as repressive forces of de-professionalization, anti-intellectualism and inequality. This chapter begins from this tension to explore how specifically post-Soviet modalities of neoliberal restructuring amplify a dilemma faced by advocates of critical, public education in post-welfare societies around the world; namely, how to extricate education from dependencies on both managerialist states and the irrational vicissitudes of capitalist markets. It suggests that interrogating what privatization means in practice to educators across variegated spaces of neoliberalism, in particular its operations in relation to local traditions, systems and imaginaries, is vital for deepening our understanding of the situated nature and possibilities of alternatives and strengthening transnational movements for critical education.

Keywords: Central Asia, higher education, post-socialist, neoliberalism, privatization, universities

Biographical note: Sarah Amsler is Reader in Education in the Centre for Educational Research and Development at the University of Lincoln (UK). She is author of *The Politics of Knowledge in Central Asia: Science between Marx and the Market* (2007) and various essays on the politics of knowledge, education and culture. Her current research focuses on affective politics of critical pedagogical work, and the role of education and knowledge in movements to facilitate radical democracy.

Introduction

These are turbulent times for higher educators everywhere. They are marked, on one hand, by a new era of capitalist initiative characterized across the world by the rapid defunding of formerly public education systems, ascendance of academic capitalist knowledge regimes, and transformation of professional identities.¹ On the other hand, there has been a considerable expansion and intensification of political resistance to these processes, with struggles against the privatization and corporatization of education at all levels becoming key elements of social movements contesting the dominance of neoliberal rationalities in labour, health care, social welfare and party politics. It therefore seems that ‘the university is in crisis, almost everywhere’ (Burawoy 2011a, 1; Calhoun 2006). And, when we look to the ‘growing waves of struggle against these incursions as students, staff and faculty in Europe, Latin America and across the Middle East organize, occupy and resist the transformation’ of educational institutions and social life, these appear to be revolutionary times indeed.²

It would thus be possible to speak in common-sense discourses about the globalization of education (Lauder *et al.* 2006); to identify the supranational forces of political, economic, and cultural change that are redefining the meaning and purpose of higher education; and to point to intricate international networks of resistance to these changes. Despite this framing, however, the lived ‘crises of the university’ are not homogenous phenomena. They can thus neither be explained with reference to a uniform assemblage of theoretical tools, nor acted upon using a singular single approach to educational, social or political action. The limits of overextending the ‘neoliberalization of education’ thesis – which are in fact the often-overlooked ‘*almost everywhere*’ in Burawoy’s statement above – are particularly visible in the everyday lives of students and educators who are excluded from the global imaginaries that prioritize Northern and Western experiences of academic capitalism, and of those who do not contribute directly to or participate in the new networks of critical educational theory and practice that have emerged within these spaces. For while these networks are transnational and bring together academics and students from the Middle East and North Africa, Northern and Southern Europe, the United Kingdom, and North and South America, there are still significant absences.

Notably quiet in this movement to resist the subsuming of universities into the capitalist economy and the transformation of educational work into economic labour are voices from post-Soviet and particularly Central Asian societies – which, for the purposes of this paper, include Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. In one sense this is a remarkable exclusion, as the organization, meaning, and social purpose of higher learning and research in these relatively young states have been sites of both educational crisis and some of the most ambitious projects to reform universities in the twenty-first century.³ At the same time, while these reforms have

often been connected with the expansion of neoliberal policies, practices, and rationalities within the region, they are not reducible to them. Competing political projects such as the state capture of institutions and everyday life, grassroots nation building, and patriarchal and class restoration also play a role.

Across the Central Asian region, therefore, there are some trends that reflect more general tendencies in the neoliberalization of higher education: the formal and informal marketization and privatization of universities; the dominance of policy steering by national governments, international financial institutions and non-governmental organizations; the commodification of knowledge; and the reshaping of professional subjectivities and academic identities by forces external to the local spaces and professions themselves. However, there are also marked differences in what these processes mean and how they articulate with local social, professional and pedagogical practices in post-Soviet universities. There are also differences in how they are normatively evaluated, and in the historical and political traditions that can inform contemporary struggle or reform.⁴

This chapter explores some of the analytical lacunae and political disarticulations that are created when the ‘crisis of the university’ is theorized through generalized critiques of neoliberalism that do not account for its multiple modalities.⁵ I begin by discussing current work on the international ‘crisis of the university’ and the emergence of globally networked fields of resistance responding to it. I then consider how the experiences of social scientists and humanities scholars in Central Asia and the Caucasus decentre some of principal criticisms of privatized education within Anglo-European intellectual space – namely, that liberal, state-funded universities are necessarily progressive alternatives to privatized universities– and challenge the transnational alter-education movement to stretch its imagination of the conditions for higher education reform. I then consider how the post-Soviet modalities of neoliberal restructuring in Central Asia, which are dominated by international financial institutions, non-governmental organizations and local power elites, have shaped the transformations of higher education in recent decades. I argue that this has contradictory effects, at once deepening crises in the funding, politics and culture of higher education; providing new opportunities for intellectual and professional development; and contributing to the production of ‘justificatory regimes’ for commodifying higher education.⁶ The chapter concludes on a hopeful note by pointing to cracks in the hegemonic discourses on higher education reform in Central Asia and considers how these might be expanded so that student and scholar activists and critical educators in post-socialist countries are better enabled to participate in ‘global communities of concerned academics’ (Burawoy 2011b), a ‘global autonomous university’ (Edu-Factory 2009: 168), or, most importantly, to improve the quality of higher learning in their own universities and places of everyday life.

