The Impact of COVID-19 on the Institutional Fabric of Higher Education: Old Patterns, New Dynamics and Changing Rules?, edited by Rómulo Pinheiro, Elizabeth Balbachevsky, Pundy Pillay, and Akiyoshi Yonezawa

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Durkheimian studies have widely shown that education has been historically conditioned by substantial socio-economic changes, which include the rise of new means of production/consumption with long-lasting effects in the labour market. History witnesses cycles of disruption in the education system that are conducive to new technological breakthroughs that revive the economy. Through the study of education, social scientists can understand how society is changing. This happens because, according to Émile Durkheim, the economy and education are inextricably entwined (Durkheim 2004, 2012, 2018). Contextually, Durkheim laid the foundations for a positivist theory of education, which centres on the interplay of production and social ties. Human relationships as well as our daily behaviour are conditionally determined by deep social forces (organised in labour division).

Having said this, higher education not only trains the future workforce but also seems to be sensitive to the new dynamics of a global knowledge economy. Of course, the dynamics of the economy are mainly marked by internal or external founding events that transform the social fabric. Hence a crisis in education often evinces the twilight of an old society and its rejuvenation in a new one (Barnes 1977; Davies 1994, 2020). This point has invariably led to a conceptual gridlock because Durkheimian texts overlook the power of ideology in the formation of social consciousness. Karl Marx has also

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written about the proliferation of ideological dispositions oriented to reproduce the logic of capitalism as well as its derived inequalities and inter-class asymmetries.

Unlike Marx, Durkheim misjudged the role played by class in the configuration of modern capitalism. Education never operates outside the spectre of class formation. As a result of this, education works as a mechanism of indoctrination (discipline) that disposes the workers to accept passively the rules of the market (in a form of symbolic domination). Education hides the most fundamental injustices of capitalism until the next class revolution. A crisis in education, at least for Marx, evinces the rise of a new inter-class struggle (embodied in the revolt of the oppressed class against their masters). To some extent, as Marx puts it, the oppressed class does the same as their master did when it takes power. Since history is defined as the pathways (road map) of class struggle, education speaks to us of the rules of winners (Anyon 2011; Marx 2023). Of course, this debate not only is far from being closed but also pits Marxism against the original Durkheimian axioms (Small 2017).

The present book starts from the same premise while helping to resolve the Marx-Durkheim dichotomy. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated substantial shifts in the fabric of higher education at the core of local economies. At first glimpse, this book has two main merits. On the one hand, it brings an invitation to well-skilled scholars versed in education and society. On the other, chapters are written by voices coming from West and Eastern Europe, Africa, Latin America, and Asia, offering a multicultural perspective. Although the 17 chapters can be read separately, they have a common thread. The crisis generated by COVID-19 evinced the relative power of governments to deal with the institutional autonomy of higher education. This affected many young students as well as professors and academicians worldwide.

The first (prefatory) chapter by the editors explores the impact of the pandemic on the higher education system. The urgency in adopting restrictive measures, which included strict lockdowns and the prohibition of free circulation, invariably pressed higher education to an online or virtual condition. This crisis not only affected the higher education institutions (HEIs), but also affected academic research. Governments prioritised the health system, leaving higher education institutions in a difficult position. As a result of this, many institutions have been forced to adapt to the new challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors suggest a model based on three dimensions: macro, meso, and micro. While the macro level focuses on the key factors and actors involved in the meta-governance of the system, the micro level signals the interaction of agents in sharing information and knowledge in the creation of operating networks. The meso level also sheds light on the role played by actors in the different types of HEIs towards a sustainable resource allocation.

The second chapter (Clarke) reviews the experience of Irish higher education stakeholders in the COVID-19 pandemic. The author argues that even if the system proved to be resilient, it failed to reach the neediest students who are ultimately excluded

from access to digital technologies as well as the knowledge economy. The deficiencies in Irish higher education, which resulted in a deep crisis, have been exacerbated by the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus.

