

Andreas Wittel – Beyond state and market: Higher education as a commons

During the last decade higher education in the UK has undergone a profound transition. Universities, formerly known as public institutions, are being turned into money making corporations. This transition of higher education away from a public good and toward a private good (toward a commodity) is in full swing and close to completion. Needless to say the effects are devastating in every respect. It would be a grave error however to bemoan this process with sentiments of nostalgia. The public university, as it is well known, has often been accused of being an elitist institution. It has been rightly criticised for stabilising and conserving existing class structures. Is there a third way? Is it possible to conceptualise higher education beyond state and market? This presentation is an exercise in utopian thinking. I want to introduce two developments in higher education that are situated beyond state and market. The first development are large scale transnational initiatives such as the 'University of the People' and the 'Open Education Resource University'. These initiatives organise education as remote learning and through digital technologies. They are aimed at students in disadvantaged areas. While the politics of these initiatives is progressive and inclusive, the educational philosophy is contestable. It is largely based on self-education and it outsources some important parts of the educational process by making a distinction between the free access to open educational resources on the one hand and small fees that need to be paid for assessments. The second development is free university initiatives that organise higher education as a common good, e.g. the Free University of San Francisco and the Social Science Centre in Lincoln. These initiatives are very much in line with autonomous thinking and anarchist concepts of education. While they should be applauded for introducing alternative models of higher education, they are also problematic with respect to the notion of free labour. In order to analyse this problem I will introduce a conceptual distinction between a knowledge commons and an education commons. The presentation ends with some general considerations on the growth and the sustainability of free universities.