

Philosophical reflections on education in the context of globalization and spectacle: The situation of the university

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Abstract

The consolidation of capitalism and its strategies are evident in the spheres of human life, especially in those that are called to determine the future of the world, like education. Faced with a consumer society that commodifies even the most intimate, the human will is subsumed by spectacle and merchandise. Thus, education slips its purpose of forming thought towards *quantitas*, that is, the uncritical accumulation of knowledge.

Keywords: Education, society of the spectacle, merchandise, university, *qualitas*

Introduction

1.1. Globalization, capitalism, and spectacle

The tendency of capital is its expansion, thus, for the capitalist system to consolidate itself as a “world system” requires practices of conquest and colonization throughout the length and breadth of the planet. This tendency appeals to the extraction of wealth in minerals and metals, especially gold and silver, and others such as copper, uranium, and lithium, fundamental for the construction of atomic bombs, skyscrapers, computer technology, and medical technology, among others.

The population of colonized territories is stripped of both its material wealth - nature - and its spiritual wealth - its culture - to be subsumed into the logic of capitalism.

To that extent, globalization goes hand in hand with the accumulation of wealth, a *sine qua non* condition for the life of capitalism.

Samir Amin (1999) in his book “*Capitalism in the Age of Globalization*” mentions that for the logic of capital to survive, it is necessary to put into practice forms of exclusion, since the tendency of capitalism is monopolization. In the words of Amin (1999), it is possible to distinguish at least five monopolies that generate an unequal struggle between the center and the periphery¹ :

- 1) Technological monopoly
- 2) The monopoly of the world's financial markets
- 3) The monopoly of natural resources
- 4) Media monopoly
- 5) The monopoly of weapons of mass destruction

During the industrial phase of capitalism, the link between the sphere of production and

¹ Center-Periphery is a geopolitical meaning that delimits the territories that have the capacity to manipulate the world's wealth (center) and the territories that are exploited (periphery).

the sphere of accumulation was linked to increased political and social control by the State. However, from the 1960s onwards, the imposed model ceased to be “supportive” of the need to increase profits. Therefore, capitalism had to mutate and invent new conditions to reproduce (exchange) value as the total foundation of society.

Capital thus entered a different phase that motivated norms aimed at modifying the reproduction of the system. Thus arose the political structure of neoliberalism in the 1970s, which appealed to abruptly polarize the relationship between the center and the periphery. Amin (1999) mentions that the consequences of this polarization are as follows:

- Increase in unemployment
- Wage declines
- Increased food dependence
- Deterioration of the environment
- Decrease in the productive capacity of the States
- Sabotage of democratic systems
- Growth of external debt

Consequently, neoliberalism builds speculative capitalism whose reproductive logic is resolved in the stock markets, a situation that leads to an increasingly high degree of abstraction in society. Neoliberalism implies, therefore, weakening the State as the controller of the economy and strengthening the market as the axis of society as a whole. Thus, globalization must be understood in terms of the tyranny of market capitalism that regulates itself without the intervention of anything real (as was once the function of the state).

According to Wallerstein (2006), the fact that single world society is emerging as a result of corporations (transnational companies), financial capital, and mass media networks, is beginning to be perceived. Thus, the dominant ideology configures a single

world where images are the constructors of meaning.

In this regard, Debord (2002) in his book “The Society of the Spectacle” explains that the key for the human being to submit to the empire of the spectacle is separation and fragmentation, which leads to the worker never seeing the final product of his work and this product in circulation becomes a commodity, what is nothing but the product of fragmented work, deriving the reign of specialization in consumption, be it of knowledge, technology, personal hygiene, and fashion.

Consequently, The world is witnessing a process of globalization with a constantly growing level of alienation that implies, therefore, and according to Debord (2002), the consummate negation of man and the affirmation of the commodity as the center and measure of everything; it is the logic of the commodity that administers the daily life of the masses: the rhythm of the money that labor produces is in the hands of the kingdom of the commodity, moments of leisure are at the expense of the entertainment offered by the spectacle of the images transmitted by the *mass media*, thus, the spectacle takes on concrete life in the commodity and this, according to Debord (2002), becomes the totality of the daily life of human beings.

