Neo-liberalism, globalization, and the American Universities in Eastern Europe: Tensions and possibilities in “exported” higher education

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Abstract (148 words)

This article explores the presence of U.S. institutions of higher education in Eastern Europe as one facet of the neo-liberal global environment. It draws on policy documents, institutional statistics, materials produced by interest groups and NGOs, official mission statements, press releases and media coverage, and personal narratives. The American University in Bulgaria is examined as a case of this wider phenomenon. Exclusively structuralist, critical analyses of such institutions can easily lead to conclusions of homogenization and dominance through the hegemony of “exporter” education institutions and programs. Poststructural analysis—attuned to multiplicities of meanings, nuances of context, and complex interplays of power and knowledge claims—allow for more attention to the local dynamics, while human interpretation and agency may point the way to more hopeful roles for U.S. institutions of higher education abroad. In turn, these roles may challenge the one-way deterministic flow of influence suggested by structuralist analyses.

Keywords: neoliberalism, globalization, higher education
“Do you think this university is a form of neo-colonialism?” The question asked in an Introduction to Expository Writing class provoked stunned silence from the twenty-five young adults who had come from all over Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union to study at this American liberal-arts university in the middle of the Balkans—the American University in Bulgaria. Although the students may not have expected to hear a question like this in a lesson on thesis statements, framing arguments, and building strong conclusions, the question was strikingly relevant to people living in post-communist Eastern Europe. This article explores the presence of U.S. institutions of higher education in Eastern Europe as one facet of the neo-liberal global environment. It draws on policy documents, statistics, materials produced by interest groups and NGOs, official mission statements and materials of these institutions, press releases and media coverage, as well as narratives of students in these institutions, including one of the authors’ personal reflections as a former student in such an institution.

We consider the American University in Bulgaria as a case of a wider phenomenon, identifying its challenges and possibilities and articulating the need for a range of theoretical lenses in analyses of institutions of higher education abroad. The typical mode of analysis of international higher education is structuralist—critical Marxian and functionalist, based in world-systems theory and employing center-periphery political and economic discourses. The natural conclusions are homogenization and dominance—through the hegemony of dominant actors who “export” education institutions and programs into regions subordinated to the structures of globalization.

Our article parallels structuralist analysis with poststructural analysis—attuned to multiplicities of meanings, nuances of context, and complex interplays of power and knowledge claims. As an epistemological response to the limitations of modernist structuralism, postmodern
and poststructural analytical approaches problematize the underlying assumptions of structuralist inherited wisdom and question reductionist or monolithic perceptions and explanations of outcomes. While we acknowledge there are other possible theoretical frames that also could be useful, we raise the poststructural frame as an incisive counterpoint to expand on the dominant structural-functional interpretation. Poststructural lenses that allow for more attention to the local dynamics and human interpretation and agency may point the way to more hopeful roles for U.S. institutions of higher education abroad. In turn, these roles may challenge the one-way deterministic flow of influence suggested by structuralist analyses and highlight alternatives for equitable cultural and political discourses in global education.

The professor’s question, asked almost casually, was in fact a concern even at the beginning of the phenomenon that is now becoming more prevalent across Eastern Europe and the world—the exportation of American higher education programs, either whole institutions or through distance-learning and on-line programs. Recently, however, in light of the unprecedented interconnectedness of the world and the ensuing presence of American institutions in Europe, cultural imperialism is a pressing concern in contemporary European life. In response to the professor’s question, some students observed a stark reality: although their University’s mission statement states its aim to train “leaders of the region,” there has been an increasing flow of students who pursue advanced degrees abroad (especially in the United States) and are thus less likely to return for work in their home countries.

Framework

How can we make sense of what American universities in Eastern Europe mean in terms of different intentions, purposes, perceptions, and reactions? Structuralist lenses based in functionalist world-systems and critical theory offer one way of seeing. A central problem in
global interaction is the tension between cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization (Appadurai 2003). The homogenization argument is usually laden with negative implications, the process being seen as either Americanization or commodification or as a hybrid of the two. The presence of American institutions of higher education abroad, especially in the previously authoritarian contexts like Eastern Europe, may be interpreted in this framework as neo-colonialism, both cultural and intellectual, leading to a fear of cultural inauthenticity, the “brain drain” phenomenon, or even the death of traditional regional cultures. While some decry consequences whose magnitude we are just now beginning to perceive, others celebrate the emergence of Ohmae’s (1998: 7) “cartographic illusion”—the decline of the nation-state and the increasing division of the world along economic lines instead of politico-cultural ones, renouncing “emotion-grabbing symbols” (Ohmae 1997: 13) like nationhood and instead generating concrete improvement in the quality of life through a free-market economy.

