

Deconstructing the Rhetoric of Decentralization: The State in Education Reform¹

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To deconstruct, then, is to reinscribe and resituate meanings, events and objects within broader movements and structures; it is, so to speak, to reverse the tapestry in order to expose in all its unglamorously disheveled tangle the threads constituting the well heeled image it presents to the world (Eagleton, 1986, p.80).

Education Reform: Restructuring State-Civil Society Relations

A remarkable new reform movement in education has taken hold over the past decade--a movement that includes all the major countries of the Third World and the Eastern European countries in transition². This moment in the history of education is also remarkable for the nature of reforms that from one country to the next bear an extraordinary degree of resemblance to one another. The reason for this is fairly well-known to international educators--that is, that these reforms are part of an overall package of structural adjustment programs (SAPs) imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank³ aimed to facilitate economic growth of these national economies. Closing the education gap is seen as integral to closing the economic gap within and between countries. Therefore the first order of priority of these reform proposals has been to radically restructure basic education systems in each of these countries in ways that can move us closer to the goal of Education for All, if not by 2000 (as pledged at the World Conference on Education for All held at Jomtien in 1990), then at least by 2025⁴.

The fact that these reforms are related to the structural adjustment package is extremely relevant to our discussion here. The social and economic tenets upon which the SAPs are based also guide the reforms in the education sector. One basic tenet is that global cultural and economic trends require policymakers to rethink notions of the state that prevailed through the period of extensive modernization of Third World societies. Current thinking within international policy circles is that during the post-independence period it was necessary to nurture a strong state so as to develop the capacities of the nation--both natural and human. Given the rapid globalization of the economy and increased border crossing of people and ideas, however, a strong and interventionist state is also said to hinder rather than promote economic growth and the general well being of the population⁵. What is posited here is the maturation of market relations on a global scale which require a more unrestricted space for their full development--production of capital here being directly related to the production of well being⁶. Related to this new perspective on the state is a new conception of civil society as having emerged as an autonomous actor in its own right, and hence not requiring the patronage of the state as much as it did in an earlier time.

This new thinking around the role and function of the state has had profound implications on education policy making in the Third World, specifically within Latin

America and South Asia. Education has gone from being largely a state obligation to being increasingly turned over to civil society and non-state organizations. One simple explanation for this shift, often referenced by social theorists and policymakers alike, is the reduced budget of the state for social sectors (Bray, 1999; King, 1999). This is an integral feature of the structural adjustment programs designed by the IMF and World Bank. Certainly this is a condition that makes for the reduced role of the state in education and, consequently for the expanded role of civil society. However, my focus here is less upon the conspicuous cause of these reforms and more upon uncovering the latent imaginary that undergirds the reforms, and what this imaginary implies for state-civil society relations, and for democracy and equity⁷. I argue that a new imaginary is at play--one that is represented in the discourse of globalization and neoliberal market policies--and education reforms are an integral part of constituting this new imaginary. A central concern here is how do we deconstruct this new imaginary to understand its (dis)articulation with earlier discourses of democratization and equity and the new discourses of globalization and marketization. In this paper, I attempt a partial deconstruction of a key reform proposal--the decentralization of basic education--and analyze how it responds to the state-civil society problematic as a way to unravel this new imaginary.

Decentralization as a Mechanism of Restructuration

In current education reform discourse, decentralization has become a common rallying point bringing together diverse actors such as non-governmental organizations, the state bureaucracy and international aid agencies to work jointly on improving education. It serves as a unifying force because, historically, decentralization has been equated with democracy on the basis of greater local sovereignty and increased responsiveness to the needs of marginalized groups. However, comparative analysis of decentralization has shown us that there are various models of decentralization, some of which actually translate into greater centralization, and others which may exacerbate the social inequities that exist at the local level (Bray, 1999; Puiggros, 1996; Ridell, 1996). Bray (1999) makes a useful distinction between functional and territorial decentralization wherein the former is a separation of powers between parallel authorities or units (i.e. non-hierarchical) and the latter is an allocation of powers to different tiers of the education system from the state bureaucracy to the school. Bray (1999) elaborates on the latter form of decentralization since it most closely approximates the accepted notion of the term. Within territorial decentralization, he distinguishes between three meanings of decentralization that are often used interchangeably but imply quite different things--deconcentration, delegation, and devolution. He provides numerous insightful examples of how each has occurred in various contexts, and very seldom for reasons of equity, democracy or even efficiency. Apart from specific political crises that arise in any given historical moment in a nation state, Bray (1999) concludes that it is quite impossible to draw any systematic conclusions or generalize about how, where, and when decentralization and centralization may occur. His well-documented paper is, however, more descriptive than analytical. It does not situate this policy initiative within a globalizing condition⁸.

