

## **A Critique of Commodified Education and Knowledge (From Africa to Maine)**

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by

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Having been reprimanded for stealing an old woman's gingerbread cakes baked in the form of letters, a cheeky schoolboy was supposed to have defended himself [in 1774] by explaining that "the [House of Lords] had lately determined that lettered Property was common."  
(Rose 1994: 24)

### *Part I: The Contemporary Conjunction*

Higher education and the knowledge produced in universities have experienced a remarkable transition in the last half-century. First, the informal epistemic common of academic "Lettered Property" (the texts and research results produced by university faculty members and students) has been enclosed and academics have been expelled or enticed into a neoliberal regime where a mysterious Midas touch commodifies knowledge about everything from life forms to mythic heroes. Second, higher education that had previously been seen as a public good which Church, State and/or Capital largely subsidized in exchange for the right to control its content and form, has in the 1980s and 1990s increasingly become a commodity to be sold in a competitive market by universities to their "customers," heavily indebted students.

Although there previously have been eras when higher education was sold as a commodity and academics offered the knowledge "they produced" to the highest bidder, the contemporary barrier between university and market has grown so permeable that many academics are losing the sense of the distinction. Symptoms of this crisis abound everywhere around and in us, from the language we use to describe our academic educational activities to the legal sanctioning of corporate-university joint enterprises to do research intended to produce commodities. How many times have we caught ourselves speaking about "selling" our programs, finding a "market niche" for our university, and besting our "competitors" who often are simply other colleagues of the same state university system committed to serving the same population? How many times have university officials been urged to follow the lead of the University of California System that has as its motto, "*When it comes to biotechnology, UC means business,*" and

that in the ten year period from 1993 to 2003 had nearly doubled industry-sponsored research in real terms (from \$65 million to \$155 million) (Washburn 2005: 19)?

In this Lecture I will challenge this commodification of academic research and higher education. To do this I first locate a common presupposition of the neoliberal, commodifying vision: knowledge is property. I will review the philosophical arguments concerning the commodification of knowledge and education that began in ancient Greece, continued into early modern times and culminated in the contemporary realization that knowledge is a social product, i.e., it is the production of a common good by means of common goods. I will then show that knowledge is not, should not and cannot be private property. By doing so, I demonstrate that an important presupposition of the commodification of knowledge does not hold.

Second, I will examine the impact of neoliberal policies on university systems in Africa that, among the world's regions, have been *least* able to resist them. They are also the world's most vulnerable, since they are the newest and least developed systems. These results are important for us at USM since they show how commodification operates in context where there are no pre-neoliberal institutional immunities and constraints that would block the forces it unleashes. They provide us with an inverse version of the point that Marx made when he told the Germans that they could read their fate in Britain's recent history by quoting Horace's "De te fibula nattatur!" ("The tale is told of you!") (Marx 1976: 90).

Together, I hope to provide a critique of commodified reason that will add to the defense of the non-commodified aspects of our collective work and its results.

Before embarking on this effort I want to step back a moment and assess the forces in the field. Though the commodification process I just described is very advanced, it seems that critics like myself should not despair and engage in hyperbolic jeremiads like Bill Readings' in his *The University in Ruins*: "The University...no longer participates in the historical project for humanity that was the legacy of the Enlightenment..." (Readings 1996: 5). After all, there are formidable allies on the side of the *de*-commodification of knowledge and education that could and should be recognized and rallied. The existence of these allies is indicated by the fact that discourse concerning the university is still carried on in a categorical framework rooted in an era that rejected the commodification of education and knowledge (and this archaic impulse is being revitalized by winds wafting from the future as well).

Let me begin with the most obvious obstacle to commodification: universities (like churches) are still formally non-profit institutions. (The for-profit University of Phoenix is a rare counter-example.) Universities' non-profit status is often forgotten in the rush to neoliberalize them. University presidents are told to emulate successful corporate CEOs, even though the universities are neither expected to earn a profit nor obligated to maximize returns to their "stock holders." On the contrary, they are expected to realize the goals and objectives embodied in their universities' mission statements that invariably still are committed to provide a public good, immediately for their students, and through their education to the society as a whole which would benefit from a more educated citizenry. [Example: USM's mission statement]. This non-profit status of universities (which gives them their immunity from the tax and accounting principles that are *de rigour* for private corporations) is crucial in keeping the neoliberal discourse from totally hegemonizing the university management literature. In the thrill of the "get rich

quick” neoliberal moment this status is forgotten, but it has not yet be abrogated, even though it often operates as a “fig leaf.” I think of the situation of contemporary university administrators is a bit like that of officials of the Chinese Communist Party who are committed to achieving an egalitarian workers’ state, but are in practice driven to implement the most open forms of capitalist exploitation!