Depending on the ideological lens employed, the perceptions (for at this point in the phenomenon we may perhaps only speak of perceptions) of American universities’ roles in Eastern Europe radically differ because they are situated in what Louis Menand (2001: 338) has called a “vortex of discursive imperatives.” This is used in the context of explaining the pragmatic approach to law and the ways in which decision-makers attempt to make choices appear only principle-driven while actually negotiating numerous roles and expectations. Menand indicates that,

hovering over [the] whole…pattern—all of which is already in motion, as it were, before the particular case at hand ever arises—is a single meta-imperative. This is the imperative not to let it appear as though any one of [the] lesser imperatives has decided the case at the blatant expense of these others. (Menand 2001: 339)
Menand’s concept of “meta-imperative” as an apparently dominant, pervasive, and self-evident rationale is useful for our examination of U.S. institutions of higher education abroad. With this image in mind, in the political and economic discourses of center-periphery and for those who seek to focus only on the imperialistic aspects of globalization, the understanding is that, in general, the meta-imperative of these institutions is the “Americanization” (or the closely linked “commodification of the world. Core/semi-periphery/periphery economic models, although debated, are prevalent in interpretations of current inequalities and originate in Immanuel Wallerstein’s (1974) analysis that the capitalist world-system is highly heterogeneous, marked by fundamental differences in development and accumulation of political and material capital. Countering affirmative theories of modernization and capitalism, Wallerstein delineated the lasting divisions of the world into core, semi-periphery and periphery zones inherent in the world system. His formulations, for example, form the model of many current index analyses that rank the world’s countries by strength indices. One such ranking analysis shows the U.S. at the top, with a strength index of 363, while Bulgaria shows an index of 8 (Piana 2004).

The argument that the global context is much less collaborative than it is ridden by unequal power relations has also been expanded from socio-economic models to cultural concerns. Ginsburg, Cooper, Raghu, and Zagarra (1990) and Samoff (1999), for example, call attention to the question of power in the cultural arenas. The global diffusion of Western notions of progress, including ways of thinking about education, have become almost universal and shape worldwide assumptions about economic development. Human capital and economic progress, in this view, are part of the broader discourse of capitalist triumphalism. Policy discourses are not simply borrowed but are also imposed on those at the periphery—and the
broader processes of economic, cultural and political globalization tend to steer national educational policies into a neo-liberal direction, showing that “with few exceptions, the direction of influence is from … core to southern periphery” (Samoff 1999: 53). His general thesis is based on the idea that institutional arrangements, disciplinary definitions and hierarchies, legitimizing publications, and institutional authority reside mostly within the core, with the periphery apparently left to mostly mimic the core’s dominant discourses and practices.

World culture theory (Meyer, Boli, Thomas, and Ramirez 1997; Ramirez and Boli 1987) also draws attention to the question of an increased universalism in educational systems, but unlike the world-systems theory, it is not explicitly concerned with questions of hegemony. It focuses on how the idea of schooling as we know it originated from a common European source and spread around the world as part of the cultural package of the modern nation-state, along with its conceptualizations of government, military and health systems. Over time, more nations have chosen to adopt the system as a signifier of being a “modern” country. From a critical stance, the world culture model is considered flawed because of its inadequate treatment of power, while scholars employing anthropological lenses have countered it through examples of on-site practices that suggest a different dynamic from that of a homogeneous adoption of grand models (Anderson-Levitt 2003). An emphasis, therefore, on the modes of educational governance that are globally converging and especially that of the world-systems perspectives which centers on the dynamics of power, can easily focus on the exported American universities’ active role in that process. The likely result is that these American institutions are deemed imperialistic and, thus, easily demonized.

Interpreting the universities’ self-presentation discourses, the meta-imperative that emerges is quite different: positive, optimistic democratization of the former Eastern Bloc, with
the correlated neo-liberal facilitation of free-market development. From any single angle, one rationale appears to dominate, yet within this “vortex” of imperatives lie questions that, even when evading definitive or immediate answers, may lead to more complex understandings of these institutions. In addition to asking how these institutions of higher education are constructed in light of globalization and how they construct themselves, there is a pressing need to ask what other imperatives or possibilities may be overlooked at the expense of focusing only on one narrative (be it “Americanization,” “democratization” or any other one that emerges out of a single-angled analysis). The next step is to ask what are the consequences for cultural transformation of privileging certain types of constructions and analyses over others, and what are possible paths of action for those engaged with these processes.

In its current manifestations, neo-liberalism combines social contract liberalism with free-trade capitalism. It thus maximizes individual rational choice, economic self-determination, and notions of developmental progress. From economics to educational reforms, the ascendant neo-liberal agenda emphasizes decentralization and attrition of governance, attributing more control and power to market forces and non-governmental enterprises and structures, the deregulation of banking and other institutions, the privatization of land, industry, and education, the reduction of frictions for the free circulation of commodities, the provision of various tax and other incentives attractive for business, and the rhetoric of the primacy of the private over the public. In education, critics (Apple 1996; Burbules and Torres 2000; Peters 2001; Torres 2002) argue that the trend manifests itself in the expectation that schools should be held “accountable” to the market not only in efficiency but also in producing the necessary skilled laborers for the invoked globally-emerging knowledge-based economy (Bologna Declaration 1999), that schools of choice be allowed competitive advantage over “ineffective” public monopolies (Chubb and
Moe 1990), and that individuals be given the opportunity to choose freely and pursue individual educational and professional advantage. In this context, education is increasingly perceived as a private rather than a public good (Labaree 1997a), with civic discourse giving way to the language of commercialism and privatization, turning citizenship into a privatized affair with the aim of enabling individuals to pursue their own self interest and social mobility. Henry Giroux (2002: 428), for example, contends that neo-liberalism is “the most dangerous ideology of the current historical moment,” because it assaults democracy by using free market relations as a metaphor for democratic practices and by diminishing noncommodified public spaces, like schools and universities, where people can organize moral visions and values that are vital to democracy.

