

Discussion

Comments on "Education and the Market Model"

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The paper by John McMurtry is headed by a quotation from a British Minister of Higher Education. The quotation, which is perhaps a sign of the times, speaks of an alternative paradigm whereby people may be given access to educational services supplied by persons or agencies more responsive to those who request them. There is in this the *idea* of choice among various alternatives offered independently of government; also, there is the use of *terms* derived from the context of business. McMurtry is disturbed by both the idea and the language.

A reduction in funding from government for higher education, and the elimination of many academic positions, have occurred on both sides of the Atlantic. Also, universities have felt pressure to justify their existence by providing an economic rationale. This has led people, outside and inside the universities, to adopt terms and concepts which reflect an economic rationale: McMurtry criticises this rationale for being alien to education, which properly has a *sui generis* rationale.

The empirical matters that worry McMurtry--the reduction in government support and the issue of consumer language--I shall not challenge, for they are quite correctly reported in the article, and they are without question great causes for concern. The use of commercial language in education, and in the media, is a blight on our discourse.

For comment on the argument of the paper, I first include some brief points about the detail of the claim that education and the market model are not just different but opposed. Second, some observations are made on the section dealing with counterarguments. Third, I present some general remarks about whether market thinking is a danger to education. Lastly, I return to the opening quotation and ask whether expanded choice implies a degradation in educational or academic values; this is filled out by some reference to higher education in Britain.

A point to preface what follows is that McMurtry writes in a theory-laden and single-minded style which, among other things, pushes to the background the antinomies that create tension in education even without the intrusion of the market--such as that between elitism and egalitarianism--and the ironies that tend to complicate matters of both theoretical and practical importance. For instance, he looks, presumably, to the government to support education for its own sake; but governments, even when generous towards higher education, have typically had the 'human capital theory' in mind, and have wanted to supply the adult world with suitable prepared people. Or, we note that in England it is the Tories who have pressed for a 'national curriculum' at secondary level--an idea which socialists find themselves agreeing with--after earlier socialist governments had not the steel to change traditional ways by such a proposal. Lastly, while entrepreneurial professors have used their initiative to persuade corporations to sponsor graduate programmes, and while they might resent *having* to do that to save their department, they do not claim that such innovations reduce the *academic* standing of their department or university--indeed, they relish the

increase of repute that it brings, which is hardly what they did over the more and worse intake of undergraduates that enlightened governments thrust upon them some years ago.

On more specific matters: first, the central part of McMurtry's paper is an anatomy of the defining differences between market and educational principles. The market model is opposed to education in its goals, motivations, method and standards of excellence; further underlying oppositions are in its logic of achievement and in its standard of freedom.

McMurtry's insistent and uncompromising position on this is salutary in bringing out the contrast between educational and market values. At the level of detail, however, there are moments when the contrast is forced. Thus, we are alerted that an excellent product is problem-free while an excellent education poses deep and broad problems. But this is to equivocate on 'problem.' In the first instance it means 'defect,' in the second it means 'question' or 'challenge.' And, the limited satisfactions that products offer, as contrasted with the open-ended possibilities from education, is overdone, with a distorting emphasis on the market's delivery of trivial or stultifying things to satisfy unsophisticated wants, as in commercial television and rock music. Even if it is granted that those diversions are evil, it is also true that the market provides tools, paint-brushes, hiking-boots, and many other things which are bought because the activities they facilitate offer endless possibilities of interest and challenge. That they are ready-made, guaranteed, and will wear out--unlike an education--does not mean that they are consumed in passive or stultifying ways.

These are, as I said, details. They do not lead me to deny the pernicious effects of market thinking in educational matters, or in other matters where intelligent discourse ought to be the norm.

Second, some words about the author's treatment of two counterarguments. In the first case, the argument is that the problem is really a more urgent version of a long-established and inevitable subordination of education to economic imperatives. McMurtry takes this to amount to an economic determinism which will eventually obliterate the pursuit of things as ends-in-themselves. At this point in the paper, the writing is perhaps at its most theory-laden. The metaphysics of the matter are not pursued there, and will not be here either. But there is another striking thing: the analysis is about education, although the initial concerns were specifically about higher education. And the thought occurs: the dire forecasts about the total absorption of education into a great system of commodity manufacture and exchange need a special argument for why education at elementary and secondary level cannot under capitalism be dedicated to knowledge and understanding as ends-in-themselves, even if post-secondary courses are primarily for career-preparation.

The other counterargument is that, since corporations hire autonomous thinkers, educational and market values are compatible. McMurtry charges that this is not true in any decisive extent or manner; critical thinkers are not hired who would challenge the basic ways of the firm. This response is overdone. In many companies, central, not marginal, concerns of management include: encouraging the retention of inventive persons who might be inclined to set up on their own; reducing obsolete bureaucracy; reducing supervisory and inspection jobs by increasing the scope and responsibility of the line employees' work; enhancement of skills and expertise. Even if these are in the service of the

company, they certainly do not call for people whose minds are stunted and who shun new challenges. It can be granted that no firm hires people *because* they are gadflies, snakes in the grass, or whistle-blowers; but would it be reasonable to expect otherwise? In any case, the non-autonomous character of managers' thinking does not show that the best training for it *before* their careers does not lie in the study of discipline undertaken for their intrinsic interest and challenge.