1.2. Objectives

- To reflect on how an education at this time of globalization of neoliberal capitalism and the spectacle of commodities is in danger of becoming one more commodity that, far from projecting a humanistic society, is shaping a type of individuals increasingly alienated from the logic of the “world of commodities”.

- To situate the inconsistencies between the educational reforms applied from the spheres of power and the need to build an integral and critical education as a horizon of education in peripheral societies.

1.3. Hypothesis

The educational discourse of “academic excellence” is tied to the business requirements of the market and this is rapidly replacing the very essence of education, especially in the university, which is the formation of thought as a possibility of emancipation from the colonial ties that the peripheral Latin American peoples have been carrying for at least five centuries.

Theoretical and conceptual framework

1.4. Education and Globalization

The French philosopher Jean-Claud Michéa (2015) in his book “The school of ignorance and its modern conditions” states that “modern society, which has achieved an unprecedented level of formal education, has also given rise to new forms of ignorance” (Michéa J.-C. , 2015, p. 9). Based on this statement, it is necessary to ask ourselves where education is heading within the contemporary capitalist system in its globalized neoliberal mode and what consequences education has on the population in general and on youth in particular.

Contemporary globalization is not possible without the practicality of an omnipresent and omnipotent market which, from Michéa's point of view (2015) implies the effort of the hegemonic power of the West “to systematize mercantile activities as a complete philosophical program to homogenize and synchronize the different types of existing markets...” (Michéa J.-C., 2015, p. 12).

For the market to gradually replace the values of the State as the organizer of society, the intellectuals of the 19th-century bourgeoisie designed a theoretical apparatus called Political Economy, which is how the “laws” of Newton's mechanics begin to homologate social relations using a rational regulator, the market.

From Michéa's argument (2015), political economy motivates selfish interest as the “rational engine of human behaviors” (Michéa J.-C. , 2015, p. 17). This French thinker argues that it is from the 60s of the twentieth century when the regulations of capitalism came into conflict with the civic values of Western society because selfish interest was not possible to practice in its entirety since the population still maintained values such as hospitality, solidarity, and cooperation between people.

These civic values thus became a “stone in the shoe” to promote the interests of post-industrial capitalism in its neoliberal-speculative phase: competition, selfishness, and personal success are the cornerstones of monopoly capitalism, or also called “late capitalism” (Jameson, 1991).

The objective of the hegemonic class, beginning in the 1960s was therefore to globalize the logic of speculative capitalism. To achieve this, the bourgeois elite set out to “conquer” the generations to come, that is, the infants and youth of the famous 1960s.

Hardt and Negri (2005), in their book “Empire”, explain the novel conditions that capitalism must assume to control the population in general. Consequently, the capitalist system had to be transformed not only in its form (exterior) but also, and above all, in its content (interior).

The main tool to sell the idea of a free, casual, uninhibited society is advertising whose technology appeals to control and manipulate subtly the emotions of the

population. The vehicle through which advertising comes into action is the Internet² which generates information that goes around the planet in nanoseconds, in a historical moment of the spectacle in which images govern the behavior of individuals, or images are the reality. (Debord, 2002)

Therefore, capitalism expands its tentacles toward the world's population and especially towards "...the young people of the new middle classes, who for the most part took on leading roles, were indeed discovering freedom made to their measure: the freedom to break radically -at least in one's awareness of things- with all the obligations implied by filiation, belonging and, in a general way, a linguistic, moral or cultural inheritance" (Michéa J.-C. , 2015, p. 23).