Carrying the analyses to these questions is crucial not only to countering static, deterministic interpretations that fit neatly in structural-functional schemas (yet may fail to touch upon the complexities of these contexts), but also to enabling different avenues to social action and cultural transformation. Hence, we view the interplay between globalization and higher education through multiple lenses, suggesting ways to look beyond the rather grim and uninviting ‘inevitable’ conclusions offered by center-periphery, critical interpretations. The analysis invites a reflection on the possibilities embedded in the contexts created by the American institutions of higher education abroad, and especially in Eastern Europe. Much of the current literature based on critical approaches to center-periphery analyses often seems to employ a rhetoric verging on despair or even victimization (Marcus 1986). Such critiques of unequal structures of power and influence seem to eschew considering solutions for fear of a different kind of imposition of hegemony or simplistic interpretations. Yet even steering clear of ‘solutions’ that seem gratuitous and superficial, we may—and should—attempt to see what more
positively transformative roles these institutions can and do play in relatively new contexts like Eastern Europe. Analyses of power structures, if they are to have any utility, must provide space for a multiplicity of perspectives and actors within the complex globalized context, beyond lamenting or surrendering to the ubiquity of neo-liberal discourses.

The Case of American University in Bulgaria

American University in Bulgaria (AUBG), the first U.S. university in the Balkans and opened in 1991, provides a more localized, useful lens through which to consider these abstract political-economic forces. An analysis of the institution’s self-presentation discourse, along with the underlying implications of its economics and administration, reveal elements that correspond to dominant neo-liberal discourses in the academic arena, at times appearing to stand in contrast with other overtly stated goals that refer to democracy and the creation of open societies in previously authoritarian environments. AUBG is only one example, but as Mitchell (2001: 52) explains in his work at the intersection of education, democracy and transnationalism, “it is precisely the skirmish-ness in small institutional sites that indicate the direction of broader battles over hegemony in any given society.” Also, the self-presentation discourse and economic implications of AUBG can be considered representative of the growing profile of higher education programs and institutions across the global context. As Moje (2002) posits, in the globalizing economy, higher education is on the World Trade Organization’s agenda not for its contribution to development but more as a service to trade or a commodity for boosting income in countries that can export their higher education programs. As a result, higher education has become a multi-billion dollar market. Moje (2002) emphasizes that the United States, the largest provider of education services, has earned $8.5 billion of this $30 billion market. Often, even when the exported programs are of lower quality, they are still accepted because, in the neol-
liberal rhetoric, these programs can ensure credentials that can be more easily exchanged for financially rewarding positions on the job market. Institutions like AUBG pinpoint the main tenants of the neo-liberal agenda in their catering to individuals who want to be competitive on the global job market by escaping the ‘confines’ of their nation-states, as well as through underlying implications of their mission statement, funding, curriculum, administration emphases, outreach strategies, and attempts at expansion.

AUBG is a high-quality institution and takes prides in the fact that it has been recruiting the best English-speaking students in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, whose SAT test scores compare with those of students from American-based top national universities. At the same time, given the increasing number of students who go to study in Western European countries or the United States, AUBG recognizes its need to remain competitive for recruiting the top students that remain in the region and has initiated more aggressive and purposeful recruiting initiatives. In the initial stages, the recruitment largely proceeded through the national and local offices of the Soros Foundation, now the Open Society Institute (OSI), one of the initial funding agents of AUBG and the provider of numerous scholarships for its students. As OSI has ceased much of its initial support, AUBG needs self-sustained funding and recruits increasingly from surrounding countries, responding to the demands and the atmosphere of the market. For instance, it held information sessions in Bucharest, Romania at the Hilton Hotel, sponsored by the Romanian branch of Deloitte & Touche. These recruitment strategies, coupled with increasing costs that leave even the students with the highest scholarships having to cover expenses that equal some parents’ yearly earnings, are part of a newer initiative to make AUBG more financially self-sustaining. This goal, according to a position description letter to invite
qualified candidates, has become one of the university president’s major responsibilities (AUBG 2006).

Given the attested high quality of the AUBG education and its exchange value on the job market and in American and other Western European graduate programs, increasing numbers of Eastern European students prepare years in advance and invest tremendous sums of money in preparing to be admitted (if not to AUBG then to another comparable institution in Europe, if they cannot go directly to the United States). Preparing for the SAT tests and putting together effective admission documents for American universities have become a good source of additional income for English teachers who know the system of admission in American higher education. They provide private lessons, the best of them charging hourly rates that many families cannot afford or need to make significant sacrifices in order to obtain. In addition, the cost of taking the tests, applying to multiple institutions with high application fees, and the expenses that need to be covered once admitted to one of these institutions, all raise important questions about access and the competition to attend these American institutions.