Several studies on decentralization of education highlight the problematic of the shifting role of the state in different country contexts, and its implications for democracy (see Ridell, 1996; Kaufman, 1997; Puiggros, 1996; Sayed, 1997). Early work on this question in

comparative education is found in an article on educational decentralization in Peru, Chile, and Mexico that directly addresses the crucial question of "weak state or strong state?" (McGinn & Street, 1986). In each case, the authors show how decentralization was put into effect to strengthen the central government and not weaken it. An important point they make is that governments (state) and people (civil society) are not necessarily separate or oppositional entities, and that groups across government and civil society may be either closely allied or opposed to one another. State policies such as decentralization thus need to be analyzed in terms of how certain alliances are strengthened and certain others weakened.

My research attempts to build on the above critical scholarship in comparative education by analyzing current proposals for decentralization and state reform in the Third World and its implications for democracy. In this paper, I limit my discussion to a recent policy paper of the World Bank on decentralization entitled *Beyond the Center: Decentralizing the State* that includes a significant section on guidelines for decentralization of education in Latin America (Burki et al, 1999)⁹. I hope the document analysis will also demonstrate that a theory of the state is integral to deepening our understanding of how exactly the role of the state may be reconstituted within a global field of actors.

In terms of a theoretical framework, I draw upon the Marxist geographer Henri Lefebvre's theory of the state in the age of globalization. I find Lefebvre's work particularly compelling in the context of the state-civil society debate. A number of social theorists have proposed the withering away of the state as both market and society have developed in extraordinarily complex ways (see, for instance, Appadurai, 1996; Sassen, 1996). They argue that neither the market nor civil society can be contained any longer within the territorial and political unit of the nation-state, rendering the state obsolete as an instrument of government. Contrary to this widely held position, Lefebvre argues that the state is being reconfigured in a new set of relations and is absolutely necessary to the workings of globalization.

Let me briefly outline some parts of Lefebvre's analysis that are especially germane to our discussion here¹⁰. The reconfiguration of the state is understood within an analytic of what Lefebvre calls the "production of space"--that is the state is conceptualized not as a fixed entity or container which holds market and society, but as an ensemble of social relations that form a complex, intertwined temporal and spatial grid (Brenner, 1997). Interventions of the state in the capitalist economy must be conceived spatially, as attempts to organize, instrumentalize and regulate social space. Space, according to Lefebvre, is one of the privileged instruments of the state in its efforts to control social relations among individuals, groups, and classes. (Brenner, 1997). Lefebvre's notion of "state space" (*l'espace etatique*) is the basis on which he theorizes the spatial form of the modern state, specifying three main elements of state space: (1) as a national territorial space; (2) as an internal grid of state sociospatial organization composed of politico-institutional and administrative configurations, built environments, and symbolic monuments; and (3) as the mental space produced by the state (Brenner, 1997).

Reading the World Bank report on *Decentralizing the State* (Burki et al., 1999) with Lefebvre's theory of state space, I uncover the topology of power and social control

defining the geography of globalization. The authors clearly state that the goal of this "normative framework for decentralization" is to help countries under pressure to decentralize to maintain political stability and democratize while at the same time improve efficiency of public service delivery and preserve macro economic stability (p. 17). The former objectives they affirm have been important in many Latin American countries which have moved from military to civilian rule and need to manage civilian discontent and gain grassroots support. Although these are laudable goals in themselves, the authors state that there are other objectives that are equally important--namely, efficiency of resource use and macro economic stability. Decentralization is presented as a win-win situation where all four objectives are met, and the interests of all groups--ruling parties and opposition groups, national governments, and indigenous communities--are equally protected. Thus, the vision proposed here articulates the demands for democracy with the ongoing processes of capital accumulation and debt servicing.

In this introductory section, the articulation of democracy with decentralization is made in a rather transparent manner. The authors use a commonplace though powerful discursive device of constructing binaries with one side of the binary representing a desirable policy option and the other representing a highly undesirable option (and hence a non-option). A clear instance of this is provided in the following set of statements:

In a fundamental sense, democratization, and with it decentralization, can be understood as a strategy to maintain political stability - to provide an institutional mechanism for bringing opposition groups into a formal, ritualized bargaining process. As such, it constitutes an alternative to civil war or other forms of violent opposition (p. 9; italics mine).