The third chapter (Shenderova et al.) analyses the Polish and Russian cases. As a semi-peripheral subsystem of the European Union, Russia and Poland offered a more than interesting case where the unexpected engagement of emerging actors paved the way for the rise of new policy networks in the internationalisation of higher education. The crisis opened the doors to new actors who exposed the structural deficiencies of HEIs while impacting favourably on their internationalisation (in dialogue with other European HEIs).

The fourth chapter (Dakowska) interrogates the collision between the urgency to build a solid public health system—to contain the pandemic—and the priorities of HEIs in France. The pandemic management adopted a medical discourse (dominant narrative) originally oriented to place HEIs in a peripheral position as well as aggravating the material asymmetries among institutions.

The fifth chapter (Bisaso and Coxwell Achanga) discusses critically the opportunities and challenges of virtual education in Uganda. The authors are enthralled by the neoliberal reforms introduced in the country in the formation of a New Public Management Sector (NPM) to face the devastating consequences of the lockdown in the local economy. These reforms warranted the autonomy of higher education (HE) in academic matters before the state and the market.

The sixth chapter (Barbosa et al.) depicts the complexity of HE institutional profiles in Brazil. Unlike other described cases, Brazil offered different institutional responses to the COVID-19 crisis (in a type of institutional indiscipline). At the same time, the public sector has been forced to incorporate relatively unknown instruments (e.g., digital technologies or online learning) to cope with the pandemic. As the authors assert, the public sector was placed between the wall and the deep blue sea, without any support from the Ministry of Education. The chapter concludes that COVID-19-related effects varied in public and private sectors according to their financial capacity.

In the seventh chapter, Yonezawa et al. describe the rapidly adopted opportunities for virtual education in Japan, a country accustomed to these methods. Hence the pandemic began a new stage in the global capitalist system with the odds of expanding a new revolution in the internationalisation of HEIs, while reducing the existent inter-cultural differences and geopolitical tensions among nations.

The eighth chapter (Rabossi, Guaglianone, and Markman) debates the effects of the HE crisis in Argentina, a country that dealt with one of the strictest lockdowns in the world. The pandemic left long-lasting consequences in HEIs. Those universities equipped with

online international exchange had more opportunities to survive than those more dependent on public funding or conservative HEIs.

The ninth chapter (Charles) gives a diagnosis of the problems of Brexit for international cooperation in the fields of HEIs. The role of the civic university is vital to manage the COVID-19 crisis. The civic university connects knowledge production with deep health concerns towards more sustainable community and economic and social development. The notion of the civic university combines stewardship of place and anchor institutions. While stewardship of place refers to the direct institutional engagement with local actions for mutual benefits, the anchor institutions signal the ethical responsibilities of universities in improving communal life.

The tenth chapter (Asante, Liyanapathiranage, and Pinheiro) evaluates the resilience of Norse universities in the context of the crisis generated by the pandemic. The authors offer an analytical model to scrutinise the COVID-19 effects according to three variables or processes: antecedents, processes, and outcomes. Nordic universities have developed a capacity for adaptation (resiliency), while keeping their original functions. A successful capacity for adaptation depends not only on human resources or innovation but on the combination of effective leadership, knowledge-based resources, and the optimisation of decision-making procedures.

The eleventh chapter (Almeida and Terra) delves into the significant role played by technology transfer in mitigating the negative effects of student dropout rates in Brazil, a country marked by political polarisation.

The twelfth chapter (Liu and Horta) complementarily centres efforts to understand the aftermath of the new normal in China and Hong Kong particularly. As the authors assert, both systems experienced radical transformation during the lockdowns, pushing academicians to adapt to these changes. Academicians in mainland China and Hong Kong devoted considerable time and resources to increasing their publications and academic research during the lockdown. The chapter suggests that new opportunities in knowledge production were opened.

The thirteenth chapter (Nokkala, Aarnikoivu, and Saarinen) describes the reaction of universities in Europe and North America before the economic downturn caused by the pandemic. Universities reacted too fast, making strategic decisions in a context of high uncertainty. As a result, some higher education establishments should have been closed because of the wane of applied research.

