

BOOK REVIEWS

Bridging the Gap Between the Conventional and Emerging Free Market Higher Education Policies in East European Countries: Book Review of “**The Open World and Closed Societies; Essays on Higher Education Policies**” by Voldemar Tomusk. Book review by Suchana Roy, Assistant Professor of English, Institute of Engineering & Management, Kolkata, Assistant Professor of English, Institute of Engineering & Management, Kolkata

Universally, higher education is observing mounting escalation in both learner participation and categories of educational contributors. A major aspect of this expansion is an enhancement of student diversity: governments are expanding access to higher education for students from conventionally underrepresented groups. On the other hand, this raises questions about whether this quick augmentation may compromise scholastic excellence and whether this will not be able to bridge the gap between the global and local knowledge bases. Voldemar Tomusk’s *The Open World and Closed Societies: Essays on Higher Education Policies “in Transition”* (2004) looks into the transitional reforms in the field of higher education in the post-socialist nations of Eastern Europe after the great fall of the Soviet Union, seen from the perspective of someone who had spent the better part of his life analysing these transformations as well as conferring with and administering reform projects in countries from Serbia and Montenegro to Mongolia. Evaluating these reforms in inclusive political, economic, social and historical contexts and linking these to universal higher education advancements, the book concentrates on the intricacies of the processes and conflicts in the demands on higher education structures, which in many occasions show positive or downbeat changes.

Fascinatingly, at the beginning of the book, the author brings out a qualitative comparison by admitting its deficiency of pragmatic evidence and essential volume to be used in specialised research purposes, but he portrays this work as a map of some of the most essential changes in the field of higher education of the twentieth century in the context of the fall of the state-socialist political system in Eastern Europe. Through a mind-boggling tale of the author’s then lawful journey to London with the help of a pre-World War II agreement and a non-existent country’s passport, his liaison with Eastern European higher education policy begins. By following the author’s meticulously recorded observations, assiduous readers can observe the fast-changing characteristics of the higher education systems of East European countries as an obvious impact of the great fall of state socialist regimes which were once acclaimed as the future of all mankind. After the spectacular dismantling of the Soviet Union, the fifteen republics saw a transition in every sphere of their societies, something which worked as a catalyst to generate revolutionary higher education policies. This transition, after

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a long and aching period of transition, gave rise to democratic polity, liberal economy, and free market capitalism in those republics. The transition from totalitarian regimes to “liberal” capitalism used higher education as one of its major tools as education creates the discourse for a specific kind of society, which, in a way, can work as a basis of the state machinery.

In the chapter “From Lenin to Digital Rapture: The Everlasting Transition in East European Higher Education and Beyond” the author renders a radical comparison between the established ideas of the Marxist utopia, which was the foundation of the pre-1989 period of East European societies, and the emerging “techno-romantic” utopia which is apparently revolutionary but similar in its claim of saving humanity from its inevitable misery. The author argues that the new campaign of “Great Leap Forward”, which promises the young generation to tap into the global knowledge base, is just another form of “The Tiger Leap” – an initiative by the president of the Republic of Estonia – for the purpose of creating a nationwide chain of information technology which tested the public budget but could at least provide a chance to secondary students to see a computer even if they couldn’t have any first-hand experience of it. The basic problem remained the same in the pre-transition and post-transition era. This problem was mostly economic, that of the availability of resources with which students can actually “tap into global knowledge base”, which was conglomerated into cables in the new techno-romantic utopia. The rising trend offered a striking illusion of possibility of leaping into the information society without restoring the traditional knowledge, which couldn’t fulfil the gap between the generalised technological knowledge base and the specific society-based intellectual capacity.