For many students and their families who sacrifice for their education, the meta-imperative of these “exported” institutions is personal social mobility. In this sense, the primary reason for the existence of exported institutions is competitive advantage for individuals who complete their degrees: they will be able to exchange the credentials obtained for comparatively more secure and lucrative positions in the job market. When addressing the parents of prospective students, AUBG captures these intentions, by referring specifically to a “return on investment” and stating: “AUBG’s graduates are in high demand by employers and have been extraordinarily successful. A 2007 survey of employers in Business Week magazine named AUBG the best university in Bulgaria. The majority of graduates start their careers almost
immediately after graduation, finding exciting opportunities in their home countries or abroad” (AUBG 2008). In addition, the university’s magazine, AUBG Today regularly features alumni success stories that focus both on business and social arenas, and attempt to combine the narratives of personal social mobility with the graduates’ important civic contributions. A recurrent theme in these profiles reinforced the message sent to parents, that “the AUBG alumni are always in demand because they make a difference with their discipline, professionalism, and expertise developed through a skills-oriented education” (AUBG 2008). Clear hints towards a rhetoric of ambition and personal pathways are not surprising, as they correspond with the main neo-liberal tenants, since in the neo-liberal worldview the individual is the primary locus of economic agency. This characteristic has been critiqued by those concerned with the consequences of making the individual alone the main social unit (Bowers 2001; Giroux 2002; 2003), potentially leading to civic disengagement instead of what AUBG calls “best civic management.” According to such critiques, certain emphases become problematic in themselves, when they appear to carry market connotations that replace civically democratic ones.

In the AUBG self-presentation documents, this rhetoric is juxtaposed almost casually with the elements of AUBG’s mission statement that do emphasize the training of the “future leaders of the region” that will aid in the creation of an open, democratic society. Several problematic aspects emerge out of these two intentions. First, many of the graduates will not actually work or live in their home countries after finishing their studies, finding employment in the U.S. or Western Europe instead. For example, it is telling to see in the statistics made available in 2008 that, out of 354 alumni pursuing graduate studies, a staggering 206 were at institutions in the U.S., followed by countries like the United Kingdom, Hungary and Bulgaria
with approximately two dozen students each, and several other eastern European countries with several graduates each (AUBG 2008). Second, many graduates look for positions that are directly related to private or corporate business and that seem to have little involvement with direct civic engagement or democratization separate from free-market economic development. Moreover, the mission statements of universities such as AUBG clearly connect democracy and free markets as mutually reinforcing. As has become apparent so far, in envisioning development, the economic aspects are emphasized. This is convenient, since the most financially rewarding positions are in the fields of business and economic development, directly tying into individual graduates’ search for personal financial gain. Although AUBG offers majors in English, Journalism, Political Science/International Relations, and European and American Studies—and many students do choose these, at least as one of their majors—the top choices are economics, business administration, and computer science. This remains the case even if many of the recent features in *AUBG Today* show successful graduates who are very civically involved through the nature of their new jobs. The underlying presumption is thus that democratization will happen mainly through the development of markets and free enterprise—a premise sharply questioned by criticism of the neo-liberal discourses. Democratic processes, in fact, may be endangered when the main emphasis is on the individual and the economic aspects, at the expense of societal and civic ones.

A newer American institution abroad, American University in Kosovo (AUK) founded in 2003 and operated in part by the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT), does not mention democratization as one of its aims, directly emphasizing development and economic growth in Kosovo, on the background of historic hardships and fragile political arrangements. The claim is that “the curriculum meets the economic development needs of the region and strengthens the
climate for Kosovo’s transition to a free-market economy,” (RIT 2003) and thus its first stated aim is “to provide a career oriented education that fosters the links between the university, industry, and government necessary to support the workforce development needs of Kosovo” (AUK 2005). Accreditation comes through Rochester Institute of Technology, whose programs, with their focus on preparing students for careers in business and industry, have a national and international reputation for excellence. The media releases have called this new University in Kosovo “the third Eastern European venture” of RIT and the tenth overseas (RIT 2003), while its vice-chair has at that time contributed to the development of one of the strongest investment banking franchises on Wall Street. This emphasis on finding academic leaders who know how to respond to and understand the market is a growing phenomenon in the United States as well, corresponding to the increasing pressure for universities to function as businesses or to respond to funding agents who emphasize the market (Giroux 2002).

In fact, AUBG itself, even with its clearly stated mission of democratization, has also been accountable to its funding providers. Up to 2007 when Bulgaria became a member of the European Union and this funding ceased, AUBG was the largest United States Agency for International Development (USAID)-sponsored institution in the Balkans. In 1991, AUBG was founded as a joined initiative of the Republic of Bulgaria, the City of Blagoevgrad (where it is located), the Open Society Institute, and the University of Maine. Given its main stated objective of providing a model for Western liberal-arts higher education in an emerging democracy, USAID committed to providing limited operational funding. After five successful years, USAID decided to further support AUBG in its plan to achieve self-sustainability and future financial independence. AUBG reported in an online statement that has become unavailable after the funding relationship ceased:
USAID has been the fundamental funder. AUBG must satisfy its conditions and deliver value for its work. Its long-term future depends on the belief of the United States government and its official representatives in Bulgaria and Washington that this is a great civic institution for the region, deserving of American taxpayer support…. Financial management is essential to AID support and AUBG must consistently demonstrate its ability to monitor and control revenue and expenses. The University reports compliance directly to the Chief of Mission for USAID in Sofia and through her to Washington D.C. (AUBG 2004).

