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Global horizons and imaginary spaces: travel and experience among transnational students in Sweden (0104)

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Introduction

In this presentation we are tapping into debates around the ‘demystification’ of knowledge production and higher education on a global scale (cf. Collinge 2005, Robertson 2006) as well as sharing a commitment to counter-hegemonic forces in the present day neo-liberal globalization of higher education. We consequently adhere to different critical voices that problematize the political economy of knowledge production in the world of higher education (Traweek and Reid 2000, Robertson 2006, Luke 2006), and in more detail we are interested in ‘the flows and linkages in the production, distribution and consumption of education’ Robertson (2006:5). We are concerned with the flow of imaginaries, institutional as well as individual, that in various ways feed these linkages with social and symbolic facticity in order for them to become such powerful vehicles for the rhetoric of ‘knowledge society/economy’ and the twin ideological force of globalization. This concerns the dominating commodity paradigm as well as the peripheral concerns of the intellectual outskirts of a globalized ‘knowledge society’ that both, but in different ways, are linked to transnational flows in the world of higher education.

To move beyond the ethnocentric and normative claims inherent in the contemporary assemblages of what constitute an emergent globalized ‘knowledge society’, we are elaborating the concept eduscapes (see also cf. Forstorp and Mellström 2013) that could contribute in clarifying different forms of geo-political stratification in higher education. Through this we are approaching fundamental

questions in the political economy of knowledge production such as who gets to be taught, what, where, and who is being selected to provide education in the global food chain of higher education (see Robertson 2006:10). The main purpose of this presentation is to further elaborate the concept and show how it can be set in motion with examples from peripheral voices in the global food chain of contemporary global 'knowledge society'.

We define eduscapes as the transnational flow of ideas and people in regard to research and higher education and where nodes of knowledge centres, peripheries and positional dynamics shifts over time but are connected through modern communication technologies and different epistemic, ethnic, and learning communities (see also Kynäslähti 2001; Luke 2005, 2006; Carney 2008, 2010, 2012; Ambrosius Madsen 2006, 2008; Beck 2008; Carney 2008; Ambrosius Madsen & Carney 2011; Caluya, Probyn & Vyas 2011). Through the notion eduscapes we open up for an analysis of understanding educational landscape in terms of their positional dynamics.

By employing the general perspective of 'interdisciplinary knowledge studies' we aim towards an analysis of the spatial strategies and routes available for higher education and knowledge migration as these are used by individual students from developing countries. Our way to conceptualize these strategies and flows, is thus to think of them as eduscapes.

As a cultural phenomenon eduscapes has its historic counterparts in the privileged classes' educational migration in the form of 'Bildungsreise' and 'Le Grand Tour', as much as in labor migration. The signification of the notion is in no way unique to our time but is tracing age-old patterns of movement in the name of diasporas, colonialism, postcolonialism, exploration, 'conquistadorism', etc. Spatial movement for educational purposes is not unique to our own time. However, a new dimension of concurrent eduscapes is the intensification, diversification, differentiation, and technologization of 'scientific' knowledge and institutionalized higher education on a global scale not previously experienced.

Drawing on anthropologist Arjun Appadurai's (1996) conceptualization of contemporary global flows and different forms of global scapes (i.e. finance-, media-, techno-, ideo-, and ethnoscaples), this form of (edu)scape is adding another global dimension of social facticity as well as its realm of cultural imaginary.

With our use of eduscapes, we are aiming at an analytical vehicle that encompasses places and processes, institutional practices as well as spatio-temporal strategies of individuals. For our purposes, eduscapes refer to places such as hubs of knowledge and capital. It can designate institutional arrangements referring to the ideology of a group, an organization, or a nation. It can also mean processes of knowledge negotiation and subjective trajectories of individuals in time and space, including their imaginary (educational) landscapes. These eduscapes are linked to social and cultural imaginaries as that subjective horizon of expectation and experience that both institutions and individuals inhabit. The cultural imaginary of eduscapes is here regarded as a symbolic matrix within which people imagine and act as collective and individual agents. Following the British historian Graham Dawson (1994:48) the cultural imaginary is a “network of discursive themes, images, motives and narratives available in a culture in a specific time”. The social imaginary is understood as the everyday hermeneutics of how collectives and individuals navigate in relation to the symbolic matrix of eduscapes. This is a landscape of meaning and collective aspiration where the imaginary dimension is equally important as the actual physical movements. We are thus moving in-between cultural scripts and social facticities that are conditioning institutional policies and strategies as well as individual anticipations, in the form of dreams , hopes, and imaginations, what is called ‘affective eduscapes’ in Caluya et al (2011:94). From the horizon of the individual the educational landscape is where dreams of a prosperous future are nourished and maintained, but this is also the place where fantasy not merely is an escape from reality but a constant and unavoidable accompaniment in real life experiences.

In this paper we are giving this concept momentum by investigating global horizons, spatial practices and social imaginaries of a number of interviewed students and lecturers in Sweden and Malaysia, coming from a vast range of countries. We are here drawing on a variety of materials, such as applications for doctoral positions, interviews, and ethnographic observation.

Our intention with this presentation is also that it will feed into a platform for further comparative work on ‘affective eduscapes’ for transnational scholars and students.