The 60's, thus, imply the exponential growth of the middle class that seeks in a neurotic way to fulfill the ideological promise of neoliberal capitalism: happiness, enjoyment, the eternal present, fantasies that move the spectacle and that, having no otherness, are presented as historical aspirations to be fulfilled by personal success and progress, defined as the capacity of individuals and nations to increase consumption levels.

In this context, Michéa (2015) denounces the pretensions of transformation of education and the incorporation in people's lives, especially in childhood and youth, of a type of education that far from motivating acts of thinking and deciding, reproduces the values of consumption based on the adaptation of individuals to the market as the sole destiny of civilization.

The school of the 21st century, in the words of Michéa (2002), is synthesized in the

slogan that the elite of neoliberal capitalism decided under the name of "detittytainment", a metaphor that translated into English means "entertainment cocktail" (Michéa J.-C. , 2015, p. 27). Educational reforms, therefore, should aim at maintaining a mediocre educational level that stultifies the masses and keeps them permanently distracted.

How to achieve this brutalization is the task of the relationship of the spectacle, that is, the transmission of images that manage to convince the population of success and competition as fundamental values of society. In this context, traditional values represent a danger for profit: honesty, fraternity, and hospitality are retrograde civic values for the interests of money as the "deity" of post-industrial society.

So, the educational institution, at all its levels, must reproduce discourses linked to money disaffected from the process of commodity production, that is to say, education must ignore the level of production where, according to Karl Marx, the exploitation of labor power takes place. Thus, the only thing that education must attend to is the phase of commodity circulation in which the market appears as the regulator of the supply and demand of objects that circulate as omnipresent beings through computer networks.

Teachers, under these conditions, are nothing more than "facilitators" or in Michéa's words (2015) animators of different activities whose transmission needs pedagogical knowledge focused on the stimulation of affections or passions and not of perceptions seeking an argument of a rational nature.

Students, thus, are beings trained for "uncivic consumption" (p. 31) that tends to reproduce discourses of a type of citizenship education as a cliché of the logic of spectacle. What this student population clamors for are

² The Internet is a decentralized set of interconnected communication networks...its origins date back to 1969.

subjects linked to individual entrepreneurship and success -synthesized in the accumulation of money- without considering society as a whole.

Consequently, in Michéa's opinion (2015), the fundamental objective of *deltittytainment* is the youth who must be fascinated, through the educational system, by the financial capital which is the type of capital that reproduces the logic of the market. For this reason, Michéa (2015) raises the problem of “the progress of ignorance” as a decline of critical intelligence (Michéa J.-C. , 2015, p. 43) that in the circumstances of beautification of images by the spectacle fails to discern that rebellion against the consumerist system “is a moral necessity” (Michéa J.-C. , 2015, p. 44).

Consequently, the a-critical mass that pays thousands of dollars for access to education loses sight of the minimum conditions of a culture, for example, the linguistic capacity that is daily deformed by the use of social networking technologies that erect a “neo-language” (Michéa J.-C. , 2015, p. 44) destined to destroy natural languages and, therefore, to disregard any historicity.

In the ignorance of historicity, fantasies linked to the progressive increase of symbolic capital-intellectual capital are produced, which, according to Michéa, is a necessary sign of bourgeois distinction (Michéa J.-C. , 2015, p. 48) and in this way, education “remains a simple tool at the service of the reproduction of capital” (Michéa J.-C. , 2015, p. 48). The way to measure this symbolic capital and/or intellectual capital is through the individual accumulation of university degrees and certificates, which are just another commodity produced by the neoliberal system that reproduces speculative capital.

These titles, in this way, do not imply qualified knowledge to solve any problem of

society, but are only “fetishes” that serve to increase the ego of a few, and consequently, the selfishness among the population. In this way, only a reduced population group will achieve this accumulation of titles, while the rest of the population will be immediately excluded from the “privileges” of the system: it is one of the ways of alienation of the middle class on a global scale because the illusion that the system of inclusion generates is ultimately false in concrete terms. After all, the middle class is not able to decide anything about the policies that govern the planet; however, it is how the interest of the bourgeoisie is refracted in all daily areas.

