Abstract

The essential aspects of today’s reality are determined by the dominant variant of socio-economic system, which is built around the concept of development (whether in terms of narrower – growth). The result of the dominance of neo-liberal vision of the economy become socio-economic inequalities, precarious conditions of employment, encompassing the uncertainty of human existence, as well as the real limitations of civil rights of particular social categories (denizens) and the devastation of the environment. In the face of these phenomena it seems reasonable to pose questions about the limits of the concept of economic development from the perspective of the social consequences, or more broadly – about the direction we are heading, or in other words – “progress” of civilization. These issues will be analyzed in the context of education, i.e. at every level of the education process. Particular attention will be placed on changes in education since the late 80s of the last century.

Introduction

Since the 1980s, we have been observing a substantial transformation in the way public life is organised (cf. Bloom, 1987), which is a result of a persistent spreading of neoliberal economic politics. This transformation began with conceptualisation and acknowledgement of the theoretical economic concepts of the so-called Chicago school, as well as with the crisis of the Keynesian welfare state, which, after the end of World War II, granted a “golden age” of development to the Western economies that lasted three decades. Although neoliberalism is usually analysed from the economic perspective, it is important to bear in mind that under its influence essentially all the aspects of human life – most significantly of all the social relations – have undergone a transformation (cf. della Porta, 2015). According to Simone Clarke, “neoliberalism owes its strength to its ideological appeal, but neoliberalism is not merely an ideology, it purports to rest on the scientific foundations of modern liberal economics. Modern neoliberal economics is no less dogmatic than its nineteenth-century predecessor in resting on a set of simplistic assertions about the character of the market and the behaviour of market actors” (2005, p. 58).
Apart from the progressing privatisation of the public sector, increased flexibility of job markets, lowering of taxes on income from capital, or the overall flattening of tax progression, together with the limitation and/or re-formulation of social politics spending, a major consequence of the proliferation of the neoliberal project we should focus on is an overwhelming lack of the feeling of security. As a result of this lack of security on the individual or collective level of existence, people have started to experience uncertainty (cf. Stockhammer, 2007, pp. 31–49). John Kenneth Galbraith has long been proclaiming “the age of uncertainty” (1977), and Ulrich Beck’s well-known 1986 book “Risikogesellschaft: Auf dem Weg in eine andere Moderne” (Eng. trans. 1992) pointed out the risks that follow the development of an industrial society. This article aims to address the problem of uncertainty from the perspective of the education system. As part of the welfare state and together with all the other spheres of social life, the education system undergoes significant transformations. Although the economic aspects have dominated the discussion about the changes in the social-economic system, it is important to remember that the level and quality of education influence not only the economy (with the highly visible manifestations of innovation), but also the political institutions (quality of social life) and cultural practices (with the ability to critically approach the world around us).

**Times of permanent uncertainty and social development**

One of the more fascinating aspects of the analysis of capitalism – or modernity – can be described as a social development paradox. Now, changes introduced into the economic system, preceded by theoretical reflection and academic debate, are supposed to serve the improvement of the initial conditions by means of implementing new models or approaches. If, perhaps overly naively, we assume that economic solutions are means to particular and positively valued goals (progress) – like, for example, those pertaining to material prosperity and social security – then we have a not-so-small problem with neoliberal economic politics. In one of his works, Amartya Sen proposed the following perspective on development, which is a notion axiologically neutral, as compared to progress:

“Development can be seen (...) as a process of expanding the real freedom that people enjoy. Focusing on human freedoms contrasts with narrower views of development, such as identifying development with the growth of gross national product, or with the rise in personal incomes, or with social modernization” (2000, p. 3). And what is very important he added that: “Growth of GNP or of individual incomes can, of course, be very important as means to expanding the freedom enjoyed by the members of the society. But freedoms depend also on other determinants, such as social and economic arrangements (for example, facilities for education and health care) as well as political and civil rights (for example, the liberty to participate in public discussion and scrutiny)” (ibidem).