The (almost) global crisis in higher education

There are many ways to name the processes of change that are redefining the character of higher education today. The structural transformation of the public university has been described variously as the ascendance of a new form of ‘academic capitalism’ (Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004), an intensification in the privatization, marketization, financialization and commodification of knowledge (Brown 2011; Canaan and Shumar 2008), and an expansion of capitalist relations into the institution of education itself (Caffentzis and Federici 2007). While these processes are regarded in some quarters as progressive, they have also been widely criticized as constituting an ‘assault on universities’ (Bailey and Freedman 2011), a ‘war against democracy and education’ (Stevenson 2011), and the ‘unmaking’ or ‘death’ of public higher education as both an idea and institution (Newfield 2008; Couldry and McRobbie 2010). And while neoliberal reforms come in ‘an almost bewildering array of local trajectories, contingent forms, and hybrid assemblages’ of capitalist logic (Peck, Theodore and Brenner 2009: 96), it is clear that cumulative processes of neoliberal restructuring around the world have fundamentally redefined the social meaning of higher education, higher knowledge, and the academic professions themselves (Amsler 2011a, 2011b; Burawoy 2011a, 2011b; Calhoun 2006; Fischman, Igo and Rhoten 2007; Peters 2005).

Higher education reform has been a central element of transnational political agendas to advance the geographical and institutional reach of capitalist relations and values since the 1970s. Following the early debt crises in the United Kingdom and Mexico at this time, the world’s major international financial institutions developed a ‘package of putatively all-purpose responses to the crisis of international Keynesianism,’ including a radical defunding of public education at all levels and an imposition of ‘efficiencies’ in schools, universities and other social institutions (Brenner *et al.* 2009: 214; Henales and Edwards 2002). Policies and mechanisms of educational privatization were further developed in the punitive ‘structural adjustment’ programs subsequently imposed on Latin American and African countries by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund during the 1970s and 1980s, which George Caffentzis argues ‘tore apart every aspect of their economic and cultural life, leading to an epochal restructuring of the universities’ (2011: 27; see also Federici 2012; Levidow 2002).⁷

At the same time, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development embarked on an ambitious project to transform mass higher education in European societies, transforming it into a system that promoted the social supremacy of vocational knowledge, efficiency and institutional accountability over more critical forms of education (Peters 2007: 3; OECD 1985). By the late 1990s, the principles and practices of neoliberalizing higher education had become reified into a powerful ‘gospel’ of

‘travelling policies’ that were implemented almost unilaterally by international and nongovernmental organizations in state and economic restructuring at the global level, including in post-Soviet societies. A new ‘worldwide reform agenda for the finance and management of universities’ was an integral component of the post-Soviet development agenda (Amsler 2008: 110; Grubb and Lazerson 2006; Johnstone 1998).

The particular forms, lived experiences and social consequences of this process cannot be generalized. However, it is possible to identify an underlying set of ideal-type principles and practices that broadly parameterize education and the academic professions in this context (Amsler 2009, 2011a; Harvey 2007; Olssen and Peters 2005; Seddon 2005; Shore 2010; Spring 2008). These include:

- the undoing of welfare states and social-democratic projects in which public higher education served a particular purpose and where its existence was protected through public funds (particularly through ‘shock therapy’, loan conditionality, structural adjustment and programs of fiscal austerity);
- the rapid expansion of fee-paying students, tuition-dependent universities, profit-producing educational practices, and corporate sponsorship within this broader context of defunding and privatization;
- the standardization and coordination of degrees across ‘European’ and ‘global’ space to increase levels of competition in the ‘knowledge economy’;
- the propagation of new values of economism and efficiency, institutional auditing, short-term and ‘shock-style’ educational reform, and the casualization of academic and student labour;
- the pursuit of elite ‘world-class’ status through the international measurement, ranking and marketing of universities;
- the commodification of knowledge, decreasing public interest in the intellectual content of curricula, and decline of commitments to social justice in education and education for social justice; and
- the cultivation of new, ‘entrepreneurial’ educational subjects who are prepared for precarious work in the ‘new capitalism,’ and of consumer-subjects who regard learning, knowledge and skills primarily as tradable market commodities.

The result of all this, according to Craig Calhoun (2006), is that ‘the costs of higher education have shot up, teaching has been marginalized in many institutions’ priorities (if not their rhetoric), and universities appear less as producers of public goods and more as distributors of private ones.’ Consequently, spaces for the critical intellectual and professional development of higher educators are being foreclosed as teachers become more like contractual workers, are required to constantly adapt their skills and identities to the vicissitudes of market demands in universities, and begin to conceptualize the value of knowledge through abstract standardized criteria of intellectual capital and ‘value added’ labour (Clegg 2010; Davies and Bansel 2010). Perhaps most significantly for the purposes of this paper, neoliberal forms of governance in universities tend to engender the de-professionalization and loss of autonomy of academics and higher educators (Olssen and Peters 2005; Silova 2009).