The social cost of the alienation of the middle class can have disastrous consequences for the future of the planet and the survival of the species, given that the levels of overexploitation of nature are increasingly accelerated and this entails a permanent conflict with the poor population because they are the first victims of the policies of the hegemonic class. Thus, the deterioration of the quality of life enters in contradiction with the discursive promise of the “life expectancy” indicator, which in numbers, reflects the illusion of human progress, but in the concrete and real life of people, implies that the great part of the impoverished working class of the world must face daily the overexploitation that causes diseases linked to famines, epidemics, diseases with high costs in drugs for their treatment; in addition, they face the massacres of entire peoples living in territories rich in minerals and fossils that are expelled by the interests of global capitalism to usurp their lands.

In the cities, the population, mostly middle class, is living the ignorance of the unethical practice of globalization: commodity trade appears as the only world reality, in this regard, according to Michéa,

“the ideal school reform will therefore be the one that manages to turn, as quickly as possible, each student of Secondary Education into a “militant cretin” (Michéa J.-C., 2015, p. 53).

To cretinize the population - especially children and young people - “the ruling class takes the trouble to invent a word (“citizen” used as an adjective) and to impose its use when in everyday language there is a synonymous term (“civic”).... (Michéa J.-C. , 2015, p. 54). “This substitution of words has the intention of confusing people, since the neo-language of globalized neo-liberal capitalism aims to spit out words in their signifier, taking away the historical meaning that each word has. Therefore, “citizen” is a pure signifier that radiates freedom for consumption: while “civic” appeals to a deep ethical content of tradition linked to the ties that the person has with his nation, with his family.

In higher education, university reforms aim to make the population confuse the words “university” with “company” and unconsciously establish a symbiotic relationship between the two. Thus, the university ceases to be the center of the “act of thinking” and becomes the place where “leaders and entrepreneurs” are trained. The “professor-student” relationship, typical of the academic attitude, is surpassed by the “facilitator-client” relationship, the axis of which is a product called “class”. (Michéa J.-C., 2015, p. 57)..

Consequently, the educational system at all levels does not have the purpose -at present- of providing a type of education to form people who think in favor of the construction of a harmonious coexistence; on the contrary, the objective of education is to promote ignorance as a business of the bourgeoisie: the more alienated the population is, the higher the level of profits

because only a brutalized population is not capable of becoming aware of the deterioration of the planet and the consequences that this will bring us for the future.

1.5. The University in the context of the Globalization of Neoliberal Capitalism: The Triumph of *Quantitas* over *Qualitas*

To hear terms such as “excellence” or “quality” is common in the context of a society where the spectacle of the market reigns, where everything has the feasibility of becoming merchandise. The university, as a structural part of society, has not managed to escape this irrepressible trajectory and under the banner of the “democratization of education”, a concept used by Jean Claude Michéa (Michéa J. , 2002), knowledge has become a lucrative globalized service.

Higher education represents one of the fundamental axes within the development plans of the countries of the periphery, hence the issue of evaluation is essential and must be given under the terms of this society. The university must meet the high-quality standards demanded by the market so that its management and the product it generates can be “accredited”: the consumer society demands it. According to the study by Maria Mercedes Zerega and Manuel Murrieta: *Calidad en la educación superior ecuatoriana: ¿para qué? para quién*, it is stated that the power of the market is what ultimately defines how processes in the university should be understood, hence the evaluation, under these terms, is an unavoidable proposal.

In this sense, the term “quality” is understood through standardization, that is, subjecting a “product” to standards established by the company and setting minimum conditions (dictated by the group

that invests in its interests), so that the aspects and characteristics of the product efficiently satisfy the needs of its users or clients. It is clear that this business term, adapted to all institutional structures of society, is the quantitative definition of everything difficult to measure in figures or in terms of “quality”, which represents a clear example is an education and all that it implies. The issue is aggravated in the case of the university, because of its transcendent and definitive role in society: to promote critical thinking, autonomy, and ethics.