With social development, and not progress, in mind (cf. Sztompka, 1994), one should treat seriously the subject of “economic colonization of the discourse concerning social issues” (Baranowski, 2013, p. 138), taking into account the critical approach to mainstream economics (Rist, 2011) and its social consequences. Doing that, we need to realise that “social uncertainty is ubiquitous in human society. Whenever we interact with others we face the problem of social uncertainty. We engage in social interactions with others to improve
our own welfare, material or psychological; however, in interacting with others we make ourselves vulnerable” (Yamagishi, Cook, Watabe, 1998, p. 170).

When considering the influence market mechanisms have on the positive aspects of social development – e.g. through freedom of economic activity, or verification of social usefulness of production, together with the mechanism adapting production to needs and technological and organisational usefulness – we should not forget about the negative aspects. Primarily, about the idealised concept of perfect competition, which does not exist in empirical reality – the consequence of which are attempts at monopolising the market. But also about the so-called public goods, or negative external effects, or, even more broadly speaking – phenomena destabilising the economy as a result of the liberalisation of the law. The consequence of marketization of many spheres of human activity, which is of particular interest to this analysis, is the lack of the feeling of security and social uncertainty accompanying it. These two phenomena pierce deeply into the modern societies, becoming a permanent biographical characteristic of particular social categories. In reality, the “winners”, that is those who are secured against these phenomena, constitute a small minority. There is little hope these tendencies will change, what is more likely is their intensification.

Economic and educational inequalities

Market economy produces economic inequalities, in income as well as net property (Piketty, 2014), which have a much broader social repercussions. This is linked directly to the shape of the current economic system, which for a long time has been promising that stable economic growth will result in prosperity for all, i.e. that all people will be the beneficiaries of the market system. Joseph E. Stiglitz, taking for his subject the United States of America, negatively assessed the social-economic consequences of the market system, stating that:

“For years there was a deal between the top and the rest of our society that went something like this: we will provide you jobs and prosperity, and you will let us walk away with the bonuses. You all get a share, even if we get a bigger share. But now that tacit agreement between the rich and the rest, which was always fragile, has come apart. Those in the 1 percent are walking off with the riches, but in doing so they have provided nothing but anxiety and insecurity to the 99 percent. The majority of Americans have simply not been benefiting from the country’s growth” (Stiglitz, 2012, p. XLVI–XLVII).

However, deep and broadening economic inequalities, which are not accepted by most members of the societies, do not automatically result in reverse tendencies that would be aimed at changing the given status quo. Education seems to be an excellent example of this, because an individual’s ability to take advantage of the opportunities provided by achievement-oriented societies (as opposed to societies where status is assigned) is largely dependent on the quality of their education. And the quality of education is largely dependent on the material situation, which has a decisive influence on both the starting position of an individual (material prosperity together with mental wellbeing, understood as the subjective feeling of overall satisfaction with life) and their real chances of receiving education from best schools or higher education institutions. In this sense popular myths,
like “from rags to riches”, are in reality infeasible, because the chances of acquiring a valuable degree from a reputable university or polytechnic are beyond the reach of most lower-situated income-professional categories (to avoid using the less and less popular terms like class or social strata). Because in many countries a strong correlation between education and income still exists, aspiring to “riches” by people without a real chance of acquiring decent education is rather like playing the lottery. Despite the observed general decline in pay and certain social benefits in the USA, people with higher education are better secured from uncertainty on the job market. It needs to be admitted, however, that the current changes are alarming, which is why Guy Standing stated – regarding the USA – that “schooling was no protection” and added: “Between 2000 and 2012, real wages fell by 12.7 per cent for US high-school graduates, accentuating the long-term decline. They also lost enterprise benefits. The proportion of high-school graduates with health care insurance fell from 23.5 per cent to 7.1 per cent; for college graduates it fell from 60.1 per cent to 31.1 per cent. Pension coverage dropped from 9.7 per cent to 5.9 per cent and from 41.5 per cent to 27.2 per cent respectively” (Standing, 2014, p. 145).