AUBG was thus accountable to the agency’s mission and the implied interests of those working in partnership with USAID. As its mission statement states, U.S. foreign assistance “has always had the twofold purpose of furthering America's foreign policy interests in expanding democracy and free markets [emphasis added] while improving the lives of the citizens of the developing world” (USAID 2008). USAID has working relationships with more than 3,500 American companies and over 300 U.S.-based private voluntary organizations. Whatever the results of these efforts, for some there remain questions about the complex intersections of interests that appear to meet a common denominator in the proliferation of a world-wide democracy linked to free-market capitalism.

AUBG has now moved beyond preparing undergraduate students in these highly sought-after majors. It has recently developed an MBA program—its only graduate program—and has become involved in a large adult-education outreach program that involves the professional education of some military personnel who lost their positions due to restructurings that were implemented after Bulgaria joined NATO. AUBG was contacted and funded by a joined effort of the Bulgarian Ministry of Defense and USAID to provide basic training courses for a number of
these unemployed former military personnel. In addition, AUBG showed that Bulgaria and the Balkans region desperately needed professional education for the current and emerging leadership of both public and private enterprise, and that there are emerging markets with national and international development agencies and banks which seek research and consultation in their programs. To this end, AUBG wants to expand a flexible entrepreneurial certificate and graduate professional education program, based in Sofia, and working throughout the Balkans region.

However, AUBG is far from alone in experiencing the economic instrumentalization of academic programs as consumer products. Institutions of higher education throughout North America, Europe, and Asia are compelled, to some degree, to compete in a global marketplace. Even in the U.S., with its long tradition of education as a public good for democratic equality (Labaree 1997b), universities advertise on television and jockey for rankings in *U.S. News and World Report*. Higher education as a marketable commodity is a relatively universal factor in the neoliberal world system. AUBG’s experience may be illustrative of what is to come more generally around the globe, with education chiefly conceived as a private commodity for social mobility and costs increasingly placed on individual families.

**Globalized Institutions of Higher Education and the Neo-Liberal World System**

Two AUBG employees have offered a laudatory assessment of the university’s accomplishments for the greater good of the whole region:

With their exposure to Western thought, cultural expectations, and ways of doing business, AUBG alumni soon became the employees of choice for the large multinational companies that were establishing their presence in East European markets…. AUBG
alumni have formed a critical mass of young people who are fast becoming important agents of change for the advancement of their own countries…. With a proven educational track record, institutional experience in working with students from different cultures, and a talented student body that perpetuates an ethos of tolerance and respect for the individual, AUBG is a working institution of democracy building in a world that sorely needs such success stories. Having already left an impressive mark on the Balkans, AUBG now seeks to expand its contributions to the stability and prosperity of the world beyond. (Chuleva and Phillips 2004)

Despite a tone of triumphalism, with its emphasis on discourses of expansive neo-liberalism, this recent assessment of AUBG may fail to convince skeptics. What is more visible to skeptics is the grimmer conclusion of homogenization through the hegemony of the system that exports these institutions, as there seems to be little that anyone can—or even attempts—to do in light of the unleashed forces of the global market in more benign guises of “development,” “progress,” or even the unquestionable “democracy.” In such center-periphery analysis, the meta-imperative of the commoditization (at times synonymous with Americanization) is clear: These discourses become projects packaged in American terms that can be bought or sold on the world market.

Perhaps, the situation becomes even grimmer when talking about a similar process of “Europeanization” of these ‘periphery’ Eastern European nations. The education-related discourses of the European Union bear a striking resemblance to the neo-liberal elements found in the discourses of the American universities in the region. The emphasis on market competition, efficiency, and social mobility in higher education is apparent in the European Union. In these nation-states, with centuries of humanistic tradition and commitment to academic autonomy, the university system is now being implemented in different ways.
Institutions of higher education may be in danger of losing their autonomous identity, intellectual freedom, and role as trustees of the European humanistic tradition to expansive neo-liberal market imperatives.

In 1999 the Bologna Process was initiated as a joint initiative between European Union member and candidate states to reform European universities. The main attempt was to align their academic organization and standards for two major goals: first, to enhance the employability and geographic mobility of citizens; and second, to increase the international competitiveness of European higher education. Despite the high number of education ministers from both member and candidate states that were signatories of the Bologna Process, there are grounds to remain skeptical of the means by which the goals can be achieved as well as whether the goals themselves undermine the foundations of the academia.