From the late 1990s, and particularly in response to the first [signings of the] Bologna Accords which signalled an institutional locking-in of transnational power, localized movements of critique and opposition to these processes began to intensify in small pockets of resistance around the world. By the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century, some of the most substantial and transnational movements for public education in recent history began to articulate. From the heavily policed street demonstrations in Greece in 2010 and 2011 to the beleaguered occupations of campus and public spaces in Europe, Latin America, the US, and the UK in 2011 and 2012, and from direct action to the politicization of university life and the development of radical higher education outside formal institutions, there is a palpable feeling that ‘there is a new mood in the air’ (Solomon and Palmieri 2011: 6; see also Amsler 2011a). Calhoun (2006) has argued that ‘versions of the same issues are reshaping education around the world.’ If so, what versions are now shaping the work and professional identities of educators in Central Asian universities?

University crises, decentred

In the summer of 2011, these questions travelled with me as I left to teach at a summer school in Turkey for scholars from Central Asia and the Caucasus, organized by the Central Asia and Caucasus Research and Training Initiative (an Open Society Institute program). The school coincided with a particularly intensive wave of student-led struggles to challenge advances in the privatization, marketization and commodification of higher education in the UK, US and across Europe (Amsler 2011b). As I was involved in the British actions and studying developments in the European struggles, I was eager to discuss both this movement and the alternative education projects with young social scientists and humanities scholars working in post-socialist space. What were their positions on the privatization of universities? How far did critiques of

neoliberalization ascendant in the global North travel to post-Soviet contexts? Could alliances, affinities and critical professional relations be developed between and among us? I went seeking fresh readings of the global crisis of the university, wanting to hear other experiences of working through a period of major economic political restructuring within academic institutions, and hoping to discover novel strategies of analysis, critique and resistance from the quieter spaces of the globalized commons. What emerged instead were the limits of the ‘radical’ critiques of neoliberalization that seem so compelling in my own conditions of work and everyday life, and the poverty of understanding within these critiques of the particularities of struggles in and for higher education outside the geopolitical centres of the alter-education movement.

Most of my colleagues in the seminar were unfazed to hear that American, British and European universities were being transformed from institutions of learning, research and civic life into institutions of economic production and human capital. It was not that discourse on the global ‘crisis of the university’ was old news. Rather, it seemed surprising that the privatization, marketization and commodification of universities could be legitimate sources of such levels anger and anxiety, rather than being regarded as business-as-usual or, indeed, indicators of national progress and accomplishment. In the first instance, the impoverished material conditions of many universities in the region pale in comparison with even the most underfunded public universities in the global North, with students wanting for computer technology, books and journals, appropriate buildings, and in some cases even heat, with teachers’ salaries that are described as merely ‘symbolic’ (Amsler 2009; DeYoung 2007; Dzhaparova 2005; Silova 2009). Secondly, in environments where public dissent on the scale of the recent university struggles in Euro- and Latin American spaces is not only unimaginable but often regarded conservatively, some scholars were incredulous that students – much less professional academics – were protesting at all. Perhaps most significantly, however, the radical critiques of neoliberal politics were entirely out of joint with the argument, promulgated by international institutions, non-governmental organizations and local elites, that the marketization of universities is the only viable means for improving the quality of higher education within Central Asian societies (Amsler 2008, 2009). For today, more than two decades after the ‘immediate post-collapse excitement,’ the liberal education reform discourse in which privatization is packaged is still often regarded as a ‘contemporary, relevant, positive globalising force’ (Baker 2011: 1053).

In this context, and in the absence of alternative narratives, blunt critiques of the privatization and marketization of the university can seem like outbursts of entitlement or cruel attacks on hope. This is particularly so when, as Artemy Magun describes in the Russian context, ‘the opposition perceives [a state] regime as corrupt and authoritarian and the liberal-democratic opposition often combines the language of neoliberalism (denouncing economic “inefficiency” or the lack of transparency) with slogans of

“liberal” democracy’ (2010: 3). In our seminar, some seminar participants agreed that it made sense for students to occupy buildings in Athens, California, London and Madrid. Here, they said, existing forms of knowledge, educational policies, academic freedoms, and progressive teaching practices seem to stand a chance of being preserved either within formal universities or in autonomous educational spaces. But in Almaty, Bishkek, Dushanbe, and Tblisi, academics are more directly engaged in other struggles against different techniques of power and structures of inequality, such as the personal profiteering of academic elites, the imposition of unrelenting and unaccountable state control over curricula and assessment, the routine sale of grades and degrees on informal credential markets, wage poverty and work exhaustion amongst professional educators, isolation of academics from supranational professional communities, an evacuation of interest in intellectual and pedagogical work amongst many students and teachers, the severance of links between higher learning and social mobility, and in some places, the dilapidation of physical structures in the wake of conflict and economic collapse. Our conversation also confirmed what has already been demonstrated in the studies of Iveta Silova (2009), Alan DeYoung (2011) and others: that there is both a crisis of deprofessionalization in Central Asian education, and a deep desire on the part of higher educators to assume control of the meaning and purpose of universities.