The uncertainty of employment and social security is spreading also onto people with higher education, which requires a rethinking of the question of taking up the commitment of financing higher education in the context of the decreased stability of employment and increasingly relevant role of education itself.

Precariat and precarised education

In his previous book (2011), Guy Standing used the term uncertainty in the context of the flexibility of the job market, which is the key element of precarity, and “which came to mean an agenda for transferring risks and insecurity onto workers and their families” (2001, p. 1). Among the main indicators of precarity, Standing included: “precariousness of residency, of labour and work and social protection” (ibidem, p. 3).

To fully understand the phenomenon of precarity, the category of uncertainty should be looked at together with multi-dimensionally understood flexibility – in order to fully appreciate the seriousness of the situation and the variety of practices of people living in precarious forms of employment. Standing talks about: wage, employment, job, and skill flexibilities (Standing, 2011, p. 6). Although the British economist mentions the changes in the education system in the aforementioned texts, particularly in regard to its commodification (see: Tittenbrun, 2014, pp. 167–173), it plays only a secondary role to the transformations in the sphere of work, and their social consequences. It is so because “economies generate new types of job all the time, but we know the direction they are taking. For instance, over the next decade, fewer than half of all new jobs in the United States will be for people with degrees or the equivalent (Florida, 2010)” (Standing, 2011, p. 68).

In regard to higher education, the problem isn’t just in the uncertainty of acquiring (well paid) employment after getting a university degree. The education system itself becomes uncertain, as on the one hand it becomes pseudo-education, which reflects the momentary needs of the market for the so-called specialists in certain disciplines, and, on the other hand, on the free market it itself becomes a commodity, like everything else. This is
why “commodifying higher education legitimises irrationality. Any course is acceptable if there is a demand for it, if it can be sold to consumers willing to pay the price. Anybody can take a pseudo-course giving a credentialist degree »because you're worth it«, which means because you or your parents can pay and because we are here to give you what you want, not what we believe to be scientific or valid based on generations of knowledge” (Standing, 2011, p. 70).

A whole separate issue is the working conditions on all levels of the education system, where flexible forms of employment have been promptly implemented, which happened simultaneously with rapid changes in curricula and expectations towards students. It shouldn’t then come as a surprise that already primary schools started to “produce” entrepreneurs and consumers in a semblance of the overwhelming market entities. As has been summarised by Standing (2011, p. 69): “Instead of learning about culture and history, children must be taught how to be efficient consumers and jobholders”, indeed a true transformation from a society of producers to a society of consumers, to use Zygmunt Bauman’s (2007) words.

Education of uncertainty and uncertainty in education have much broader social and cultural implications than the education system itself, which indeed is a very important institution that uses symbolic violence to determine and actively influence the system of social dependencies. Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron (1990, pp. 7–8) claim that:

“The symbolic strength of a pedagogic agency is defined by its weight in the structure of the power relations and symbolic relations (the latter always expressing the former) between the agencies exerting an action of symbolic violence. This structure in turn expresses the power relations between the groups or classes making up the social formation in question. It is through the mediation of this effect of domination by the dominant PA [pedagogic action – M.B.] that the different PAs carried on within the different groups or classes objectively and indirectly collaborate in the dominance of the dominant classes (e.g. the inculcation by the dominated PAs of knowledges or styles whose value on the economic or symbolic market is defined by the dominant PA)”.

Not to mention ontological status of the “symbolic market”, the dominant PA reinforces the relations of social-economic dependencies in a given society on an axionormative level with the use of symbolic violence. Violence that is not associated with the ruling order or modes of influencing the behaviours of others. It is invisible, and, what is even more important in the context of education, instead of eliminating social divides in order to open paths of development for marginalised categories, it reinforces them, making the existence of underprivileged groups even more uncertain. From the point of view of the French scholars, the education system is not as emancipatory as it is commonly believed, but in reality it acts on a given social order as a conservative agent.

