

From the July 1998 Kovalevskaia Fund Newsletter

The Privatization Ideology and Higher Education

by Ann Hibner Koblitz

Recently, the media have focused much attention on the supposed advantages for Third World countries of “privatization” (the transfer into private hands of government-controlled industries such as airlines, telephone service, fisheries, and oil, combined with the reduction of government expenditures in areas such as health, education, and welfare). The chief proponents of this policy are the U.S. government, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund (I.M.F.), which Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak has with reason called the “International Misery Fund.” U.S. and I.M.F. officials maintain that privatization has many advantages for Asian, African, and Latin American countries: efficiency increases, waste and corruption decrease, private initiative is encouraged, and competition lowers prices on basic goods. Furthermore, the U.S. government and the I.M.F. claim that for the future development of poorer countries it is best to shift emphasis from tertiary to primary education.

Publicity about privatization, at least in the mainstream media of the U.S., has been almost uniformly positive. However, those of us who work in education or health are much less sanguine. For example, despite the I.M.F.’s professed belief in the importance of primary education, in practice their policies lead to newly-imposed or increased school fees (see the discussion of this phenomenon in Malawi and Zimbabwe in Vol. XII, No. 2 [1997] and Vol. VIII, No. 2 [1993] of this newsletter). Parents with scarce resources and several children must make choices. Often, they decide to pull their daughters out of school to help at home and/or earn money for the schooling of the sons.

Analogously, the costs of health care have risen dramatically. Third World governments have cut back their programs of pre-natal and maternal care, vaccinations, school lunches, and so on. The harmful impact of these cutbacks on the physical vitality and intellectual capacity of the younger generation will likely be felt for decades.

Privatization has had almost entirely negative consequences for tertiary level education. Private “universities,” which should more accurately be called trade institutes, are springing up like mushrooms. The tiny country of El Salvador has almost forty such places, and numerous institutions with names like “University of Tourism and Travel” and “University of Hospitality Industries” dot the landscape in Lima, Peru. A few of the new private universities deliver high quality education. Most do not, and their only function appears to be to train low-level support personnel for U.S. and other transnational enterprises. Moreover, the private trade schools attract faculty away from the national universities, which cannot afford to compete with the salaries and conditions offered by the private institutes. (See the articles on privatization in Vietnam in Vol. X, No. 1 and 2 [1995] of this newsletter.)

Within the public universities themselves, the ideology of privatization has also made itself felt in a variety of ways. The I.M.F. actively discourages basic research in Third World universities, and national and international funding agencies are increasingly hiding behind the mantra of “applicability” as they direct scientists away from independent research.

For example, a long-time friend of the Kovalevskaia Fund in El Salvador, Dr. Concepción Lemus de Bendix, was told by USAID representatives that they would consider funding her experiments on obtaining low-cost dietary supplements from food waste only if (1) her project was supervised by a U.S. scientist, and (2) she agreed to collaborate with PROCAFE, the organization of Salvadoran coffee growers. In the first place, Dr. Bendix is a seasoned U.S.-trained scientist who has no need for the tutelage of a U.S. “expert.” In the second place, the whole point of Dr. Bendix’s work is to develop *low-cost* yeast supplements for distribution to the most needy of her compatriots. Hence, she has no wish to work with a for-profit enterprise and wants to remain under the auspices of the National University.

Another example: Dr. Busiso Chisala of the University of Malawi Mathematics Department was recently refused a grant to do research in number theory at U.S. universities on the grounds that his work is not practical. Yet any healthy scientific culture needs a balance between pure and applied areas. The only applied science that can develop in the complete absence of basic research is going to be derivative and dependent upon expertise and technology from the U.S. and Europe.

When the U.S. government and the I.M.F. pressure Third World intellectuals to redirect their energies away from basic science to applications, they claim that they have the best interests of the masses at heart. But ironically, those institutions of higher education that have the strongest tradition of moving beyond elitist, abstract conceptions of knowledge and developing close ties to the community with practical projects in public health and social welfare are precisely the ones that have been most consistently attacked by pro-U.S. forces. For example, in El Salvador both the National University (UES) and the Jesuit university (UCA) have been viciously assaulted by the U.S.-funded Salvadoran military (see Vol. V, No. 1 and 2 [1990] of this newsletter). Even after the peace accords, UES has received no money whatsoever from the government for scientific research, and it is constantly being told that it needs to become self-supporting by drastically raising tuition and fees.

The U.S. government policy for Third World universities is particularly curious, since higher education within the U.S. in no way follows the privatization model. No one claims that American universities should be supported entirely by tuition and fees. On the contrary, “private” universities are heavily subsidized by local, state, and federal governments through tax-free status, student scholarships and loans, generous grants for scientific research, and tax breaks for donors. Thus, privatization in the Third World has a negative impact on higher education, and is not even consistent with internal U.S. policy toward its own universities.

It appears that the main result of privatization will be to increase U.S. control and make science and technology in Asia, Africa, and Latin America more dependent on the U.S. and Europe. Moreover, the discouraging situation in the national universities (which in virtually all countries have historically been more involved in scientific and technological research than the private schools) is likely to fuel the brain drain to the U.S. In these ways U.S. interests will benefit from worldwide privatization. But the majority of the population in Asia, Africa, and Latin America will not.