The Corporate War Against Higher Education

Henry Giroux

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Abstract

In what follows, I want to address the fundamental shift in society regarding how we think about the relationship between corporate culture and democracy. Specifically, I want to argue that one of the most important indications of such a change can be seen in the ways in which we are currently being asked to rethink the role of higher education. Underlying this analysis is the assumption that the struggle to reclaim higher education must be seen as part of a broader battle over the defense of public goods, and that at the heart of such a struggle is the need to challenge the ever growing discourse and influence of neoliberalism, corporate power, and corporate politics. I will conclude by offering some suggestions as to what educators can do to reassert the primacy of higher education as an essential sphere for expanding and deepening the processes of democracy and civil society.
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In one high-profile case, an independent group is offering $17,000 for information leading to the capture of Muhammad Nazaruddin, a prominent politician who fled the country after being accused of corruption. Many Indonesians tell pollsters that corruption is the nation’s number-one problem, despite repeated pledges from politicians to root it out. Ade Wirawan’s recent report on corruption in schools says that graft in the education system goes far beyond the problem of students bribing teachers for passing grades on exams. It’s systematic. “Corruption takes a lot of different shapes. Higher education, I would argue, has mimicked the trends in the larger society and can often be seen as a microcosm of this larger struggle. More and more universities and colleges in the United States have fallen into line and have functioned as servants of power. In 2008, I published a short essay called “The Struggle Against Corporate Takeover of the University” in Socialism and Democracy. I continue to be interested in the university as a microcosm of the larger struggle in American society involving the commodification of culture and the attack on the commons. Corporatization of higher education has taken its toll on an institution, which previously was considered one of the great triumphs of the American system.