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The Central European University in Budapest, Hungary was forced to close down in late 2018. (Photo credit: Photograph: Bernadett Szabó/Reuters)

Internationalizing Education in an Era of Global Authoritarianism

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The literature on the internationalization of higher education has expanded greatly in recent years, but much of it continues to be framed by neoliberalism and the corporatizing of universities. Fazal Rizvi's recent article in *global-e* is a case in point (Rizvi 2020). As he notes, most universities, particularly those in the global north, have for decades tried to lure international students to their institutions to help defray cuts to public education under neoliberal austerity measures. This cynical exploitation has—quite rightly—been widely criticized. As a counter to this critique, Rizvi argues that universities are now couching their market-driven agendas in the language of "transnational collaborations." But, he goes on to explain, these collaborations are not very successful for three main reasons: 1) at the institutional level, universities do not have sufficient resources and administrative support to foster research collaborations, 2) at the cultural level, lack of understanding and facility with language undermines a sense of reciprocity and true exchange, and 3) commercial logics shape the desired outcomes of collaboration rather than intellectual curiosity and sincere efforts to expand knowledge production.

Surprisingly, the author does not mention as a barrier to collaboration the assumption of intellectual superiority by scholars in the global north (predominantly male and white) that has made the Euro-American academy globally dominant for hundreds of years. He does note that universities in the global south are weary of colonial legacies of knowledge production, and insinuates that this may make scholars wary of collaboration. However, he does not ask if western scholars may also be wary, although for very different reasons. It seems to me that many scholars in the global north do not seek transnational collaborations that may reveal their concepts and ways of thinking to be parochial or perhaps even wrong. Of course,

there are some researchers who are genuinely anxious to “test” their hypotheses, engage in different perspectives, and learn from others. But in reality, those kinds of scholars are few and far between. In practice, there is little incentive, other than pursuing patents or other money-making projects, for western scholars to expand their intellectual frameworks and decolonize their assumptions (Grosfoguel et al 2016; Darian-Smith 2017). Perhaps—though Rizvi does not reflect upon this—there is a lack of will by faculty in both the global north and global south for transnational collaboration, despite the language of partnership by university administrations.

A much more troubling absence in Rizvi’s article and in the literature more generally helps explain today’s barriers to transnational collaboration. This absence underscores a total disengagement by scholars with the rise of global authoritarianism and its impact on universities around the world. Global authoritarianism reflects the cumulative impact of neoliberal policies that over decades have created massive inequality within and between countries, which have in turn fostered today’s populist support for ultra-right strongmen. These leaders, in the name of the disenfranchised and impoverished, are aggressively dismantling democratic institutions, including universities and colleges.

Today we are witnessing across the world—in the global south and global north—a systematic attack on public education. Some governmental leaders have tried to censor free speech on university campuses that are perceived to be too liberal (United States). Other governments have taken more drastic measure by attacking teacher unions (Philippines), using surveillance in classrooms (China), dismantling the sex-education curriculum (Canada), banning discussion of rights for women and LGBTQ communities (Brazil), closing colleges and universities and throwing thousands of educators and researchers into prison, and in some cases having them killed or disappeared (Turkey, Hungary). Curriculums are being revised, critical thinking outlawed, scientific knowledge debunked, and religious and nationalist fundamentalisms imposed. With the global political tide pushing increasingly narrow state-framed worldviews, there is a retrenchment of how people understand their relational place in, and connection to, the world (Darian-Smith 2019).

Educators from the Philippine Alliance of Concerned Teachers protest historical revisionism and police intimidation of academics in 2018. (Photo by A.M. Umil/Bulatlat)

Against this backdrop, one does not have to look too far to explain the limited success of transnational collaboration. In universities in the United States, for instance, it is no longer easy to send students and scholars to many countries due to safety risks that include the possibility of being kidnapped or thrown into jail. Evidence of this is the severe curtailment of Education Abroad Programs in recent years and the annual shrinking of approved overseas sites. Similarly, it is harder to receive overseas students and scholars given President Trump’s travel bans that have been broadened since they were first imposed in 2017. Travel bans leave many students and faculty from US universities trapped overseas or detained in airports, and have severely chilled efforts toward future collaboration (Reardon 2017). Even for students and scholars who do not belong to a travel ban country, there is much

uncertainty. Overseas students are decreasing in numbers, and extreme scrutiny of visiting scholars and research funding from countries such as China and Saudi Arabia is playing a big part in declining interest for collaborative programming.

Importantly, the closing of collaborative research opportunities is not just happening between countries. Within the United States itself, some states ban the travel of scholars at publicly funded institutions. For instance, California has rules that ban travel to states such as Texas and North Carolina that have enacted LGBTQ-hostile legislation. This means that scholars from across the enormous Californian public higher education system cannot travel to some conferences and engage in face-to-face collaborative ventures within the United States. As the country becomes more politically and culturally polarized between progressives and the far-right, one can imagine that barriers to open intellectual exchange may proliferate rather than decline.

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I don’t want to generalize from the US experience since all higher education systems have characteristics reflecting unique cultural, economic, and political profiles. That being said, the US is an internationally dominant presence in higher education and in many ways is a harbinger of other westernized university systems. If (trans)national collaborations are unsuccessful in the United States, it is pretty safe to say that they will be unsuccessful elsewhere as well. This scenario is compounded by the US joining ranks with other far-right-leaning governments whose populist politics include strict immigration policies scapegoating migrants, discriminating against ethnic, gender and religious minorities, as well as denouncing science and attacking institutions of higher education.

So what does this dramatic shift in global geopolitics mean for universities and the potential of transnational scholarly collaboration? We cannot predict the future, but with the rise of global authoritarianism and prevailing ultra-nationalist sentiment we are already witnessing ways in which universities are becoming a common political target. In this radical climate the “ivory towers” upon which university scholars perch are teetering and unstable. This is more obvious in some countries than in others, but it is not hard to extrapolate. I imagine that in the coming years scholars around the world will be increasingly keeping their heads down, not daring to

challenge the status quo. Censorship and surveillance are already managing our everyday worlds. My point is that new and extremely ominous barriers are stifling sincere efforts toward transnational scholarly collaboration and an open exchange of knowledge. The question is, why are scholars of higher education not talking about them?

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