It would be possible to explain each of these problems in relation to wider neoliberalizing processes; to demonstrate, for example, that global reform agendas have often led to the emergence of extreme forms of educational inequality, privatization and commodification that are unconstrained by alternative moral economies, democratic principles, or social regulation (Buzgalin 2006; Upchurch *et al.* 2011). But neoliberalizing processes have contradictory effects that also include the fulfilment of long-standing needs and desires for geopolitical recognition, ‘technological innovation, expanded global networks for human rights and social activism, and... alternative forms of communication and information’ (Fischman and Haas 2009: 567). For higher educators, such reforms may also bring new individualized opportunities to study at prestigious universities, participate in exclusive professional development projects, and join intellectual conversations from all over the world. From the vantage of everyday life in Central Asian universities, the neoliberal discourses that have taken root in the region – those that promise bureaucratic transparency (often through the intensification of regulated governance), formal individual equality of opportunity, rapid economic prosperity, and the opportunity to access the material and political privileges of membership in global society – are therefore often interpreted as not only legitimate but desirable alternatives to the material desolation, intellectual marginalization, geopolitical isolation, and abuses of political power that are common features of the academic profession in the region today.

In other words, problems of higher education in Central Asia emerge within a specific social and historical context. Generalized discourses on the ‘crisis of the university’ that appear to explain such problems in the contexts in which they are produced therefore do not automatically offer the same analytical insights elsewhere. My discussions with colleagues from the region thus usefully amplified a dilemma that tends to be muted in work focusing on the Euro-American university: how can we liberate education not only from the dehumanizing vicissitudes of capitalist markets, but also from dependencies on corrupt, managerialist, and authoritarian states, and from uncritical discourses of the ‘new capitalism’ which promise to dissolve the repressions of both?⁸ From where I sat then on the coast of the Aegean Sea – distant from campus occupations, demonstrations and picket lines; outside an ordinarily comfortable consensus on the evils of the marketization of education, and funded by one of the world’s most notorious capitalist speculators and celebrated liberal philanthropists – I began to see that even the most exciting forms of alternative higher education could be regarded as curious forms of voluntary exclusion from the most visible promise of inclusivity on offer – the neoliberal utopia of ‘world space.’

A very post-Soviet neoliberalization

UNESCO has recently claimed that market reforms have had a positive impact on universities in Central Asia; that universities were made ‘free to set up their own governing structures ... hire their own staff’ [and] transform curricula to ‘suit new social realities’ (Varghese 2009: 11-12). But how do these dominant processes of educational reform shape the possibilities for critical forms of education to flourish, for students and teachers to form meaningful educational relationships with one another, or for the creation and defence of spaces for critical academic work within the region?

The term ‘neoliberalism’ now signifies a complex constellation of ideas, discourses, policies, and practices which, while appearing to press in a common direction, are also endlessly assembling and disarticulating in concrete, situated spaces (Bohle and Gerskovitz 2006; Brenner *et al.* 2009; Larner 2000; Peck *et al.* 2010; Ong 2007). Ethnographers working in Central Asian education have thus argued that ‘although the discourses [of educational reform] may be at least aspirationally “global”, the contexts in which they are encountered and adopted are profoundly varied’ (Reeves 2005: 7; see also DeYoung 2011; Humphrey 2002; Liu 2003; Silova 2005; Verdery 1996). However, there is a curious contradiction between this recognition of contingency, on the one hand, and the dominance of neoliberal discourses on education reform, which some critics suggest have ‘become practically identical to that of African countries,’ on the other (Silova 2005: 51; see also Asanova 2006). Accounting for the persistence of this ‘grand narrative of the “transition” to free markets or representative democracy’ (Liu

2003) in Central Asian higher education is thus an important part of making visible spaces for resistance and alterity.

It is often felt that the collapse of the Soviet Union simultaneously left a vacuum of institutional and cultural substance – thus creating an open field of play for ‘a ‘no-holds-barred, fang-and-claw capitalism’ (Solomon and Palmieri 2011: 2) – and opened space for the resurgence of pre-modern forms of political power. To be sure, it was the ‘perceived vulnerability, exhaustion and crisis of an inherited institutional order...that opened up a space for neoliberalized forms of regulatory experimentation’ in Central Asia as it had done previously in postcolonial societies (Peck *et al.* 2010: 214). However, in addition to the social problems wrought by systemic crisis in post-Soviet society, national independence also produced new collective desires for both autonomy and recognition. Once society was apparently liberated from authoritarian forms of political, social and cultural power, alternative social futures seemed possible: for individual and family prosperity, the expansion of civil liberties, increased international communication, and the freedom to explore different ideas and ways of life.

Many of these hopes and desires, however, were rapidly appropriated into neoliberal projects, ideologies, and imaginaries which promised to fulfil them, thus giving rise to intoxicating justifications for even the most extreme initiatives of neoliberal reform (Magun 2010). International financial institutions such as the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, International Monetary Fund, and Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development; international organizations like the United Nations and European Union; and non-governmental organizations such as the Open Society Institute saw in Central Asia a new field of opportunities for the expansion of conditions for market relations in formally liberal-democratic states.⁹ The political and economic spaces into which the former Soviet Socialist Republics emerged as sovereign states were therefore not just neutrally ‘global,’ but were in fact fields upon which increasingly expansionist and divisive capitalist initiatives had begun to struggle for influence and control. What parameters does this create for the development of the academic professions in Central Asian societies, and in turn, for the future of higher education itself?