In the backdrop of such a dramatic context at the beginning of the book, the author draws arguments after the fashion of case studies to establish his perceptions about filling gaps between the two contradictory yet similar worlds of discourses in higher education. In the next three chapters on various issues of higher education reforms in Romania, Estonia, and Russia, he compares official conventions and a selection of official reports with other evidence available on the status of higher education to point out the disparity between “official knowledge” and contemporary needs. The author argues that Romania saw ground-breaking changes in higher education during the 1990s. Though the world-view was new and the policies were made in the backdrop of continuous government efforts to gain control over uncoordinated sectors in that transition period from socialism to capitalism, Romania was caught in a vicious circle: significant changes are impossible without substantial added assistance. No aid was granted without changes occurring first, while delaying the EU membership only caused additional suffering to the Romanian people. The author states that there are still some economic apparatuses that drive Romanian public sector higher education deeper into

crisis. The contemporary university sector, with its unbending standards, could not accommodate 30 percent or more of the learning age group with all its diverse needs and backgrounds. The private higher education sector that materialized massively in the early 1990s could have brought essential diversity into Romanian higher education without incurring any great expenditure from the public fund. The government was lacking in a reasonable policy that could have used this scheme for the benefit of the public. Subjecting private universities to technical control riddled by conventional and deflated public university faculty had significantly condensed its chances of engrossing enormous demand for all-purpose higher education. Restructuring a higher education system is always a tricky task. It was, according to the author, more difficult in a country like Russia, which was not ready to admit that its higher education needed reform to restore its intellectual integrity as well as social and economic relevance. According to him, although many things were changing at the institutional level — though dissimilar to those expected by the centralized government—the latter was still in delusion to have the information it needed to make critical decisions and the freedom to make the necessary decisions. Most importantly, it remained in the delusion that those decisions were implemented in all socio-economic spheres of the society.

After the great fall of the Soviet Union, the author noticed that despite the illusory triumph of the market, higher education had remained one of the most controlled sectors in the entire East European region. With the help of Levi's framework, the author tries to explain how the state turned the ambitions of unconventional academicians and their foreign contributors' support to their own advantage. Through its managerial mechanism, the state became authoritative and could easily run the systems through new progressive, westernised procedures such as authorisation, which was promoted by global institutes and Western associates. He even states that non-recognition of degrees awarded by rebellious universities was an inexpensive but enormously powerful policy tool. The result is that, as Levy found in Latin America, private institutes can in some facets be more public than the public ones. Theoretically, the responsibility of the faculty remains a riddle to author. Recruited from both public and private systems they concurrently build up generalized national standards for providing higher education, while working at a private university, they try desperately to break free from it. In the author's words, it would have caused some kind of cognitive dissonance, but author argued that apparently it did not. He states that this can be related to the dual morality developed under the communist system. These phenomena can be seen in capitalism too. In general, cognitive dissonance is coming into vogue as a normal condition for any human being struggling for existence.

Chapter five investigates the diverse forms of markets that were emerging into East European higher education. The author argues that development in these coun-

tries has been rather disorganised. In many countries, the fundamentals – or more specifically, the legal regulations for markets to emerge in the sector of higher education – had been insufficient. This raised the gap between students' potential and the standard of education that universities were able and willing to offer. He argues that new private universities could not deliver services at the level they used to publicise their education; but the public universities which were admitting enormous numbers of fee-paying students also could not reach the promised standards either. The education that was provided in public as well as in private higher education institutions in Eastern Europe, remained inadequate in both the cases. The author, in this chapter, suggested that it was not the market that chose the fittest for survival, but the evident state administration.

In “Reaching Beyond Geometry – The Privatness of Private Universities” the author discusses the reorganisation of higher education from the perspective of Burton Clark's classical triangle model and reforms it according to contemporary growth in Eastern Europe. He looked into the meaning of the “private” higher education institution and comes into the conclusion, following a model proposed by Levy, that even if higher education is privately funded and administered, it does not essentially have an agenda to popularise privatised education.