Mencinger (2000) draws attention to the Bologna Process’s underlying emphasis that everything can be solved by supply and demand and that universities should be organized to compete as companies do. This reform initiative appears to be based on the assumption that the United States has been outpacing Europe because of the difference in their respective educational systems. In this interlocked world, with unprecedented flows of capital, goods, and people, the fear of being economically outpaced through knowledge and education almost mirrors the notorious “arms race” of previous decades. The drive to economically outpace other developed nations through education is a paradox in this current global environment. It leads not to increased cooperation in light of co-dependence, but to competition that at a certain point becomes detrimental exactly to those who are meant to benefit from it—both individuals who pay increasing costs for educational credentials, as well as periphery nations who see their most educated individuals leave for jobs elsewhere. Nevertheless, this capitalist-modeled competition
treats universities like any other features of the market—individuals are human capital and only the ‘profitable’ academic endeavors should be funded.

In the cases of “peripheral” members of the European Union membership, like some Balkans countries, fear of homogenization may no longer be synonymous with a process of Americanization but, ironically, with “Europeanization” embedded with meanings that, historically, have been generated only very recently. Despite the different terminology for a similar process, this alternative may, in fact, only strengthen the world-systems interpretation that the nations positioned at the periphery may be rather helpless in what appears to be a transnational trend among the powerful—the creation of the neo-liberal environment and the celebration of its structures and cultural modes through institutions of higher education, be they North American or European.

As the American “exported” institutions expand beyond just Eastern Europe, they represent different configurations in a sometimes uneasy marriage between American and local educational traditions. Moreover, Western universities provide hundreds of programs in the growing education markets of China, India and the Middle East, a phenomenon that has been called in the media both “an educational gold rush” and “the most important diplomatic asset” (Lewin 2008). Although not all American institutions across Eastern Europe have the same history or degree of gradual changes in financial and programmatic approaches as AUBG, in many cases even surface-level examinations of their programs and degree emphases indicate similar claims and orientations—the preparation of leaders for the countries’ integration in the world market system, intriguing connections between free markets and democratization, individuals’ advancement through competitiveness in the global arena, and a predilection towards education that emphasizes the financial and scientific specializations at the expense of
liberal arts traditions. In this sense, therefore, as well as the fundamental questions of cultural homogeneity and neo-colonial intellectual dominance, a glimpse into AUBG’s case illuminates wider patterns.

Poststructural Ways of Looking at Globalized Institutions of Higher Education

In an exclusively structuralist analysis, then, we are left with a hard conclusion of hegemony and domination, a deterministic view in which students, by the tens of thousands, educated in globalized programs of higher education, are fitted into the needs of the new structure. This mode of analysis leaves little room for personal agency. In this view, the students will be educated in dominant neo-liberal contexts, internalize the dominant discourses, maximize individual gain at the expense of civic engagement, and in turn participate (willingly or unwittingly) in reproducing the structure. Such an analysis, while attempting to critically dispel the “mystification” of hegemonic structures, simultaneously disempowers through the implicit assumptions that individuals mindlessly internalize and reproduce dominant ideologies (Clayton 1998) and, thus, are portrayed as little more than victims (Marcus 1986). Moreover, as Heilman and Bastos (1997) have argued, structuralist approaches tend to diminish the importance and complexity of how individuals learn and respond to institutional structures and cultural norms. Appadurai (2003: 221) also contends, “What these arguments fail to consider is that at least as rapidly as forces from various metropolises [the center] are brought into new societies [the periphery] they tend to become indigenized in one or other way . . . The dynamics of this indigenization have just begun to be explored in a sophisticated manner.”

Because of the multiple and under-analyzed “disjunctures,” as Appadurai calls them, that exist in the global context between economy, culture, and politics, clear-cut theories such as
those based on economic models alone are not revealing enough. Alternate analytical lenses are needed to enable us to grapple with the emerging complex realities of the global cultural economy. In their analysis of individual responses in an academic structure, Heilman and Bastos (1997) employ both structuralist and post-structural approaches, stressing the inadequacy of attempting to do only one, since in any circumstance we are dealing with conflicting priorities:

Social and institutional analyses in education would be enhanced by considering data through poststructuralist lenses because the view can reveal complex, challenging, and sometimes contradictory insights which can enhance our understanding of educational experiences. Postpositivist thinking, especially poststructuralism, has not been commonly used because it troubles the metanarratives that often dominate this type of research, especially the notions that identity categories such as race, class and gender determine experience and the idea that power operates unidirectionally top down [or center-periphery] through recognizable systems of dominance and subordination. . . .

structuralism is still important, but the power of the multiple theories used in this study validates theoretical bricolage. (1997: 25-26)

A structural, center-periphery analysis of the American institutions of higher education in Eastern Europe did reveal unequal structures of power and influence in the emerging neo-liberal global environment, but in its static, deterministic manner it voided the propensity for all the individual participants to make meanings and to act or counteract. Constructing the potential roles of these universities in this manner has important social consequences because such analyses take a critical stance, but in their grand-scale discussions fall short of providing any basis for action or alternatives. They are a teleological dead-end.
The paradox is that such analyses are too grand for localized action, and yet they objectify their focus of analysis through a process of “miniaturization.” Scott (1998:10) explains the process by describing how the emerging modern nation-states needed to employ this process in order to make their constituent spaces more “legible”—simplifying and attempting to normalize everything (natural spaces, like national forests, as well as human spaces, including cultural manifestations like personal surnames and standardized language) to ensure their ‘accurate’ and ‘complete’ information about the territories in which the state had the only legal rule. In a similar manner, structuralist analyses employed alone can produce grand interpretations of abstract structures and point to their problematic facets, but do so through a process of simplification and miniaturization.