The case of Kyrgyzstan

Considering approaches to university reform in the Kyrgyz Republic offers one way of exploring this question. The privatization of state universities and the creation of new private ones are issues of considerable debate within Kyrgyzstani cultural politics. While they were once framed parts of a bigger picture in which state enterprises and assets from land and natural resources to health, housing, and education were privatized

through various means during the 1990s, most conversations now revolve around the imperatives of ‘modernizing’ and ‘internationalizing’ higher education (Musabaeva 2008). This debate is often couched in narrow terms: not *whether* to privatize and marketize higher education, but *how* best to do so.

In the wake of defunding from the former Soviet centre, the imposition of strict ‘efficiency’ regulations from international lenders, and the emergence of new opportunities for creating personal wealth through individual ‘entrepreneurship’ and corruption, political elites have had little sympathy for appeals to develop any new form of public higher education here. As early as 1999, one education minister declared that the country’s universities should ‘stop crying’ for public funding and ‘turn their eyes to the world’ (Amsler 2008: 105); a decade later, the Minister of Economy asserted that ‘it is necessary to let universities go on a free voyage, in order to allow market selection to choose the strongest universities’ (Musabaeva 2008: 1). The privatization of higher education – here, in Darwinian-inflected metaphors – is pitched as an already-accomplished strategy for national survival.

But this is not privatization in any clear-cut sense of the term. While the number of universities in Kyrgyzstan has quadrupled since independence, most state-funded universities have not officially been privatized. An agenda to incorporate them was legislated in 2003, but has lain dormant in parliamentary politics since (Musabaeva 2006, 2008; Karegaev 2008). However, most state universities began charging formal tuition fees after the cessation of Soviet funding. The balance of ‘contract’ (fee-paying) students at the Kyrgyz National University, for example, tipped from approximately thirty per cent in 1995 to eighty-seven per cent in 2009 (Varghese 2009: 21), and by some accounts nearly ninety percent of all students are now paying for tuition nationwide (Musabaeva 2006). International financial organizations regarded this organic shock therapy as a success: educators’ salaries fell (in some cases to poverty levels), students’ tuition payments increased, the number of higher education institutions and courses expanded, and government ministries looked suitably distanced from the emerging educational markets that they were being encouraged or coerced to create.

A closer look at everyday life within the universities, however, suggests that rather than being a *marketized* institution of learning which is more closely aligned with economic production, the university has been transformed into both a commodity and a market *in its own right*. Privatization processes take a variety of forms in universities here, including the reorganization of universities into personal business enterprises for politically powerful rectors and academics. Cashing in on the public belief that higher education remains a force for development, and unconstrained by either financial

regulations or political forces within civil society to defend alternative principles of educational and social justice, they are able to extract increasing amounts of money and favours from students and their families for increasingly poor education (DeYoung 2011: 11; Musabaeva 2006, 2008; Osipian 2009). Academics teaching in these institutions are now often paid so little that many are forced to work in two, three, or four precarious posts simply in order to survive; some take up additional work outside the university in international organizations and businesses, or more incongruously in the bazaar (Niyozov 2006). It is difficult to maintain a coherent professional identity in such conditions. Amidst such hyper-precarity, privatizing processes have created what Madeleine Reeves has called a 'new regime of value' in education, one which intensifies the commodification of knowledge from something with intrinsic use-value into a commodity that becomes valuable only upon its exchange for goods, services or financial returns. Or, as one Kyrgyz lecturer put it,

in Soviet times it was enough when you were toasting someone on their birthday to wish for them that their children study well at school, because if that were the case then their future was taken care of, now when you say a toast, you wish them first of all money – money to pay for the school, to pay for the university, to pay so that they can get a nice job [literally, a 'warm place,' *teploe mestechko*]. It's not education you need to get a job now; it's money to get an education!

(Reeves 2005: 12)

These are not purely neoliberal problems; research into the 'spirit of capitalism' in late-Soviet economics assures us of the hybrid nature of political economy here (Paretskaya 2010). Emerging tendencies of corruption within universities during the late Soviet period, for example – what one Kyrgyz professor of sociology has called erosions of *intellektual'niy bezsovestniy* (intellectual honesty) and professional ethics – are sometimes regarded as effects of earlier incursions of market principles into socialized space. 'From the 1970s,' she says,

they began to develop a shadow economics, shadow health service, shadowy education. And they said that now education was free of charge, but nevertheless it became not free of charge. It was [paid for] by some private persons who could manage...entering into the universities.

(Asanova 2003)

As Bikbov argues in the Russian context, ‘the commercial turn that followed the political liberalization of the late 1980s brought an end to high hopes for an intellectually valid and socially just educational system’ (2010: 5).

However, while there were criticisms of such tendencies during the early stages of market initiatives in republics such as Kyrgyzstan (DeYoung 2007; Mitrofanskaya 1999), the histories, imaginaries and systems of value that were once considered alternatives, such as including collective development, orthodox historical materialism, *vospitaniye* (moral education) and education for social cohesion – were delegitimized in development discourses and by nationalizing power elites soon after the Soviet collapse, and replaced by ideals of individualized academic ‘entrepreneurship’ (Silova 2009). Even the most rhetorical promises of the ‘basic contract’ of socialism, like those made in the post-war ‘edu-deal’ of Western European welfare states, were broken (Liu 2003; Reeves 2005: 11).