Similarly, knowledge (like language) is still largely conceived as a common good. Indeed, the “intellectual property” approach to knowledge is a misnomer (for a brief history of the phrase see (May and Sell 2006: 18)). Patents and copyrights at present are not property in the “free hold” or “common law” or “full ownership” sense of property [2]. This is indicated by the categorical and temporal limits that are placed on them. There are many products of research and scholarship that cannot be patented or copyrighted (e.g., “mathematical formulas, newly discovered laws of nature and newly discovered substances that occur naturally in the world traditionally have been considered to be unpatentable” and “ideas” can not be copyrighted, only their “particular expressions” can) (Elias 1999: 70, 197).

The temporal limits on patents and copyrights have been a battlefield between proponents for lengthening them and those who want to shorten or eliminate them. For most patents the statutory period is 20 years after the application date (while for design patents it is 14 from the date of issuance and for plant patents, the period is 17 years) (Elias 1999: 202). This period has remained stable almost since the beginning of the republic. Most copyrights last for the life of the author plus 70 years while if the work is done for hire the copyright lasts between 95 and 120 years (depending on the date the work was published).

These restrictions and limitations indicate the enduring social anxiety about giving any one individual agent (whether it be a scientist, a corporation or even a state) permanent control over knowledge and the basic texts that express it. This temporary and gerrymandered character of the monopoly rights to sell knowledge of inventions and reproduced texts is clearly meant to *both* support the work of the author of a text or inventor of an idea for a useful devise (or his/her employer) *and* to deny patents and copyrights property status. For it is very important to distinguish between monetarily *supporting* an activity versus *buying* it, i.e., there are many way stations between an absolute gift and a full-blown commodity (cf. McSherry 2001: 68-100).

The categorical and temporal constraints provided by the “non-profit” status of universities, and the “non-property” aspects of patents and copyrights against neoliberal tendencies should be reassuring to those of us who are their critics. But these constraints are buckling under enormous pressure on all sides in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.[3] The greatest visible force comes from the promoters of the neoliberal view who entice us with the promise of the enormous social benefits to come from the complete commodification of education and knowledge. They argue: if automobiles and wheat are best produced and distributed as commodities, then why should education and knowledge be exceptions? They tempt us with the vision of a huge opening to ideas and information leading to a dramatic lowering of their cost typical of the opening of a market for any commodity (Washburn 2005: 9). “Let there be a thousand University of Phoenixes and let the temporal and categorical limits on patents and copyrights be lifted,” they urge in calling for the creation of a “knowledge economy.”

I am skeptical of this reheated rhetoric from the dot.com era, of course. But I believe that simple reliance on “the facts” that universities are *supposed* to be non-profit and that patents and copyrights are *not supposed* to be private property is questionable. After all, what is to stop university administrators from following the for-profit ethos while paying lip service to the pieties of their non-profit mission (just as Chinese Communist Party officials chatter their Marx-Lenin-Mao-speak while fashioning the most capitalist economy on the planet)? What is to stop corporations and universities from extending the statutory period of patents and copyrights to infinity, for all intents and purposes? How then is commodification of education and knowledge to be countered?

I have no easy answers to these questions, of course. After all, the gigantic social forces that are pressing forward this commodification process have little respect for philosophical and empirical niceties, but *we* in this venue do. Moreover, I suspect that there are other social forces in us that are even deeper than the commodifying ones arrayed before us. These decommodifying forces need to be evoked, legitimated and let free to act in their own way. I call upon them in this lecture.

## Part II. From Plato through Locke to Foucault

One way of invoking dormant powers is to remind them of their past presence and potency and awaken them to their present opportunities. To do this, in this section I will present a short historical sketch of the philosophical discussion of the question, can knowledge and education be commodities to be bought and sold? It is a précis of a still to be written philosophical history (and critique) of intellectual property. Once the major episodes are presented I will develop my own argument against the claim that knowledge can be commodified based on this sketch.

### *a. Plato and the Sophists*

One of the first struggles over the commodification of knowledge and education took place between Plato and the Sophists in ancient Greece the fifth and fourth centuries BCE. Plato harshly criticized the Sophists’ claim that knowledge and education can (and should) be bought and sold in dialogue after dialogue (e.g., *Protagoras*, *Gorgias*, *Phaedrus*, *Hippias Major*, *Meno*, the *Republic* and, of course, the *Sophist*). This should not be surprising, Plato was the leader of another institution of learning, the Academy, that was based on a theory of knowledge and education completely opposed to the Sophists’, who were operating rival schools and educational activities in direct competition to the Academy.

