**Post-Communist Higher Education**

*Higher Education in Post-Communist States: Comparative and Sociological Perspectives* is a collection of eight essays that provide case studies on the transformation of higher education in eastern Europe’s formerly state socialist countries during the nearly three decades since the end of Communist Party rule. The title of this volume certainly aligns with its contents, but it also understates the collective contribution of these essays. Each essay goes well beyond providing an overview of higher education policy or practice. Instead, the authors address a major and understudied aspect of post-communist eastern Europe. The end of state socialism coincided with the expansion of global neoliberal capitalism. In this light, the authors ask: what does the commodification and marketization of higher education in post-communist states, particularly in the social sciences and humanities, look like? This volume not only provides answers to that question but, through the comparative perspectives noted in the title, also provides fresh insights into how neoliberalism functions in higher education elsewhere in Europe and North America.

The introduction of this volume, written by the editors A. Salem, Gary Hazeldine, and David Morgan, outlines the effects of neoliberal economics on higher education, focusing particularly on the British case. In the opening paragraph, they describe an English system rife with fees for students, followed by high debts and low-paying jobs after graduation, economic uncertainty and instability for the growing number of short-term contract academics, and managerial surveillance of faculty. The result, they argue, is unsurprising. Higher education has become a commodity that must be neatly packaged to sell on the market. Insidious actions by the neoliberal state make debts and economic insecurity appear as “a desirable consumer choice” in exchange for education (p. 12). Students, in short, act as consumers or speculators in selecting universities and degrees. After laying out the case of British higher education since 1980, Salem, Hazeldine, and Morgan explain that the volume seeks to understand how and why post-communist states adopted neoliberal systems despite their histories of planned economies and dedication to Marxist-Leninist principles.

Olga Suprun’s essay questions the extent to which higher education in Lithuania can be described as operating in accordance with free market principles. The end of state socialism in
Lithuania ushered in a period of expansion for higher education institutions. The number of both state and private institutions grew, and the autonomy granted to them in law resulted in little chaos. Although Lithuanian law promised free higher education to all “good students” who planned to attend state higher education institutions, the reality was much different. Courts and lawmakers debated what constitutes a good student and created a quota system that prioritized majors beneficial to the Lithuanian economy. Suprun argues that while lawmakers cast an education reform bill, passed in 2009, as supportive of free market principles to make it palatable to Lithuanians, in reality, it continued to embrace aspects of the command economy, particularly using the higher education system to fill labor needs.

Suprun considers how various European and North American models might benefit future education reform in Lithuania, complementing other essays that examine the place of post-communist higher education in a global context. In their study on higher education in Hungary, Zoltán Ginelli, Attila Melegh, Sabina Csánova, Emese Baranyi, and Rudolf Piroch also question the extent to which institutions there have embraced global neoliberal practices. Focusing on policies and the content of courses in the social sciences, these scholars find that even courses labeled as addressing international concerns often focus solely on Europe in general or Hungary in particular. While educational content has undergone a clear process of “Westernization,” admission policies for international students favor Hungarian nationals elsewhere in Europe. The authors dub the Hungarian case “neo-nationalist,” since it gives primacy to Hungary’s regional concerns over interest in creating a global workforce.

In contrast, Robert Ferguson’s essay compares formerly state socialist eastern Europe with other developing regions to investigate the current global focus on innovation and entrepreneurialism. He argues that across the world, the push for technological advancement has undermined critical thought. Drawing on documents outlining plans for Brazilian higher education, he argues that developing economies emphasize the technological to draw in investments, but such technologies may undermine the critical thinking and debating skills necessary for democracy. While Ferguson acknowledges that technologies, such as social media, have played an instrumental role in social mobilization, they have also “normalized ... the non-contemplative” (p. 227). Moreover, even if technology provides platforms for open political debate in a democracy, we should not assume that every citizen has equal access to these technologies.

Other essays draw more favorable conclusions regarding higher education in formerly state socialist countries. Piers von Berg reflects on his experiences teaching civic engagement in post-Soviet Azerbaijan, focusing on the conflicting goals of higher education. On the one hand, institutions are charged with training manpower, but on the other hand, they shape social norms. He argues that even in the era of globalization, it is essential to focus on the local, where students experience the global. He finds that while British higher education embraces the development of civic norms on paper, it could learn from his experience in Azerbaijan that drew students out of the classroom to engage in substantive conversations with those outside the academy. In contrast, Marine Vekua’s study on Georgia focuses on what Georgian universities have gained from the country’s official push to join the European Union. She finds that the Georgian adoption of European standards has improved the educational process, providing room for extracurricular activities while still permitting specific Georgian aspects to remain, particularly in the case of journalism studies.

The standardization of curricula has increased the value of degrees in formerly state socialist countries and encouraged the arrival of international students, but to what extent are the
legacies of state socialism compatible with the neoliberal order? Andreas Umland shares his experiences as a visiting scholar in the former Soviet Union, focusing on what might surprise others who accept similar positions. Implicit to Umland’s argument is the notion that corruption and hierarchy are indicative of surviving Soviet elements, but Joseph Backhouse-Barber and Tom Driver, in their respective essays, point to the compatibility of Soviet attitudes and practices with the new neoliberal order. Backhouse-Barber argues that neoliberal higher education is more focused on economic output than its Soviet command economy predecessor. In contrast to Umland, Backhouse-Barber makes the case that the instability of neoliberal higher education systems plays a more important role in breeding corruption than any Soviet legacies. Similarly, Driver’s study of the covert, biopolitical control found in neoliberal higher education suggests that neoliberal practices have allowed Soviet institutions to continue well into the twenty-first century. Despite mentioning the biopolitical, Driver only defines the covert, conceiving of it as “more subtle power ... an art of government and governing through the formation of subjectivities” (p. 243). Although the neoliberal economic order lacks the clear ideological line of the Soviet one, Driver makes the case that neoliberalism also has a clear end goal—that everything and everyone, including academics, must orient their work to meet the needs of global capital. Monitored entrepreneurialism and marketization have replaced Soviet economic plans as the means of achieving economic goals.

This volume is rich in its diversity, covering multiple countries in formerly state socialist eastern Europe and also a variety of viewpoints and theories. For those teaching courses on eastern Europe, the essays can introduce students to post-socialist life and open discussion on the legacies of state socialism. Scholars who do not focus on this region will find the essays useful for understanding recent developments in higher education in Europe and North America, particularly the role of neoliberal policies. In reading the entire volume, however, readers may find the jargon a bit under-explained at times. Each scholar seems to have their own conception of neoliberalism and opts for specific word choices (for example, communist versus state socialist). Some choices are better explained than others. The change in vocabulary without explanation is jarring, but ultimately this should not deter those interested from reading the volume.
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