Perhaps the most pressing problem in higher education in Kyrgyzstan is thus not that universities are marginalized in global trends of neoliberal restructuring. Rather, the particular constellation of unregulated marketization, empowerment of informal cronyism within state bureaucracies, and development of quasi-colonial dependencies on neoliberal agencies of foreign intervention have enabled – or rather, have not constrained – the emergence of some particularly ‘ugly’ forms of privatization (Musabaeva 2008). As in other post-Soviet societies, it is not the case that capitalist commercialization and state regulation are competing against forces of autonomy and critical knowledge production. Rather, there seems to be a power struggle between ‘two rival models of commercialization of the educational sector, namely a “black” and private model versus a centralized and seemingly more transparent manner’ (Bikbov 2010: 3). In other words, Bikbov is arguing that although buying a university degree on the informal market and paying tuition to attend university in almost guaranteed exchange for one at the end of term are not equivalent practices, they are nevertheless grounded in a similar logic of commodity exchange. Both are expressions and effects of market relations in education, both reduce knowledge to its commodity form, and neither is conducive to the development of critical intellectual work or educational professionalism (Bikbov 2010: 3).

In Kyrgyzstan, as across much of the region, international lenders, aid organizations and foreign academic partners have responded to this situation by urging universities to ‘privatize better.’ The theory is that by wresting control of institutional resources and educational programs from corrupt individuals and governments, more ‘democratic’ experts, organizations and businesses will be able to ensure that the ‘correct’ forms of privatization are put in place. This presents itself as a simple solution to profiteering in

universities because it promises to replace informal authority with individual autonomy, bureaucratic standardization with forms of governance encouraging a limited tolerance of difference, coerced conformity with the encouragement of independent and creative thought, opaque favouritism with systems of standardized assessment, didactic pedagogies with the facilitation of active participation, and geopolitical marginalization with inclusion in local and global economies.

Yet the neoliberal paradigms of educational reform that promise all this are precisely those which academics and students have been challenging across the world. The reclamation and reimagining of higher learning in Central Asia today clearly cannot be advanced simply by embracing the same agendas of privatization, marketization and commercialization that are contributing to the deprofessionalization of the academic professions and corroding conditions for critical, democratic education elsewhere. Nor can alternative approaches to reform be invented by simply applying knowledge that has already been produced to theorize these processes, which are rooted in historically specific intellectual traditions and struggles against particular developments in capitalist relations, and which do not necessarily account for alternative modalities of neoliberalization.

Cracks in the crisis of the Central Asian university

Many academics now seem resigned to the privatization, marketization and commodification of higher education in Central Asia. But there are also localized, interstitial, micro-political refusals to conform to the dominant logics of practice; what John Holloway (2010) calls ‘cracks.’ These not only have the potential to disrupt the dominant justificatory regimes, but map on to more generalized tactics for challenging neoliberal agendas in higher education and other social institutions. Les Levidow suggests that there are four such counter-strategies that may travel and take different forms across contexts: demonstrating links among neoliberal reforms, linking resistances across constituencies and places, de-reifying information and communication technologies, and developing alternatives (2002; 12-13). The remainder of this paper will explore where such counter-strategies are at work in Kyrgyzstan, and consider the implications this may have for the future of the university professions.

There are some excellent examples of work analyzing the linkages between micro-reforms, incremental changes and practices of everyday power. ‘Critics need to demonstrate,’ Levidow argues, ‘how all these aspects are linked, how they change the content of academic work and learning, and how they arise from efforts to discipline labour for capital, as part of a global agenda’ (2002: 12). We may look to new narratives of critique and resistance of marketization that are buried in the rejected archives of

Soviet social research and early post-Soviet media, as well as to more recent critical theorizations of educational privatization, aid and reform in the region (Zholdoshalieva and Shamatov 2008; Reeves 2005; Musabaeva 2006, 2008; DeYoung 2011; and Baker 2011). Such work becomes particularly illustrative in when engaged through Levidow's third counter-strategy, is to 'de-reify' learning resources by familiarizing ourselves with the histories, politics and possible uses of materials (and, in this case, imaginaries) that are presented as ideologically neutral (2002: 13). This is particularly vital where nuanced distinctions between liberal democratic and neoliberal education reform are being collapsed in such ways that the relationships between pedagogy, education, and institutional financing are obscured (see. e.g. Amsler 2009 on the symbolic politics of 'student-centred' teaching methods, or Reeves 2005 on the implementation of credit-hour programs in Kyrgyzstan).