There were many points of contention between Plato and the Sophists, of course, but a pivotal one concerned money: the Sophists charged fees for their instruction. They did not form religious confraternities as the Pythagorians, the Platonists and eventually the Christians did, who thereby claimed an archaic and sacred character for knowledge and education. As Jaeger put it, “[Plato’s] school was based on friendship (φιλία) and was meant to continue, on a higher level, the old form of higher education through personal association and conversation” (Jaeger 1943: 111). The Sophist’s fees for lectures and private courses were not trivial. If the average artisan’s wage was between 3 and 4 minas per year, then consider some of the better known Sophists’ course charges: Zeno-

100 minas, Gorgias-100 minas, Isocrates-10 minas, Euenus of Paros-5 minas! No wonder that the “top of the line” sophists like Protagoras and Gorgias were reputed to be among the wealthiest men of the period (Kerferd 1981: 26-27). [3] These itinerant teachers who spearheaded this early commodification of knowledge and education could only have come with the first coined money economy that took hold in the Mediterranean world beginning in the 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE. The Sophists were selling knowledge about “selling” (e.g., political policies, trade deals, and invitations to love affairs) in an increasingly commodified economy. Education in such mercantile knowledge was clearly desired in Athens, and some Sophists like Protagoras played an important political role there even though he was not a citizen (Kerferd 1981: 18).

Plato’s analysis of the Sophists is scattered throughout his work, but in the *Sophist* there is a definitive critique of Sophism that is based on seven series of Divisions and Collections. I will not review all the series, but only quote the second and the last characterization of the sophist:

We’ll say that the expertise on the part of acquisition, exchange, selling, wholesaling, and soul-wholesaling, dealing words and learning that have to do with virtue--that’s sophistry in its second appearance (Plato 1997: 245, 224d)

Imitation of the contrary-speech-producing, insincere and un-knowing sort, of the appearance-making kind of copy-making, the word-juggling part of production that’s marked off as human and not divine. Anyone who says the sophist is of this “blood and family” will be saying, it seems, the complete truth (Plato 1997: 293, 268d).

The intersection of these Divisions and Collections results in the conclusion that the Sophists are fraudulent merchants, selling things that they do not (and cannot) possess. For example, Plato argues that virtue cannot be taught (although the Sophists claim to do just that) and knowledge is not a material that comes from “outside” the knower (although the Sophists claim to provide it). Virtue and knowledge must ultimately come from the “inside” the subject through a process of “recollection” of a conceptual common that was glimpsed before birth. The process of awakening to this common is not commodifiable. Indeed, money itself is closely connected with the false images, appearances and semblances the Sophists are selling, since it is exactly the relative measure of value that fascinates and at the same time absolutely differs from real wealth.

In intellectual history it is hard to tell who is a “winner,” of course, but in the relative short term (for almost first two millennia after his death), Plato’s critique of the Sophists was victorious and his educational ideal (in the *Republic*) provided a model for non-commodified education and knowledge that the Christian Church (both East and West) instituted in its monastery schools and early universities. After all, the Church’s intellectuals (like Plato’s philosopher kings and queens) were supposed to be living in a communal life without any private property. Knowledge and education in both Plato’s Academy and the Church, though clearly expensive, was supported collectively through contributions, tithes and gifts. Hence, for another one thousand eight hundred years

knowledge and education was not commodified and they still carried a somewhat religious, extra-worldly character.

The barriers against commodification began to tumble with the rise of capitalism in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. As money became again the universal mediator, a new relation between knowledge and the commodity was inevitably posed and the Sophists were given a new hearing. Perhaps the most decisive legal sign of this change was the Statute of Queen Anne (8 Anne c. 21) of 1710 that is often dubbed the first true copyright law in history. The Statute gave copyright to authors in Britain for a period of at most 28 years. It is no surprise that this law was crafted under a new discourse on property and thought that was decisively influenced by John Locke. The impact of John Locke's "labor theory of property" in his *Second Treatise on Civil Government* on modern concepts of property has been widely noted by historians of economics and politics. Less well known was how Locke's work in the *Essay on Human Understanding* meshed with his views on property to challenge the Platonic separation between knowledge and property. For Locke argued for two distinctly anti-Platonic positions: (1) the non-existence of innate ideas and (2) thought was a labor process.

The animus behind Locke's rejection of the doctrine of innate ideas (which constitute the common of thought, since they are available to all equally) lay in his suspicion that the doctrine tended to make people lazy and "collectively inclined" in intellectual matters. "If everyone believes X from birth, then so should I, even if the only evidence I have is the others' beliefs," is a kind of reasoning Locke rejected. In trying to explain why there was such a long adherence to the existence of innate ideas from Plato to Leibniz, Locke wrote:

When men have found some general propositions that could not be doubted of as soon as understood, it was, I know, a short and easy way to conclude them innate. This being once received, it eased the lazy from the pains of search, and stopped the inquiry of the doubtful concerning all that one once styled innate. And it was of no small advantage to those who affected to be masters and teachers, to make this the principle of principles--*that principles must not be questioned* (Locke 1959: 116, I.iii, 25).