To the same effect, though much earlier, Thorstein Veblen used to interpret the role of higher education in one of his most popular books. The last chapter of The Theory of the Leisure Class was dedicated to the problem of education and titled: “The Higher Learning As An Expression of the Pecuniary Culture” (2007, pp. 236–259). Even the examples he uses wonderfully correspond with symbolic violence, a notion Veblen did not use.
Production of knowledge in an uncertain market economy

It is difficult to disagree with Frédéric Lordon’s assessment of the situation, in which he points out that “For technical know-how is nowadays secondary, or almost. On the one hand it is assumed that, having acquired generic learning capacities in the course of their school years and university education, the newly recruited can be trained in the specific skills they will need by the company itself. On the other hand, what use are these technical skills unless activated by an animating desire? Yet the latter depends on an individual who remains an enigma” (2014, p. 50). However, formal education is still highly valued on the job market, for example through the requirement of a higher education diploma in order to work in a certain profession. This does not exclusively refer to certified occupations, which are formally regulated. Data from OECD confirms that people with higher education diplomas are characterised by a very high or high employment index (see Fig. 1), although important differences can be observed between individual countries. There

![Graph](image_url)

**Figure 1.** Employment rates of tertiary-educated adults, by levels of tertiary education (2015) 25–64 year-olds.

1. Some levels of education are included in others. Refer to the source table for more details.
2. Year of reference differs from 2015. Refer to the source table for more details.
2. Data for tertiary education include upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary programmes (less than 5% of the adults are under this group).

Source: OECD (2016, p. 94). Tables A5.1 and A5.3.
is also a significant dependence between the type of a diploma (e.g. Doctoral, Master’s, Bachelor’s or equivalent etc.) and the employment index. The higher the level of education acquired, the larger the chance for employment.

However, according to some researchers, particularly those studying the commons, “the university system uses the commons paradigm to help many different people work together to generate new knowledge” (Bollier, 2014, p. 99). More can be said, “hoarding knowledge as a privately owned good is not only hostile to the community, it defeats the value-proposition of scholarship. The goal of scholarship is not to maximize profits but to advance the search for truth and root out error” (ibidem, p. 100).

These ideas sound very nice, although in the market reality we are faced with a situation in which “the privatization and commodification of academic knowledge and scholarly relationships are now well advanced” (ibidem, p. 101). This, in turn, is related to another dimension of uncertainty, namely the appropriation of the effects of the work of academics by market entities, which effects indeed pertain to very socially important areas. David Bollier uses very suggestive examples to describe the far-reaching consequences of scientific knowledge commodification practices:

“Harvard University now owns patents for the so-called oncomouse used for laboratory research for cancer studies. It also owns patents on 23 synthetic nano-scale substitutes for elements of the periodic table. Patents on treatments for the AIDS virus mean that public funds are often used for developing medicines that later become privately owned and expensive to buy. Big Pharma thrives; indigent AIDS patients are more likely to die” (ibidem, p. 101).

Apart from the obvious benefits, like financing laboratories and commercialisation of academic research, partnerships between universities and business have a lot of drawbacks. Private enterprises appropriate the results of academic collaboration in such a way that the social benefit of that collaboration becomes questionable. Let us take a look the following fragment illustrating the real-life practices:

“Even though taxpayers finance the most important drug breakthroughs, the patterns are often owned by corporations and universities and the drugs are sold at high prices. US taxpayers have financed research that produced treatments for genetic disorders, depression and diabetes, and have invested in the research for Vasotec and Capoten for hypertension; the antiviral drug Zovirax; Prozac and Zantac for depression; Taxol for cancer; and Xalatan for glaucoma. But the patents for these drugs belong to corporations and their shareholders, not us” (ibidem, p. 102).

Not only do private corporations gain measurable profits from collaboration with public universities, they also regulate, via a system of scholarships and research grants, the shape and directions of the research. It probably does not need to be added, that those solutions are preferred, which provide a larger revenue for the private investors. Even the representatives of humanities and social sciences act “on commission” of private companies, designing solutions that can be conveniently put to work as corporate practices. In this sense, scientists and their uncertain career paths are increasingly resemblant to the situation of wage labourers in the employer’s job market. In essence, academic workers are hired workforce and always have been, although when deprived of the ethos of university work – the independence of their research and stability of employment (which often compensated for the low income), they are exposed to increasingly high degrees of uncertainty.
The question that suggests itself under the influence of these arguments is whether there is a possibility, particularly in the context of higher education, to turn back from the progressing privatisation and commodification of academic knowledge. The table below illustrates the basic differences between the for-profit and the commons paradigms.