A second strategy for developing professional identities beyond the neoliberal frame is 'linking resistances across constituencies and places,' and building relationships of communication and solidarity between professional groups that are presently fragmented and divided. Here, the goal is to 'turn ourselves into collective subjects of resistance and learning for different futures' (Levidow 2002: 12). Although there have been a number of serious university struggles in other areas of the former Soviet Union (Magun 2010), there have been few in Central Asia. One example of an act that could provide opportunities for such linkages to be made in university space is the recent work by a small group of students to challenge the imposition of a major increase of tuition fees at American University.¹⁰ The university administration argued that the increase was necessary to 'increase AUCA's prestige and attract international students, as well as to stop relying on donations' from the Open Society Institute and USAID (Mambetshaeva 2011). While many students receive some type of US-style financial aid, the group was nevertheless 'afraid that most students of AUCA can't afford such rapid tuition changes [and] will leave this wonderful university' (We Are Against 2011). One member drafted an open letter to the administration, suggesting that while the group did not categorically condemn the rise, the university had both failed to acknowledge the difficulties that the increased fees would place on poor students from rural villages, and to publicize compelling reasons for its decision. 'Open up your books,' it urged, 'open up your intentions. Let us see for [ourselves] what picture you see, and let us share the same opinion as you do' (We Are Against 2011).

While this protest appears to have been ephemeral, the group is still open and the online dialogue that it created indicates possible points of critical articulation with wider analyses and experiences of the crisis of the university. 'Thumbs up for the AUCA students finally standing up against commodification and commercialization of the education that was promised to be emancipating and community-oriented,' wrote one member. 'We should definitely challenge these neoliberal values and attitudes to

education as a product and students as consumers' (We Are Against 2011). These are spaces for mutual learning with those confronting similar processes elsewhere in the world, in which university students and academics might begin to critically engage beyond the existing parameters of their institutional professional identities. The question is, how can they be opened up and transformed into alternative 'pedagogies which enhance critical citizenship, cultural enrichment and social enjoyment through learning,' ultimately linking them to the needs of localized struggles? (Levidow 2002: 13)

There are also deeper tensions in the politics of Kyrgyzstani higher education that offer spaces for critique and re-imagination. In his ethnographic study of life in Kyrgyzstani universities, DeYoung (2011) highlights a perplexing problematic. Despite 'catastrophic' failures in secondary education, a severance of the relationship between higher learning and labour, continual increases of private tuition fees, and widespread corruption among educators and administrators, there seems to be an *increasing* demand for higher education among Kyrgyzstani youth and their families. Much of this is driven by economic necessity. However, despite public knowledge that at present the primary value of a university degree is its exchange value in an unstable marketplace of social capital, many people still attend university in the hope of becoming 'educated.' To some extent, therefore, it is the *desire* for non-instrumentalized knowledge and principles of non-market-based intellectual integrity that makes them marketable commodities.

There is a further irony. Because non-instrumentalized knowledge is regarded as luxurious here in this environment where so much is commodified, intellectual freedom, educational access and critical thought have become 'niche markets' – and these have developed primarily in the most systematically privatized and transnationally-networked universities in the region. These institutions are valued more highly than others by students, their families, and many academics not only because they offer adequate material conditions for academic work. It is also because they sell the opportunity for individuals to study, teach, and conduct research in less obviously marketized and commodified ways, and frame this opportunity as part of wider projects to advance individual freedom, social progress, and globalization. It is even more ironically from within these institutions that some of the strongest critiques of privatized higher education are now emerging, and here where there may be possibilities for rearticulating educational privilege as an educational right and social necessity.

But the difficulty of articulating such a critique from within is intensifying. In a recent turn of events, for example, the government of Kazakhstan moderated its dual agenda of privatization and state control to build a new, internationally-networked, state-financed, and institutionally autonomous university. Nazarbaev University (named after the country's president-for-life) is broadly exempted from governmental control over

curriculum and administration, offers full test-based student scholarships, offers first-year foundation courses designed and taught by University College London and is formally affiliated to dozens of elite universities in other countries. It is a nationalist internationalizing project designed to break into the more exclusive world of academic capitalism. The creation of the university represents a shift away from the earlier, more localized and developmentalist logics of neoliberal restructuring in Central Asia towards a newer agenda that reflects the power of global ranking and marketization that is being inculcated around the world through a dense network of multinational financial institutions, non-governmental organizations, universities, and media (Amsler and Bolsmann 2012). It also indicates a shift in the priorities of foreign universities, from either exercising neo-colonial 'soft power' or salvaging a 'generation at risk' during the 1990s, towards strengthening mutual interests in the development of global academic capitalism through the creation of hyper-elite, competitive, and globally networked super-universities (DeYoung 2005; Silova 2005). Joshua Kucera's (2011) has argued that some US-based academics who are associated with the university hope 'to establish relationships with a country that, thanks to its booming oil- and gas-fuelled economy, is poised to be an important business center of the future.' For Kazakhstani students and academics, there are promises that this could be the next big step towards full integration into 'world space.' Kucera (2011) points out that there is evidence of a political slippage, though. For while the internationalization of higher education was once justified through imperfect discourses of liberal democracy, the new rhetoric aligns nationalist with capitalist interest without apology – and, as a result, 'notions like "democracy and civic education" went unmentioned' in academics' own explanations of what they do.