After the analysis of the current state of the university, it would seem that for the hegemonic mercantile structure, guided by the elite strata such as the UN, UNESCO, OECD, WB, IMF, the fact that “thinking” is developed is not a good “business”; the philosopher Martha Nussbaum (quoted in the article *Are we facing the end of the humanities?* by Mauricio González), already warns that these institutions “subordinate education to the maximization of profit with the least possible investment, they commodify education (González, 2017) and the formation of thought is nothing more than an accessory that can be dispensed with. Thus, the university has entered a process of metamorphosis that leads it to transform all its potential to a business level.

Within this context, for Latin American countries, UNESCO has proposed measuring the quality of education from three approaches:

- the first refers to pedagogy (which Michéa criticizes so much since pedagogy is the preferred weapon of the market to transmit, repeat, and not to think); it measures the teaching-learning processes centered on the student and didactics;
- the second focuses on social interaction and considers a good education when it

is good for the community; however, it is necessary to ask from what perspective, with what meaning, for what, and for whom, without these questions it is a meaningless exercise;

- and the third, the rational-technical (the one that has been adopted by countries such as Ecuador), which has a purely quantitative basis, compares results and yields “measurable” data that are accepted without real discussion, without analysis, and without knowing in depth the criteria that preceded them, which finally result in those that dictate how the excellence of the university is given. A clear example of the effect of data, among many others, is given in the field of scientific research since quality is determined by the number of times an author has been cited, no matter in this case the context, the recipients, or other important aspects, only the quantifiable counts (Zerega M. y., 2017).

Under these parameters, “the performance society”, as the philosopher Byung-Chul Han has called it, which fits in with all the commodification of education, has been responsible for the convincing society that, in the educational system, especially in the university environment, the only way to guarantee the ideal of “transparency” of processes is in the fulfillment of standards. It is, then, mistrust that sustains this concept, since the growing need to “evidence” everything, submits the university community to control, calculation, and programmed direction; without evidence, for this quantitative measurement, there can be no transparency, and the longed-for efficiency does not prevail. However, who is not interested in efficiency dominating every field and certainly in the university? An

innocent question with a cynical and blind answer, for those who cannot see the true mercantilist intentions behind it.

Thus, the university has become a repository of quantifiable data, synonymous with quality and excellence. The roles of teacher and student are also becoming increasingly blurred in this dynamic. As Michéa and Simon Leys point out, the “student has become a “client” and the classes “a product”, the marked clientelism in Canadian centers and the most prestigious private universities is increasing: “Given the high tuition fees at Harvard, the student not only expects his professor to be learned, competent and efficient: he expects him to be submissive because the client is always right”. (Ordine, 2013). A situation that is already being emulated in some universities in Ecuador.

To complete the picture, the teacher, in his standardized metamorphosis for the business environment of universities, must fulfill the role of researcher-creator of unlimited production of “*papers*”, because thanks to them he will be considered “competent”. Michéa already warns that it will be necessary to “re-educate teachers, that is, to force them to “work differently”, under the enlightened despotism of a powerful and well-organized army of experts in “educational sciences”....”. (Michéa J. , 2002).

The fundamental task of such experts will be to define and impose (by all the means available to a hierarchical institution to ensure the submission of those who depend on it) the pedagogical and material conditions of what Debord called the “dissolution of logic,” in other words:

The loss of the possibility of instantaneously recognizing what is important and what is accessory or out of place; what is incompatible or, on

the contrary, what could be complementary; everything that implies such a consequence and what, at the same time, impedes (Michéa J. , 2002, p. 14).