Or, as A. C. Fraser, his editor glossed this passage: "[Locke] protests the indolence which thus blindly reposes on the opinions of the community, and which grudges the private judgment by which each man is detached from the community and becomes *himself*" (Locke 1959: 116, n. 1).

Locke not only hoped to enclose humans from the common of knowledge. He developed the view that thought was labor. This view was diametrically opposed to Plato's or Aristotle's who both categorized thought as an activity that is an end in itself. As I wrote:

For Locke, real thought is laborious: a hard, time-bound process which is a means to something beyond itself. We do not think, according to Locke, for the pleasure of thinking; rather thinking is the work we must do to arrive at pleasure. Thought has no life of its own, it is suspicious of images

and forms, beauty and mimesis. Here we find the bourgeois mentality at its most self-reflexive: thought too must labor to advantage, otherwise it is not thought (Caffentzis 1989: 131).

Instead of collective products of thought, internally available with no labor, Locke only recognized products of thought as being an individual's property, just as the physical labor in gathering acorns from the common ground transformed them into the gatherer's private property. As Mark Rose pointed out in his essay on the genealogy of modern authorship, Locke's labor theory of property discourse when "extended into the realm of literary production..., with its concern for origins and first proprietors, blended readily with the aesthetic discourse of originality" (Rose 1994: 30). Locke's conception of property and thought was a remarkable intervention in the field and justified the claim that the author of a text, the inventor of the design for a machine, the creator of a theory are proprietors. Undoubtedly, this framework laid the basis for the claims of those who wish to totally commodify intellectual life. Indeed, the Statute of Anne of 1710 was something of a compromise between the full blown application of "freehold" or "full ownership" notions of property to texts, inventions and theories and the older Platonic "commonist" conception of ideas that rejected property claims and payments for the use of things that we were all born with and merely had to be stimulated to remember (as Socrates did for the slave boy in the *Meno*).

This compromise was decisively tested in the case of Donaldson vs. Becket that was tried before the House of Lords in 1774. Our cheeky schoolboy thief in this paper's epigraph referred to the case in his defense. The London booksellers, represented by Thomas Becket, brought Alexander Donaldson to court because the latter published a cheap reprint of James Thomson's *The Seasons*, a work composed more than 28 years before. Becket and his supporters claimed that copyright was "a common law right" and hence should be perpetual. The House of Lords decisively rejected this claim and their decision has stuck for almost three centuries. But they did not entirely reject the property claims of the author:

...the Lords' decision did not touch the basic contention that the author had a property in the product of his labour. Neither the representation of the author as a proprietor nor the representation of the literary work as an object of the property was discredited (Rose 1994: 45).

The twentieth century has seen a deepening of the struggle announced in Donaldson vs. Becket. On the one side, the social and economic forces that are pushing for the "full-ownership" status of copyrights and patents have become stronger since the rise of neoliberal theory and practice (especially since the collapse of the Soviet Union); on the other side, the individualist ideology that is so congenial to this trend has been displaced from intellectual hegemony by philosophers of the "linguistic turn," from Quine and Wittgenstein to Derrida and Foucault (Rorty 1992). They recognized that the site of thought, meaning-creation, truth and value is not "the mind," it is language. Thus there has been a displacement of philosophy from the "private" to the public and social in the last scholarly generation, in contrast to neoliberal economics of the same period where "privatization" has been the shibboleth.

These contradictory movements have important consequences for the issues of this lecture. On the one side, the drive to commodify intellectual products (from software, to films, to music, to texts of all sorts) is increasingly important for US and world economic life, while, on the other, the legitimacy of this “privatization” is increasingly being put into question on a number of counts by the major philosophical tendencies of our time. Aspects of the Lockean framework that has supported intellectual property claims from the Statute of Anne to the present have been found problematic including (1) the notion of *originality*, which is the basis of intellectual property claims, (2) the *individualization* of the labor that goes into the creation of intellectual products, and (3) the internal *unity, distinctness and integrity* of the “work.” In contrast to these elements, a new narrative concerning intellectual life has an emphasis on the pre-existing *structures* and *discourses* that make originality possible, the notion of “*the author-function*” and of *intertextuality*.

What is an “original” piece of knowledge that differentiates it from simply a copy or rearrangement of those already existing? We now recognize that the romantic notion that knowledge creation is a rupture of convention and tradition is untenable. But all the epistemic activities that lead to these products are affected by a matrix-like structures that literally no one individual creates and that original knowledge simply fills in a pre-existing place in the background matrix.