Hence, there is a place for analyses beyond the rigidly structuralist, in which systemic structures are important but which simultaneously recognize a multiplicity of ways of seeing and making meaning of those structures. Poststructural approaches may help us understand what happens in globalized universities and what kinds of “indigenization” of discourses (Appadurai 2003) indeed occurs. These contexts are not abstract, detached laboratories of analysis. They are specific localities in what otherwise can seem disempersoned and decontextualized geography. They are places where students, faculty, and administrators engage in different actions and interpretations of their environment. Structures are enacted, perpetuated, reformed, challenged, or internalized within a nexus of individual and corporate meaning-making.

Appadurai (2003: 225) offers the “master-term democracy” as a useful example in this regard. As a master term, democracy is expected to be unquestionably accepted (at least where it has been enacted procedurally) and internalized even in the absence of concrete definitions from those who are trying to disseminate it. “The fluidity of ideoscapes [Appadurai’s term for
ideological contexts disseminated through pervasive means like the media] is complicated in part by the growing diasporas (both voluntary and involuntary) of intellectuals who continuously inject new meaning-streams into the discourse of democracy in different parts of the world.” These intellectuals are involved in what he calls “the repatriation of difference” (Appadurai 2003: 229), through which disseminated discourses that have reached the periphery, are indigenized and returned to their origins, infused with different interpretations that reflect these individuals’ and communities’ engagement with their situations. Even “master terms” like democracy are not static, top-down notions, but multifaceted constructs that contain and provide rhetorical space for a multiplicity of individual and collective efforts at meaning-making.

With a poststructural lens in mind, the roles of “exported” institutions of higher education can be conceptualized differently, in an attempt to understand the actions of those intellectuals educated in the institutions and avoid the simplistic, de-personalized compartmentalization to which rigidly structuralist analyses are prone. This involves attempting to understand how those who seem to have accepted neo-liberal discourses by their career choices actually live in their daily choices and social and political engagements. Such analyses also look at the less statistically significant populations that seem to have intentionally refused normalized paths of social mobility and instead choose career paths with active social engagements related to the environment, the welfare of children, or combating corruption in transitional democracies—and, as the AUBG magazine has shown, there are many of them. The consequence is to move beyond the individual as an isolated social unit—in contrast to the neo-liberal core assumption—and look into communities that are formed through the collaborations and ensuing dialogues within structural institutions, collaborations by individuals acting not as passive victims but as actors aware of major transformations in the world and cognizant of their
role in what is and what could be. Communities can be as informal as simply creating opportunities to question, as the one facilitated by the professor who brought up the question of neo-colonialism in class, or as formal as the founding of the European Association for the Teaching of Academic Writing, which creates opportunities of expression for educators in Eastern European nations who are new to the practices of teaching writing as a higher education discipline. The Association’s conferences in Europe have attracted participation from American and Western European professors and researchers, building dialogue over discourses that are less globalized and, thus, hold less market power in the world system.

In light of communities, some more organized than others, it is perhaps too simplistic to assume, as it is often implied, that in this tumultuous nexus of economic interests, political control, and transnational political thought universities on their own cannot possess the resilience to avoid being swallowed by the emerging global economy. Some are skeptical of the universities’ possibilities of enabling knowledge that can powerfully critique the neo-liberal world system, while others seem to endow higher education with almost omnipotent redemptive abilities. While the latter may not take the current political and economic global inequities of power as seriously as perhaps they should, the former is prone to pessimistic interpretations conducive to little more than a social paralysis that solely decries how “civic discourse has given way to the language of commercialism, privatization and deregulation” (Giroux 2002: 426). Moreover, the former position also seems to imply that the neo-liberal agenda actively and collectively seeks to subvert university independence. This implication, however, is vulnerable to critique by analysts who do not necessarily align with critical-left rhetoric, indicating that this alleged submerging of the university in the globalized economy may indeed be a collateral side-effect which allows, in fact, more room for resistance because university scholars can be
proactive in response to what really may be passive, reactive forces. While the university’s shift toward focusing on employability may be an inevitable consequence of globalized capitalism, it seems very few people are actually calling for all universities to be transformed entirely into career-preparation polytechnics.

Therefore, in trying to consider a realistic view of the global political and economic environment, while simultaneously attempting to steer clear of the dead-end “hegemonic conclusion”—that “receiving” states are helpless actors in the increasingly neo-liberalized context—American universities abroad can be positioned as “local trackers” in this arena. Scott (1998) employs the concept of the “local tracker” to explain how in medieval European towns visitors always needed the aid of local residents to be able to make sense of the local geographic intricacies in the absence of accurate and readily available maps. In his analysis of the ways the modern state was able to make the spaces and populations legible, Scott used this concept to explain that the state also employed types of “local trackers”—those who know both the local and national level and are able to facilitate the flow of information between these different levels of organizational order. Scott emphasizes that without this mediation (and sometimes even with it!) state action is likely to be inept, greatly overshotting or undershooting its objective.