In chapter seven, he discusses another chic issue in higher education, viz. entrepreneurialism and its insinuation in Eastern Europe, following Burton R. Clark's (1961) well-known study. By providing an example of a private graduate school in one of the East European countries, he states how a privatized institution that is funded by foreign donors can completely overlook local needs and area-based understanding of students. It develops a curriculum which, in the author's words, can be the definition of “academic irrelevance” to make donor agencies happy, but completely disregards specific needs of regional students.

“When East Meets West: Decontextualizing the Quality of East European Higher Education” is dedicated to the matter of eminence. It portrays the ways in which some Western rules and regulations, predominantly those linked with value assurance, were relocated in Eastern Europe and through this relocation, considerably tailored. It challenges the notion that East European higher education was not in a place to set up ample quality measures for itself. It states that because of their post-war socio-economic condition and scattered societal consciousness, they could not reach the global standards which defined the global knowledge base. It resulted into creating modified structures of higher education which were detached from the realities of local societies, to an extent where they could be considered as mere political expressions, which included little knowledge about field work and contemporary needs of that particular society.

In the chapter “Reproduction of the “State Nobility” in Eastern Europe: Past Patterns and New Practices”, the reader experiences the emerging issues related to the reproduction of elites in East European higher education. It is argued that the conventional segment of elite education, the engineering school, was losing its significance. It can be seen through the author’s magnifying glasses that the realistic party workers – who had moved into the positions of power in the wake of the revolutions of the late 1980s by securing their positions with the successful privatisation of state possessions – were looking for diverse kinds of educational paths for their offspring. This situation provided importance to new and emerging fields like law or business training which resulted into rising competition among the organisations trying to possess control over the field of the privileged class’s education system. While public institutions entered this field with the support of state agencies, private institutes validated themselves through global endorsement schemes and foreign sources. The social relevance of the higher education system in elite training schools structures the foundation of higher education policies of those countries. As the author explores in chapter ten, higher education was caught in the middle of a disagreement where scholars received their degrees internationally, while the research and education they offered would have to be regionally significant. This need for a suitable balance was getting hard to attain under the emerging capitalistic free market regime where knowledge was produced in a restricted number of international schools and could only be dispersed through local universities which stood on the foundations of the old knowledge system. In this book, the author tries to find a more sensible approach, to find a balance where scholars could be significant both globally as well as locally.

The chapter “Transnational Capitalist Class and World Bank “Aid” for Higher Education” follows the same concern of globalisation, representing how aid granted to sustain transformation of the field of higher education by globally acclaimed institutions with the help of professionals who hold generalized global knowledge base, may instead of advancement lead to marginalisation of the “recipient” countries’ own resources.

The last chapter of the book looks for a universal model following the work by Elster, Offe, and others. The author argues that East European higher education had three core developmental aims, such as archaic models like the Humboldtian model, that of the Western countries in particular, and that from the recent past. After a vain effort to reinstate the Humboldtian model on an enormous level and the understanding that contemporary Westernisation projects could not meet East European expectations, the organism was gradually returning to its recent past, restructuring it in idealistic terms. In this way, here the higher education systems fundamentally lacked constructive policy outline and were drifting against the modern individualistic devel-

opment. It could also be a result of East European universities' inability to transform themselves from within and the Western education system's unsuccessful attempt to offer the essential academic support to higher education in "transition".

If education is one of the major pillars of societal discourses, with lucid language and an analytical mind, then it must be said that in this book the author has successfully mapped the restructuring of the pillar in East European countries. Thematically, it is undeniable that this book is one of those rare works where the turmoil between the dominant centralised communist policies and the emergent liberal free market capitalistic policies could be captured successfully; but if one goes by the author's confession in the preface, this analysis can certainly be called one-dimensional. Even though this book analyses different socio-political and economic issues of different East European countries, it seems like all arguments are being merged into one to prove one specific perspective. If an avid reader looks beyond this fact, this book can certainly be a camera to hold the memories of the then emerging giant that was the market-based capitalistic higher education policies.

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