Consequently, the view of knowledge as a product labored over by an individual increasingly appears factually mistaken and logically incoherent. After all, the producer of knowledge in the sciences is, even for citing purposes, the research team and behind the team is a scientific community with its traditions, paradigms, structures, and revolutions as Thomas Kuhn pointed out long ago (Kuhn 1962). The “author function,” in Foucault’s evocative phrase, is no longer played by the isolated self-sufficient individual thinker operating like an artisan in control of his/her means of production (Foucault 1977). The contemporary “author function” is increasingly recognizing the communal and social nature of knowledge production.

Finally, there is a widespread appreciation of the fact that intellectual products are never far from the commons they are produced from. That is the reason why the fashion of calling an intellectual product a “work” has ended and terms like “texts” have been substituted. For a text is like a piece of cloth that is woven from pre-existing yarn often used in other textile products. Any particular text like an any particular piece of textile is open ended and its materials can be both extended as well as used in the creation of other texts. Intertextuality, i.e., the examination of a text as composed of other texts in complex, often unconscious ways, is now a widely recognized reality.

This contemporary narrative concerning knowledge production and education for knowledge production has itself produced a major crisis of legitimacy concerning copyrights and patents. The collapse of the Lockean “author function” is now common knowledge and has undermined the ideology of private property claims in intellectual production. The free downloaders and the benders of “fair use” rules are all around us...in fact, are us. We who have recognized the socialized nature of knowledge and cultural production are no longer impressed by the individualist claims of the “creators” and their corporate sponsors. This knowledge about knowledge is being put into action to produce new knowledge and educate new knowers in the face of a legal and moral system that is profoundly at odds with it. Or, to put it bluntly, knowers in their search for

knowledge presently operate out of fear of prosecution and not from conviction in the justice of intellectual property claims.

How this crisis of legitimacy will to be resolved is not clear, of course, but it does provoke the development of arguments against private “full ownership” of conceptions of knowledge. Let us consider a number of them.

(1) *The “tragedy of the commons” or utility justification:* The superiority of private property rights over what had been common resources has been justified using a utility-based argument incisively developed by Garret Hardin in 1968. He argued that if there was an open access to a common resource, say a field used to graze cattle, the incentive would be for each cattle owner to put an addition animal onto the field before his/her neighbor did. This incentive would inevitably lead to overgrazing and the destruction of the common resource for all. Selling parcels of the land to private cattle grazers would preserve the field, since the property owners would not want to destroy their own plots by overgrazing (Hardin 1968). Their private, but behind-their-back collective forbearance would preserve the whole field.

Hardin's argument applies neither to grazing nor to knowledge. In many, if not most grazing commons, the commoners in control decide on and impose rules of use on themselves that are meant to minimize environmental degradation. What gives Hardin's argument some plausibility, however, is scarcity: there is limit on the number of animals that can graze on a field due to the finite area of the land and the finite time it takes for grass to grow back after being consumed by cattle. But knowledge is a fundamentally non-scarce (or even scarcity dispelling) resource. One person's knowledge that X does not restrict another person's knowledge that X in the way that one person's animal grazing a piece of field takes away grass from another's. On the contrary, one person's knowledge that X can be the basis of engendering another's knowledge that X. Therefore, one of the most powerful utility-based arguments for privatization is invalid in the case of knowledge.

(2) *Knowledge is socially and not idiosyncratically produced, hence private appropriation is unjustified:*

It is now widely recognized that knowledge is socially produced. First, the production of knowledge “tokens” (books, interviews, scientific theories, lyrics, or legal documents) depends upon “types” (concepts, ideas, styles, methodologies, genres, and the like) that are not produced by any one particular agent. Second, knowledge requires intersubjective verification and hence its production involves the community of knowers. Third, the material production of knowledge now depends upon a vast, worldwide network of information, material and knowers. Putting these three observations together, if one accepts the labor-theory-of-property maxim: “to the producers belong the product,” the notion that the product of this huge production process belongs to only one agent is doubtful and can only be justified on the basis of extremely sophistic arguments (Caffentzis 1994: 181).

(3) *The infinite regress of a totally commodified world:*

Kant argued that one way to test the strength and coherence of a moral imperative is to totalize it. For example, consider the maxim, “Don’t pay your debts!” If everyone did not pay their debts, then there would be no creditors and hence debt would collapse. Consequently, in this case the universalization of the maxim undermines the maxim itself, whereas the universalization of the contrary maxim, “Pay all your debts” would lead to perfectly consistent result.