Changing the scale of the analysis from the domestic to the international, this notion of the “local tracker” is useful in considering the role of the intellectuals educated in these American universities (and consequently of these universities themselves) as mediators between the “large-scale” and the “local.” In this case, “large-scale” is not a state per se but the larger conglomerate of political and economic influences exercised over the countries from the outside (especially through the presence of these universities). “Local” are the states in the regions where American universities operate (as well as the particular sites of these institutions). In this
transnational context, what is the role of the “local tracker” who becomes versed in both the rhetoric of the local and that of the large-scale—particularly, those educated in an American/Western European conceptualization of power relations and civil order? Being “fluent” at both the local and large-scale levels, local trackers may find themselves torn between the two realms. Daniela Dimitrova (2008), an AUBG graduate who began her academic career in the United States in 1997, relevantly stated in a contribution to *AUBG Today*: “Often I feel like a bridge connecting continents and cultures.”

The “local” expects to understand and take what is good from (or reject) those they perceive as outside authorities (or imposers)—for example, borrowing a model of democratic education from the United States or Western European countries. Meanwhile, those at the large-scale level (organizations like American research and aid institutions or the European Union) expect the “local tracker” to represent the “local” in easily understandable categories that would make it more “legible” to globalized outsiders. Therefore, misconception at both levels can occur and may facilitate “otherness”—a chasm that is difficult to bridge. In many ways, the “local tracker”—in this case the product of the globalized higher-education system—lives in this chasm, a place from where he or she needs to learn to operate in order to make the large-scale/local dyad closer to a partnership instead of “oppressor-oppressed” relationship.

In more direct terms, this position suggests that the “large scale” (meta-institutions) are not as omnipotent as the ardent critics posit them to be because they are, in fact, dependent on the “local” alleged subalterns to navigate the context of the locality. As Castells (2004: 11) argues in his impressive trilogy on *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*, the contemporary “network society is based on the systematic disjuncture between the local and the global for most individuals and social groups.” “Large scale” institutions do indeed have more
material power and associated global influence, but they may actually lack the ‘agility’ that involves small-scale flexibility, personal responsiveness, and the ability to navigate local contexts—in the same way that a powerful nation’s army is dependent on ‘local informers’ to provide accurate field intelligence. Without ‘local trackers’, transnational institutions will engage ineffectively in the region. ‘Local trackers’, in turn, receive added prestige and competitive advantage from their association with transnational institutions. Collaboration, then, is mutually beneficial to more parties. Scholars, academics, and educated graduates in a local region are well positioned to act as ‘local trackers’ for the higher-education institutions—a positioning that provides a certain ‘free space’ for both representing some interests of neo-liberal institutions as well as questioning or countering the excessive reach or influence of the institutions.

Conclusion

Reconceptualizing this flow of dialogue, influence, and presence from mono-directional to poly-directional offers more hopeful visions for regional academics, educated graduates, and globalized universities than a purely critical analysis of cultural imperialism and capitalist hegemony. Possibilities for social action and change in a globalized world rest precisely in such newly emerging identities and collective solidarities. Hence, “exported” institutions of higher education act at the intersection of local imperatives and global influences and may be able to attend to democratic educational imperatives—the need to prepare imaginative intellectuals that cultivate humanity by being able to critically engage with their own traditions, position themselves in the standpoint of another, and envision themselves as citizens responsible beyond narrow localities (Nussbaum 1997). This vision, however, needs to be carefully scrutinized, as the focus on locality is central to purpose-driven civic engagement for
which “local trackers” are so well suited. Stripped of local meanings, abstract categories only enhance social paralysis inherent to heavy-handed structural interpretations of these institutions.

It is this analytical balance that Marcus (1986) has advocated, in an attempt to avoid two equally reductive approaches—the sometimes myopic procedures of ethnography that may not undertake to meaningfully contextualize human action in the wider social structures, and the distant and abstract analyses based on economic models. Two decades later, this intellectual project remains timely at the current historical moment when large-scale forces of neo-liberal economics appear to sweep across localities in new ways that we are only now learning to address. Longstanding, comfortable interpretive models may not be sufficient:

The most sophisticated experiments in ethnography sensitive to political economy might initially arise within the Marxist tradition, or at least a Marxist framework…. Of course, eventually the ready-made Marxist construct may not be an advantage. It is a short-cut that may leave many of the ambiguities in the Marxist macro-system concepts unpacked…. Furthermore, it can stand in the way of the possible invention of new system perspectives. (Marcus 1986: 173)

This theoretical observation powerfully relates to understanding the role of American institutions abroad, such as the American University in Bulgaria, by underscoring the value of alternative frames for interpreting globalized education and unpacking nuanced localized contexts. Begin “with some prior view of a system and provide an ethnographic account of it, by showing the forms of local life that the system encompasses, and then leading to novel and revised views of the nature of the system itself, translating its abstract qualities into more fully human terms” (Marcus 1986: 171). This is a useful alternative to inclinations to view “exported” universities
either through the lens of a celebratory neo-liberal triumphalism or of lamenting and surrendering to cultural imperialism that they may embody.
References