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<th>The For-Profit Paradigm</th>
<th>The Commons Paradigm</th>
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<td>Corporate ideology and values integrated into education and knowledge production.</td>
<td>Peer-to-peer, networking and collaborative allows diversity of viewpoints.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Knowledge regarded as scarce asset to be bought and sold.</td>
<td>Knowledge regarded as plentiful resource for the common good of society.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Proprietary technologies.</td>
<td>Free and open source technologies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highly specialized knowledge and expertise are privileged.</td>
<td>Knowledge is subject to social and democratic control.</td>
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Besides the already mentioned appropriation of public academic institutions by the private sector, opposite tendencies have also been observed, which defy the ideology of profit at any cost. “Commercial” academic journals, where the price of a single article is comparable to the price of a book, compete – though this word is inappropriate and brings to mind the neoclassical approach to economics – with Open Access journals, available for free to anyone interested. We observe a similar thing happening with operating systems and computer programs, where corporate giants are faced by free and open software, which does not exclude anyone from the possibility of participating in the goods developed by legions of nameless commoners.

Summary

Not many people are aware that according to article 26 point 1. “The Universal Declaration of Human Rights” from 1948, “everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit”. We live in a world (and, what is worse, we have become accustomed to it) where, to a growing extent, everything has to be paid for and human existence is burdened with overwhelming uncertainty (cf. Therborn, 2013). The transformation happens not only in the local job markets or perspectives of material existence, but also social relations (cf. Tittenbrun, 2013), already being shaped on the level of elementary education. From the youngest age, education can either initiate and reinforce “entrepreneurial” attitudes, teach competing for resources and shape “winner” mentalities, or show the benefits coming from cooperation, sharing, and fairness. Interestingly, the first education scenario, while imprinting the uncertainty into the biography of the youngest students, socialises them for later life, which seems to lack alternatives, but is at the same time burdened with
uncertainty (this is why the notion of symbolic violence, introduced in the previous part, is useful). Guy Standing (2011, p. 68) has very poignantly characterised this ongoing transformation, which fits into the following scheme:

“The neo-liberal state has been transforming school systems to make them a consistent part of the market society, pushing education in the direction of »human capital« formation and job preparation. It has been one of the ugliest aspects of globalisation”.

The second scenario can be regarded as the option for those who “lose before the start”, avoiding rivalry, but nonetheless it weakens the negative consequences of social uncertainty. Advocates of cooperation and broad access to science and culture support the ideas of balanced economy and welfare state institutions, so criticised by the neoliberals. As Feduzi & Runde (2011, p. 614) point out, “an important argument in favour of the welfare state, apart from relieving poverty and redistributing income and wealth, was that it provides social insurance against fundamental life uncertainties and offers a mechanism for redistributing income over the life cycle”.

The welfare state was thought as an element protecting the society against uncertainty and potential dangers related to loss of employment or illness, among other things. Education offered by public schools was intended to minimise the uncertainty of individuals entering the job market at the time when industrial capitalism was blooming and when the expectations towards the workforce were changing. This was also the time when institutions were becoming more common – mostly in developed countries – democratic, transforming the decision-making mechanisms. An important role in these institutions was played by education. Observing the transformations of today’s welfare states, together with the changes in education systems (see Levidow, 2005) that accompany them and which expose more and more people to uncertainty, it is worthwhile to take up the critical analysis of the processes taking place. It is the more important because “giving education up”, that is, letting it be transformed in a semblance of a free-market entrepreneurship, will significantly hinder any critique of neoliberal practices, which are spreading at an overwhelming rate and eradicating any alternative approaches.

References


