**Higher Education in Post-Communist States: Comparative and Sociological Perspectives**

**By Ay Salem, Gary Hazeldine, and David Morgan. Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society Series, 2018**

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The 2018 Ibidem edited volume, Higher Education in Post-Communist States, engages with issues surrounding the slow and uneven adoption of Western neoliberal policies in former Communist states and its implications for university education in particular. The editors, Salem, Hazeldine and Morgan, bring together a range of perspectives on developments in higher education post-1991, some based on first-hand teaching experience in post-Soviet states such as Azerbaijan (by Berg), Russia and Ukraine (by Umland) and Georgia (by Vekua), others being theory-driven assessments, as in the chapters by Backhouse-Barber and Driver on Russian higher education, and Ferguson’s discussion of the political role of critical pedagogies and technological innovations.

In the opening chapter ‘The Ends of Higher Education’, Salem et al take as their point of departure the current university system in the UK, which they consider to be an important backdrop against which the ensuing discussions of diverse local situations in former Communist nations are offset. While acknowledging the effects of market models and the neoliberal policies behind them on developments in higher education in post-Communist countries, Salem et al are careful to stress that there is no ‘one-way journey towards greater Western-style neoliberalisations’ (15). Rather, the emphasis is on cultural specificities and uneven trajectories or shifts, the aim being precisely to stress regional variations and dynamic changes in different contexts.

One such context is examined by Suprun in a chapter entitled ‘Financing Higher Education: Policy Transformations in Lithuania’, which addresses the issue of the links between recent policy shifts, their accompanying legal reforms and the steady withdrawal of public subsidy for access to the universities. Suprin critically considers the constantly shifting distinction between ‘good’ students (the best performing students who can qualify for cost-free grants) and the rest (‘surplus people’ who have to pay for their studies in full). While the criteria for ‘good’ students are in principle based on merit, in practice they feed a system of distinction and hierarchy, decreasing the pool of publicly supported students and their attendant costs, and restricting their intellectual interests to subjects taken to be economically and socially useful. The result for her is a neoliberalised model in which, contrary to the representational rhetoric about egalitarianism and democratisation, there is neither equal and fair access to high quality university education, nor a market ideal where all are free to make lifestyle and consumer choices about where and what to study.

Ginelli et al, in the chapter ‘Local Global: Global Society and Higher Education in Hungary’, map the interrelation of knowledge and power in their analysis of social-science curricula at four Hungarian universities, and more specifically of undergraduate courses in human geography, international relations, political science and sociology. The authors argue that the country’s social sciences embody very particular kinds of knowledge and foster a particular mindset, being nationalistic, isolationalist and Eurocentric, if not quite overtly racist. In the process, the authors conclude, local and international students working here are presented with a very limited narrative, and finally offered a ‘conservative, ethnocentric, and more generally highly Eurocentric education’ (105). It is hard not to connect this analysis with current events in Hungary, especially concerning the state-enforced relocation of Central European University to Austria (Inside Higher Ed, December 4, 2018), alongside the banning of gender studies from master’s degrees (Independent, 24 October 2018). In this sense, undergraduate and postgraduate degrees on offer in Hungary may serve as a lens with which to examine the relationship between the academy and the state, both in terms of what may happen when universities appear to conform to the rhetoric and means of political discourse and what may happen when they do not.

Drawing on their own personal experiences of teaching at former Soviet universities, Berg, Umland and Vekua in their respective chapters give various accounts of shifting structures and ways of working during and after the transition from one political system to another. Rather than offer an empirical analysis of a particular context, Ferguson engages with the general problem of how university education could possibly maintain a Freirean role in consciousness-raising and social critique and also with the role that technology may or may not play in these processes.

Two chapters focus on the Russian higher education system. While Backhouse-Barber draws on the theories of Jürgen Habermas and Niklas Luhmann to assess the extent and type of the neoliberalisation process in this context, Driver makes use of a range of theoretical views (from, among others, Isaiah Berlin, Michel Foucault and Herbert Marcuse) to raise fundamental questions about the direction in which the sector is being taken. This is a detailed and sophisticated analysis of Russian higher education, which highlights the varied, uneven character of the changes, in line with other interpretations that stress the complex and ambiguous nature of neoliberal discourse in Russian higher education that ‘serves symbolic purposes internationally while masking old sociopolitical structures domestically’ (Minina 2016: 191).

This book, with its diverse range of case studies which together vividly illustrate the dilemmas faced by universities in countries of the former USSR and the old Eastern bloc, is a useful addition to the comparative-educational and sociological literature about higher education in post-Communist states. At the same time, while the processes set in train at the beginning of the reforms are well covered, analysis of later developments is largely lacking. Hence, the volume can serve as a solid foundation, both theoretically and practically, for further research work on the themes and concerns discussed by the authors, and a firm basis for researchers wanting to arrive at a better understanding of the economic and historical background to more recent developments.

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