In the same vein, Nuccio Ordine in his book “*The Utility of the Useless*” (2013), speaks of the absurdity of questioning the importance of professional preparation in the objectives of schools and universities. However, he states that to privilege teaching to the exclusive utilitarianism of professionalization is to misrepresent the enormous educational function of teaching:

(...) no profession can be consciously exercised if the technical skills it requires are not subordinated to broader cultural training, capable of encouraging students to cultivate their spirit with autonomy and to give free rein to their *curiositas*. (p.45)

Ordine (2013) emphasizes that the human being, in his essence, goes far beyond the profession he exercises. When the university becomes a commercial space, the true dimension of education is lost, utilitarianism gains ground and the future looks difficult. Those “responsible citizens, capable of abandoning their selfishness to embrace the common good, to express solidarity, to defend tolerance, to vindicate freedom, to protect nature, to support justice...”(p.62), will be increasingly scarce. Imagining the future that awaits the next generations should be enough to bring about change.

The context that privileges *quantities* because of that irrepressible need to weigh and measure in the search for “standardized quality”, is depleting all the sense that allowed the human being to go towards the attainment of the sublime, of that which in the words of many famous authors is “useless” for a society vulnerable to spectacle,

massification, and blindness, but which is extremely necessary for the formation of truly human beings. That which is of little or no value for the system we face today constitutes “a form of resistance to the egoisms of the present, an antidote against the barbarism of the useful that has even corrupted the social relationships and the most intimate affections” (Ordine, 2013, p.21).

The inexorable metamorphosis of higher education, which serves mercantile interests and directs education as a business, represents the systematic disappearance of the university of the past, of that whose essence was the formation of the thinking of human beings to contribute to the functioning and advancement of the societies of the world, where *qualitas* had supremacy over *quantitas*; is the urgent invitation to reflection and action about the unavoidable task of recovering the identity of the university in its essence, to discuss widely what is its true meaning and what is the role that each of its actors should privilege in this scenario. The call has been made, there are many actors in this field concerned about the future of society and it is hoped that the response will be massive to discuss a real possibility of change.

This fragment from “The School of Ignorance” synthesizes and brings to an end what this work has sought to capture. On the one hand, every day people are more aware that the “movement that destroys the existing conditions - that is, the capitalist system - leads humanity to a world that is ecologically uninhabitable and anthropologically impossible. But, on the other hand, it will only be possible to oppose this suicidal historical movement - that is, something as simple as saving the world - if, and only if, future generations accept to take this responsibility upon themselves (Michéa, 2002, p.20).

Conclusions

The meaning of globalization is imposed by an elite in charge of spreading the fascination for the commodity; this is possible through computer networks created to subtly exert control over the world population. Blanca Muñoz (2006) warns that during the 80s and 90s of the twentieth century, in developed countries, a series of educational reforms were initiated to combat and prevent student revolutionary movements. This is the beginning, according to Muñoz, of “de-education” whose purpose is that young people learn simple technological applications in which knowledge is limited, and fragmented, thus, the individual loses the ability to understand reality completely.

One of the slogans of the social struggles to democratize society during the 20th century was to demand free and quality education committed to the development of the people; however, in the 21st century, capitalism and democracy conflict (Muñoz, 2006); this conflict is evident in the establishment of a highly bureaucratic society that has gradually gained strength throughout the system of globalization of neoliberal capitalism: the reality of bureaucracy responds to implement an education that “teaches not to learn”.

Finally, the order of the university in the context of the globalization of neoliberal capitalism and the spectacle of merchandise is trapped by the media and by a series of laws that regulate the educational system that does not favor the student-teacher relationship, therefore, the university does not depend on the dialogue of ideas - the product of thought - but on the decree and the threat of the officials who represent the hegemonic interests of globalized neoliberal capital: the technobureaucracy.

The mission of the university is to improve the quality of life of the people

through the generation of ideas that are at the service of society and not the market. An education that is disalienated from the hegemonic interests of neoliberal capitalism must reject the a-critical sense and fight for a cosmopolitan and democratic society with a high spiritual sense where sciences, art, and technologies commune in favor of thought and social harmony.

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