Well, what of the maxim, “Commodify all knowledge!”? Knowledge as we now know is extremely context-dependent. To know that X involves knowing an enormous number of presuppositions and an infinity of consequences, since, to know that X implies knowledge of all the infinite logical consequences of X. Now if each presupposition used in the development of knowledge that X is someone’s property who must be paid in order to acquire the license to use that knowledge in order to know that X, then it is not clear that anyone can generate new knowledge without expending an enormous amount of research in determining what are a piece of knowledge’s presuppositions and who indeed owns them. If, as Newton once said, “I can see far because I stand on the shoulders of giants,” then in order to see far, according to the universalization of the epistemic maxim, one must first see down to identify the occupants of the endless tower of giants one stands on. Here we reenter into the world of the *Sophist* with a vengeance!

Moreover, once one knows that X, one can claim knowledge of the logical consequences of X (if, of course, one pays the owners of the rules of deduction), even if, as is inevitable, one cannot deduce them in one’s lifetime. But logical space is not as easily carved up as geographical space. For example, assume that A knows that X and B knows that Y, now X logically implies X or Y and Y implies X or Y, therefore does A own the knowledge of X or Y or does B? This and many other dilemmas await for the universalizers of the commodification of knowledge.

Hence, when one knows that X one is obligated to pay a potentially infinite set of previous knowers and to expect payment from future knowers who use one of the infinite set of logical consequences of X! This regime would literally end the process of acquiring new knowledge by making it hostage to old. Hence the maxim, “Commodify all knowledge!” should not be morally accepted.

With these utilitarian, labor theory and Kantian arguments against the commodification of knowledge concluded, I turn to Part III, the empirical and comparative part of my argument.

### Part III: Reflection for the United States

This is not an idle question. Already, the commodification of higher education in the US, has led to a level of student indebtedness that is socially unsustainable. As teachers, we know the consequences of this problem in the classroom, as our students have less and less time for learning, trying to keep up with the constant escalation of tuition fees, that is becoming endemic even in public universities. What will happen, moreover, when they will graduate with a heavy debt burden? How will this affect their lives? What price will society pay for the choices they may have to make?

\*We must also be concerned about the increasing exclusion from our universities of students who cannot pay for their education, which is bound to turn education into a

means of social ranking deepening the enormous social and economic inequalities that plague the country.

\*It is also clear that when the value of academic research is judged by the grants it brings to the university, secrecy, conflicts and duplicity, in a word, the end of collegiality, inevitably follow. What consequences will the privatization of the common of knowledge have for cooperation among faculty members?

\* Not last, how can we prevent programs from competing with each other in attracting majors, when the number of majors and graduates per year and the income generated on this basis becomes the criterion by which departments or programs are funded, as it appears to be happening now at USM.

### Part III: The commodification of knowledge and education in Africa and its consequences for us

We don't have to speculate about these questions. We gain an insight into the implications of a fully commercialized university system by considering the experience of African universities, starting in the mid 1980s, when the World Bank and the IMF convinced African government to "disinvest" in tertiary education, in the name of fiscal solvency and repayment of their external debt. This policy was called a "Structural Adjustment Program" (SAP).

It might seem counter-intuitive to use the African experience with SAPs to help assess the impact of commodification of education in the US. After all, the African continent has the lowest tertiary level enrollment rate, the lowest number of universities per capita, the lowest investment per student rate, and historically the "youngest" universities. They constitute the most vulnerable university systems of any region on the planet. But such an extreme case makes it possible to evaluate the consequences of a policy like the commodification of knowledge and education in an immediate way, since there are few obstacles to the totalization of the process in such institutions. If the policies were positive or negative, then the results would be clear. Much of the evidence I will use comes from my work and research as a coordinator of the Committee for Academic Freedom in Africa since 1991. I shall assess impact of these SAPs for the students, faculty and the institutions themselves (Federici, Caffentzis, Alidou 2000).

#### *(i) Student Response*

The first student major response to the SAPs has been public protest of the increased tuition fees and the slashing of student subsidies. This was inevitable, since many, if not the majority of the students faced with the sudden change of policy (since many governments implementing SAPs were advised by the World Bank to employ a "shock therapy" approach to implementation), could not afford to pay the new fees or to survive without the subsidies that had been promised by the government. This was true of both the poor students as well as for even "moderate income families."

Given the fact that Africans had the lowest average income on the planet, sending a child to a university on a family income of \$2 a day is a mathematical impossibility. It was not unreasonable for these students who were financially on the margins to read in the logic of SAPs an effort by their governments and powers like the World Bank that

were advising/pressuring to drive them out of the university by making it prohibitive for them, their families and villages to pay for their education. They immediately saw that their places would go to the children of the wealthy (however academically accomplished), and the income distribution in the future would be even more inegalitarian in the next generation.