The fourteenth chapter (Solberg and Tomte) focuses on the Norwegian case, which is mainly moved by a digital transformation in the constellations of higher education institutions. Authorities have successfully backed the digitalisation process as a strategic measure to cope with the devastating post-COVID-19 scenario. As a consequence,

students have shown little problem adapting to the digitalisation of campus-based teaching.

In consonance with this, the fifteenth chapter (Pekkola et al.) introduces readers to a debate about the conflict between academicians and university managers and policymakers in the educational arena. These surfacing tensions manifest in the resistance of managers to change their daily routinised practices during the lockdown. With a focus on the Finnish HE case, the chapter pays significant attention to the communication-related problems between government officials and the academy.

The sixteenth chapter (Schreiber et al.) gives a snapshot of the global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on higher education worldwide. Per their viewpoint, the pandemic situates HE before new uncontemplated challenges, transformations, and structural changes necessitated by the deterioration caused by social isolation. The seventeenth chapter, which is reserved for the editors, illustrates the learned lessons and the next steps for higher education research in the years to come. With the benefits of hindsight, the editors stress four variables that need further discussion to make further resilient systems: innovation, cooperation, rationality, and resilience.

The book, at least for this reviewer, is inscribed into 17 rich, empirical-based chapters that explore the complexity of higher education institutions in different contexts and cultural backgrounds. Although some weaknesses can be identified, the book is well structured into a multicultural vision of the problem. The chapters provide readers with empirical material, some of them of significant importance for comparative education studies. The main argument moves in the continuities and discontinuities of the HEIs regarding cooperation and innovation. The multifaceted interests of stakeholders often lead to irreversible gridlocks. Beyond the profit-centred paradigm that dominates today, the academy and the autonomy of academicians and professors remain fertile ground for making more resilient systems. In a nutshell, the book is also logically structured into three main debates: the future of digitalisation in online learning, the adaptation of the public sector to the new times, and the new curricula formed by the emergence of novel digital literacy in students. Of course, the text has some conceptual/ methodological limitations, which need further discussion. Chapters—though coherently integrated by editors according to their macro-meso-micro analysis—show contradictory results. While some nations experienced a rapid deterioration of their higher education institutions, others optimised digital technologies to find a resilient alternative to the COVID-19 pandemic. Neither in the introduction nor the conclusion do the editors interrogate further these contrasting dynamics. In Durkheimian terms, the editors' argument alludes to precisely to what extent—or in what way—is the COVID-19 pandemic changing society. It begs also some significant questions: What is the role of higher education in the new normal? Is COVID-19 showing the rise of a new world or a new stage of capitalism? Is higher education offering a new opportunity for the challenges left by COVID-19 or is it simply in its final decline?

At this point we must come back to Marx. At a closer look, in ancient times, slaves were fed to avoid starvation. Deprived of freedom, slaves were systematically placed outside education. Slaves were not free, but they had secured their means of subsistence. As Marx probed, once the capitalist system reorganised the life (and ties) of medieval institutions, modern capitalism introduced new rules where slaves became workers. However, these workers lacked the necessary instruments to secure their means of subsistence. In this context, education helps not only by indoctrinating workers into the capitalist game, but also by giving instruments to play the game. At least, this happens—like this book suggests—until the system enters an economic downfall (Small 2017). The COVID-19 pandemic exhibited the crisis of a system to resolve a current ecological urgency. These above-mentioned questions lead me to rethink the etymology of the term "education". The word comes from ancient Latin *educere*, which has two interpretations. *Educere* was mainly used to feed cattle or to denote the emancipation of the human spirit. For the ancient voices, education was a double-edged sword that combined emancipation and indoctrination. What form will higher education—supported by digital technologies—take after the pandemic?

This book is a recommended read for policymakers, professionals, and academicians concerned with the future of HEIs in the new normal.

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