Third, some general observations about the aptness or otherwise of market thinking in higher education.

In the context of education, current in America is discussion over vouchers for secondary education. The concern that McMurtry rightly raises about popular choice tending towards the lowest common denominator, and therefore a reduction in educational value, applies here. In an article in *New Republic* (July 15 & 22, 1991), Thernstrom reports that in Minnesota some persons have chosen a transfer to schools with easier graduation requirements. On the other hand, it is also posited that, since vouchers offer choices to attend private schools where the curriculum is more likely than in public schools to adhere to traditional academic values and to spurn ethnically-thematised alternatives, then vouchers are the best hope.

As for higher education, it is not clear why there is anything wrong at all with people choosing where and how to study. Higher education is, to varying degrees, selective about who is taken in, which is one major check against the drop to a common denominator. And, there are already choices, such as between full-time study and distance learning; moreover, government and accreditation agencies regulate what is done, and can continue to regulate innovative opportunities. In contexts other than education, an issue about choice in markets is the question of whether individuals will choose things for the public good when the private good is more easily had, such as whether people will pay more for unleaded fuel. Does this have any counterpart in education? Education offers private goods, such as entry to jobs or escape from poverty, but these are part of what makes up the economy, to which the market model applies. There are other private goods, such as the development of cultural interests, and other public goods, such as political literacy and a respect for democracy and community values. It seems that either of the last two sorts of things mentioned could be omitted from young persons' choices, either through lack of interest, or through a constriction of options worked by market forces in other ways. So it appears that the distinction between private and public goods merely subdivides the possibilities; it does not lign itself to assist a conclusion.

Another distinction that occurs in discussions of the market is between a failure *of* the market system, and a failure, to provide a good or to prevent an evil, which occurs because the market works only too well. Critics of the market in the economy have noted: externalities, such as pollution; the waste of human capital, since competition produces losers; and, the narrowness of purpose that arises in pursuing commerce for short-term profit. These are failures *of* the market when, later if not sooner, they are of *economic* harm. On the other hand, McMurtry's position seems to be that the market model best be kept out of education because education has its own value, irrespective of its value to the economy, and that the market, even if successful in its own terms, would fail us in educational terms.

A question to ask here is whether a reconciling of the two forces is

supportable, either by arguing that educational deprivation is an economic liability, or by arguing that the same studies that serve educational purposes can also benefit the economy. In the first case, it seems already recognised that privation at elementary and secondary level are a drain on resources because of the need for welfare, and so on. But at the level of higher education, the matter is not so simple. The sort of cuts that McMurtry speaks of are, notably, in arts subjects, where the faculty do not readily offer an economic rationale for their pursuits. It is interesting that corporate leaders give talks to business-school students lamenting the lack of humanistic background in many persons entering business. Unfortunately, this enlightenment at the top is in two ways detached from where it might make a difference. On the one hand, the actual hiring into starting positions is done not by top managers, but by others who are among those who know nothing about the humanities. On the other hand, top corporate people are not invited to give talks to students in the faculty of arts. What support there might actually be in corporations for the study of arts subjects is, then, disengaged from the places where they are actually studied, and can hardly be counted upon to save them. This is one, perhaps among many, reasons why such pursuits are probably doomed without strong support for educational values in their own right.

Lastly, the question of whether an increase in choice leads to a diminishing in educational values in higher education is addressed. The opening quotation about an alternative paradigm pertains to this; what has taken place recently in the British universities is of interest here. As McMurtry points out, many faculty positions in arts subjects, and some entire departments, have been cut. Unfortunately, although market thinking has been prominent in motivating the shake-up, the cuts are not contrary to the beliefs held by many who are dedicated to education for its own sake and who have always been sceptical about the expansion in student intake that took place in the nineteen- sixties.

Most academic jobs in Britain are lecturers' positions which serve courses designed in ways that contradict the cherished values that prevail in educational circles. This was for decades marked by the award of Pass or Ordinary degrees - not Honours - to the bulk of candidates served by such arrangements. The labels are different now, but not because of a redesign of courses. In fact, the expanded intake into lecture-based courses made things worse; with a group of any size it is logistically impossible for an undergraduate's configuration of activities to reflect the relative importance that is conventionally accorded to reading, essay-writing, and contact with a tutor. At the same time, the decentralised arrangements offered by the Open University permit students a configuration which is deemed a reputable way of learning a discipline.

The success and the *academic* standing of the Open University have made it hard to justify many Arts Faculties' existence, even if the government's interest in challenging them was largely *economic* (the Open University is cheaper). If persons attending arts or social sciences at a regular university were encouraged to consider other, decentralised, provisions, this would not necessarily imply a drop in academic value.

The alternative paradigm presumably also means adding some more options to the full-time and part-time opportunities already available--such as vouchers for consultation with free-lance scholars--and permitting a variety of combinations out of the different arrangements, facilitated perhaps by an agency that