In contexts such as this, sweeping critiques of the privatization of higher education, which have the potential to be productively disruptive and prefiguratively transformative in the historically and socially specific contexts from which they often emerge, may be less useful for making sense of the impacts of neoliberalization on higher education in Central Asia. With some exceptions, neoliberalizing processes are here welcomed as alternatives to some of the very educational and social crises which, elsewhere, are understood as consequences of neoliberal theories, practices, and policies themselves. But it is at this point of tension that we may find the greatest possibilities for producing critical, comparative analyses of the structural transformation of higher education in post-socialist and late-capitalist societies; here where the experiences of Central Asian educators and students become vital for advancing understandings of the politics of privatization more generally. These experiences make visible the lacunae of Eurocentric narratives of the 'global' crisis of the university. They illustrate that the transformative potential of university struggles and autonomous alternatives (such as free universities) weakens in places where even the most basic social institutions are already interstitial, autonomous and precarious. Much of the

power of contemporary critiques of the ‘crisis of the university’ is rooted either in collective demands that post-welfare states to recognize their previous commitments to socialized higher education and autonomous forms of educational professionalism, or in self-organized projects in autonomous education which challenge beliefs that universities must be subordinated to either state or market principles. In Central Asian societies, the framing of all socialism as Soviet socialism and the concentration of elite power within the state means that there is little basis for the first demand. As for the second, the extreme precarity of educational professionals and students means that the economic, professional and political risks of attempting critical or autonomous action are particularly acute.

For their part, the experiences of students and educators Central Asia demonstrate the limits of romanticized imaginaries of neoliberal capitalism as a model of progressive development. They offer practical illustrations of how repressing knowledge of the complexity of these neo-liberal rationalities can undermine institutional democracy and professional development rather than strengthening them. The narrowing of discourses on the ‘transition to the market economy’ in turn occludes critical awareness of the slide towards authoritarian forms of governance in universities in the capitalist global North. The extant bodies of academic work on the transformations of the university as an institution are not replete with records of accomplishment in the advance of socially useful knowledge, rigorous intellectual development or professional life. They are rather dominated by the valorization of efficient management and control of corporate universities on the one hand, and on the other with critiques of the managerial takeover of higher education, the transformation of places of creative exploration and knowledge production into institutions of economic production, the impoverishment and standardization of curricula, the ascendance of instrumentally consumerist orientations towards learning, the obsessions with measuring the quality of knowledge work through alienating metrics, the erosion of free speech and tolerance for dissent within universities, the loss of professional autonomy to audit and accountabilities, and the weakening of the social democratic mission of teaching and research on the whole.

This is not the ‘world space’ that most academics in Central Asia aspire to inhabit, and it is not one that any national or international system of higher education needs. But it is the underside, or rather the risk, of the form of global education that is presently imagined. My conversations with colleagues working in the region suggest that while the necessity of alternatives is clear, we do not necessarily have sufficient collective knowledge or vocabularies to begin developing them together. Drawing attention to a recent essay by William Brehm and Iveta Silova (2010) may clarify this point. In it, they draw on Jacques Rancière’s radically democratic conception of the ‘ignorant schoolmaster’ to make an extremely convincing case for dismantling the colonializing frames of ‘rescue’, ‘expertise’ and ‘development’ that continue to dominate much

international support for educational reform, and for replacing them with frames of intellectual, professional and social equality. What type of collaborations do we need to make these conversations and practices possible? If we are to globalize communities of concerned academics and build the autonomous university – one in which educators can re-imagine non-capitalist forms and purposes of higher education, criticalize learning, and assume control of their own professional development – we must not only learn how to actually learn from one another, but to find ways of doing this together. This learning and doing will need to take new forms of collaboration that transgress the limits of both developmentalist and neoliberal approaches to professional partnership or educational ‘borrowing,’ and that make it possible for educators to theorize and respond to the multiple crises of the university in autonomous, collective and socially meaningful ways.

WC: 7,524 (with notes)

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Notes

¹ The theory of academic capitalism, which is outlined by Slaughter and Rhoades (2004), accounts for the gradual integration of higher educational institutions into the capitalist economy. The concept of capitalist initiative, which must always be understood in relationship with the struggles made to resist it, is from Tronti (1965).

² For articulations between the education struggles, the 'Arab Spring' uprisings and Occupy movements, see Edu-Factory Collective (2011), Curcio and Roggero (2011), and Kumar (2011: 132).

³ For a brief discussion of what the Kyrgyz Ministry of Education and Science have referred to as the 'crisis of the pedagogical cadre' in Kyrgyzstan, see Silova (2009). Other forces of transformation and crisis that have affected educational work in these regions, including war, civil conflict, and political revolution are unfortunately beyond the scope of this paper. For an example of work that addresses this dimension, see Freedman (2007).

⁴ For further analysis of the structural transformation of the university since the 1970s, see Amsler (2011a), Calhoun (2006), Fischman, Igo and Rhoten (2007), and Peters (2005).

⁵ This paper is informed by a theory of the 'variegated' modalities of neoliberalizing processes, developed by Brenner, Peck and Theodore (2009), as an alternative to the 'varieties of capitalism' approach.

⁶ Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello (2007) define the concept of 'justificatory regimes' as coherent assemblages of principles, standards, values and 'tests' that are used to evaluate the fairness of a particular set of systemic relationships, in particular, capitalist relations.

⁷ For a discussion of the World Bank and education, see Torres (2002: 374-375).

⁸ See Norman Fairclough's work (2002) for a definition of 'new capitalism'.

⁹ Carlos Alberto Torres makes a useful distinction between 'liberal' and 'neoliberal' states; see Torres on 'The state, privatization and educational policy' (2002).

¹⁰ To view some of the online discussion within the group, see its Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/#!/groups/122839607785321/>.