These protests were products of a desire to survive as students and as representatives of the anti-colonial movement's aspiration to create intellectuals, scholars and scientists who were not toadies of the imperialists, and who had the national and continental needs of Africans as paramount. The student/government battles were instigated by the initiation of SAPs and other efforts to intensify their expulsive effect on the students. They have been titanic, bloody and prolonged since the SAPs agenda was a sort of "academic exterminism" (Caffentzis 2000). CAFA constructed a chronology of the student struggles against SAPs that traced out a bitter path that follows the implementation of SAPs across Africa, sometimes affecting one country or region and then another. Thus, for example, South African student struggles against SAP only begin with the application of "neoliberal" policies by the ANC government in the late 1990s, while protests in Nigeria begin in the mid-1980s, and those of the Francophone African countries in the mid-1990s when the bulk of SAPs were introduced there.

But these initial protests were not isolated events, they soon became chronic, for the simple reason that the SAPs were geared to a commodity logic in the provision of necessary intellectual goods that cannot be supplied profitably by the market. Many have taken note of this "market failure" in African education, of course, from grade school to university. When irresistible struggles met immovable obstacles often enough a stalemate between students and the government resulted. Overall student enrollment has not fallen in the last two decades, but investment per student has fallen...and dramatically at that. The universities have been allowed to run down after starting in so promising an environment in the 1960s and 1970s. All investment in publicly funded research and in the tools of research (up to date journals, books and internet access) has declined, resulting in a concomitant decline in the quality of the average African student's education.

The African university student experience with commodification of education tells a tale of violent government repression, since the state was in a position of imposing the end of the post-colonial "deal" with its next generation of university students without any negotiation. Is this violence an essential feature of the commodification process? Perhaps not, but the divisive and unegalitarian consequences of the commodification are undoubtedly central to its outcome. For if the ability to pay becomes the criterion for access to the enormous wealth of knowledge (that is the foundation of the production of wealth in this period), then those without this ability will be impoverished even further.

#### *(ii) The faculty response*

The SAP attack on students' subsidies and incomes was matched by profound cuts in teachers' wages, university budgets, and infrastructure that had a profound effect on the faculty and the organization its research work. Those faculty members who have "the LINK" (i.e., a direct relation of funding from a foreign foundations, government agencies or corporations) experienced the SAP period very differently from their colleagues who did not. As Karim Hirji acerbically put it:

...I have run into the LINK in all sorts of places, even in the toilet! Its all-pervasive nature making it seem like an Orwellian Big Brother. I have learned that to progress one needs to be LINKed. If you march out of tune with it, you are only courting disaster. Those academicians blessed by the LINK smile radiantly and subsequently prosper, and those with a missing LINKage are perpetually enveloped in an aura of gloom (Hirji 2000: 68).

Often cheek-by-jowl in the same department a colleague has an air conditioned, well equipped lab and library funded by outside donors while another (who does not have “the LINK”) has a dingy office, a lab with rudimentary equipment, out of date journals, and an archaic computer.

The LINK inevitably creates enormous jealousies and divisions within the faculties. However, giving into the temptation to commodify research in order to please the donors is often the only way that any new research will get done. On the other side, one can ask who controls the research agenda, i.e., who is deciding what the new knowledge is to be about? Is it the people of the nation? Are the resources, knowledge and wealth of the nation protected and increased by the natural and social scientific research of the faculty? Or are the interests of the foreign foundations, government agencies and corporations who are paying for the research “the deciders”? It is often said, “who pays the piper sets the tune,” now this is not always true (some pipers have the power to refuse the payers and can play tunes more to their liking), but the exceptions are rare. This LINKage dependency on foreign “donors” (who are also “receivers”) generated by the SAP has had deep consequences: “Undermining university research, or allow it to continue in a fragmented and dependent way under the direction of donors’ programs and at the service of foreign Transnational Corporations, increases the expropriation of the continent’s wealth, since it prevents Africans from devising local products, cheaper and more fit for local needs” (Caffentzis 2000: 12). Most importantly, it makes it difficult for a nation’s university scientists, the obvious defenders of its plant and animal life and indigenous knowledge, to resist the vast biopiracy that large corporations are engaged in (Shiva 1997). For after all, multi-billion dollar drug companies operate more like “pirates” than sellers of unauthorized Hollywood film DVD copies on the streets of Beijing!

Consequently, treating knowledge as a commodity, that can be bought and sold leads to a dramatic restructuring of the research agenda and a redefinition of the “ownership” of knowledge created by scholars and scientists in African universities.

This process of expropriation of resources and diversion of the research agenda that is so clearly seen, and even caricatured, in Africa is not isolated there. On the contrary, the same processes unleashed by the “laissez-faire” attitude created by neoliberal commodification of knowledge are having an impact here in the US, though with more nuanced outcomes.

### *(iii) the university response*

The final stage of the calamity of the commodification of education is to be found on the level of the university itself. A way to understand this development is to remember the medieval meaning of “university”: a body of people in the same occupation who

periodically assembled together to make decisions concerning their collective affairs (Lucas 2006: 42). There were universities of barbers, butchers and bakers just as there were universities of faculty members and universities of students. Though faculty members considered themselves to have different roles to play in the working of the educational institution (that was later named a university), since there were different faculties and disciplines, they also considered themselves to have a basic common interest. Since the founding of the first European universities more than 800 years ago, this assumption of common interest has been constant.

One of the consequences of the commodification of education has been to put this assumption in question. For when one commodifies an object, one inevitably must commercialize it, i.e., produce it only with the intent of selling in a market competing with other sellers of the same or a similar commodity. The same thing applies to education: once commodified, it will be commercialized and sold competitively. In the abstract this is obvious, but when translated into the structure of a university, there is hell to pay. A graphic example of this is to be found in Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda (a university that had been once considered one of the best in Africa and hence it was and remains a trend-setter).

Mahmood Mamdani tells the story of the commercialization of education in Makerere in his recent book, *Scholars in the Marketplace* (Mamdani 2007). In the late 1990s the faculty members at Makerere were informed by government officials that they had to take an entrepreneurial approach to student enrollment in their courses, departments and faculties. They and their units would be evaluated for further support on the basis of how successfully they attracted students (especially “paying” ones). This incentive principle inevitably led to the following situation, e.g., when Department X (say, biology) offered a “service course” for the majors of Department Y (say, nursing), this was seen a loss for Department Y and a gain for Department X, since X got Y’s students. This reasoning led to Department Y offering a course of its own (say, nursing biology) that would presumably be the same as that service course offered by Department X, hence keeping its majors “in house.” But in most cases, this “in house” course would be taught by part-timers (often poached from Department X) who would get no disciplinary oversight because those trained in the discipline are all in Department X.

This effort to “conserve” a department’s majors was rooted in the financial principle that assigned a certain percentage of student fees to the Department that offered the course. The more attractive the course, the more it could be “sold,” of course. Consequently, “turf wars” erupted between departments over the housing of interdisciplinary programs, “for the right to house a programme translated into a considerable financial advantage” (Mamdani 2007: 119). Soon departments were “charging” other departments for “service” courses they gave to the students of other departments. Inevitably in such a regime, there were “balance of payments” difficulties. The mercantile system within the university, like the one in the world market, inevitably led to violent clashes.

This approach had a huge impact on the curriculum. If tourism was a “hot” topic, then courses (even programs) in tourism would be offered, even if any serious long-term view of the social needs of Uganda pointed to areas that had nothing to do with tourism.

In conclusion then, on all these levels, after a decade of the commodifying reforms in Africa, the universities are increasingly unable to meet their most vital

academic obligations. Conflict has become the order of the day: students against government, faculty colleague against faculty colleague, department against department...and the World Bank against all! Instead of a university (in a medieval sense), these universities are kept together increasingly either ruled by a Leviathan (in the form of the police and military) or foreign donors capriciously redistributing their largess.

Will USM face a similar fate?

In my Third Russell Scholar lecture I will examine the forces of de-commodification that are circulating in the United States and internationally that can provide another outcome.

## Notes

[1] For a good description of the historical transition between the colonial sectarian universities, to the rise of the first state university systems in the ante-bellum period, to the “big business” universities of Johns Hopkins, Stanford and University of Chicago in the turn of the twentieth century see (Hofstadter and Metzger 1955). Indeed, it is only the working class, among the great social forces, that has not taken even a minor role in organizing colleges and universities in the US, even though trade unions and workers’ credit unions and mutual aid associations have at present control over hundreds of billions of dollars. The issue of intellectual hegemony does not seem ever to have been on the proletarian agenda here.

[2] For a discussion of the “full ownership” conception of property see (Becker 1977: 18-19).

[3] For a discussion of what has been called the “Mickey Mouse Protection Act” (Lessig 2001: 1065), passed by the US Congress in 1998, which extends *retroactively* past copyrights to the life of the author plus 75 years and for works for hire for 75 to 95 years and saved the Disney Corporation from losing the copyright on Mickey Mouse see (May and Sell 2006: 152-153).

[4] As Kerferd points out, however, there is some evidence that contradicts the income estimates (Kerferd 1981: 26). But there is no question that the Sophists demanded and received money for instruction and indeed saw themselves as involved in an intense competitive struggle with other Sophists (and philosophers) to attract paying (hence wealthy) students.

[5] This ideological justification neglects the fact that the neoliberalization of education was partly as a response to student rebellions around the world in the 1960s and early 1970s, higher education. “Neoliberalized” university financing (from ever increasing tuition fees to “zero based budgeting) was a way of disciplining students and their increasingly unionizing professors (Caffentzis 1975).

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