A binary is constructed between institutional mechanisms and civil war as being the only two available options for citizen participation in government. The "formal, ritualized bargaining process" may be understood as representing "state processes", that is, those that are constructed and legitimized by the state. Within Latin America itself, indigenous and peasant organizations have questioned the integrity of the "formal, ritualized bargaining process" itself, and have tried to propose alternative processes which have been met with great state opposition. Indigenous and peasant communities in struggle have consistently argued that the formal, ritualized processes for redress serve more to regulate and manage discontent rather than resolve it¹¹. Here, by positing state processes versus civil war, the authors make it appear as if there are no other mechanisms for democracy, and that state processes as such represent the only possible policy option. Contestation over "formal, ritualized bargaining process(es)" is made invisible and extraneous to the policy debate. The state, not as a territorial unit, but as a set of politico-institutional processes (re: Lefebvre), is centered as the only viable form by which democratization can proceed. In addition, democratization, rather than being a philosophy or a value in and of itself, is a tool placed at the service of political stability¹².

The following chapter of the report, entitled "Getting the Rules Right", elaborates upon the politico-institutional arrangements necessary for effective decentralization. Here the

authors delineate the complex issue of states sharing power, and the conditions under which such a sharing can be successfully exercised. To quote:

This report takes the view that the most useful way to see decentralization is as a management reorganization of the public sector, in which the rules of hierarchical bureaucracy are replaced by a much more limited set of constraints on the behavior of subnational political actors.... Decentralization thus implies not subnational sovereignty, but a new set of rules that define the relationship between national and subnational governments and replace the rules of hierarchical bureaucracy (p17-18; italics mine).

Outlined above is a definitive role for the state; that is, the state, far from becoming a nominal player in the intersections between local and suprastate, is placed as a key actor in regulating these intersecting relations. The authors are clearly hard pressed to provide a qualitative descriptor for the "new set of rules"; if the previous set of rules were hierarchical, what will the new ones look like? It is not clear that they will embody the opposite of hierarchy.

The chapter goes on to elaborate upon the new set of rules that states need to adopt so as to play this new role effectively. Each recommendation bears the mark of bland factuality for which World Bank reports can claim special expertise. Below, I summarize some of the key recommendations that have particular relevance for the construction of the state.

The recommendations rely heavily on legislation, although the authors state that the rules can come in a variety of forms, "not all of them legislation". However, they assert that "explicit legislation is key to successful decentralization". Legislation "reduce(s) uncertainty and provide(s) for a common set of ground rules for the political process". This, they assert, will both "coordinate subnational governments' reactions against abusive central government, while restricting the subnational government's scope for bargaining"(p. 18). Two specific recommendations made in this direction are 1) to strengthen the office of the presidency in relation to the legislature which could include "powers to rule by decree" and "an unassailable presidential veto", and 2) to institute electoral rules that "discourage party fragmentation--party fragmentation makes policy making more difficult and weakens the position of the president." Drastic actions such as "constitutional changes in electoral rules" are recommended as the best way out. These two changes, they argue, will strengthen the position of governments "to defend the national interest against the parochial interests of individual legislators" (p. 18-19). The report does not specify legislation or other steps that would accomplish the former objective--namely, to protect subnational governments against abuse by central governments.

These recommendations are explicitly designed to produce a powerful state with authority that is not exerted in a visible manner, that is not manifest in day to day administrative relations, but latent as an organizing grid within which the local must help improve efficiency, provide quality service delivery, preserve macroeconomic stability, and last of all, ensure democracy. The management reorganization of relations between the state and local bodies is to occur through a set of legislative rules that will

provide an almost, if not wholly, constitutional framework that will regulate the decisions of local bodies, and accord the central government with powers to discipline local bodies if they do not sufficiently regulate themselves. Within the logic of management reorganization, decentralization can be understood as a social space "produced" (literally speaking) in which social relations are rationalized, partitioned, and territorialized within an abstract, objectified grid--after all, what can be more abstract and objectified than the law?

The "New" State of Globalization

Explicit in the above recommendations is a strong role for the state, not a weak one as often concluded by globalization researchers. The imperative for a stronger state appears to arise not merely from this new "built" environment of decentralization but also from the deregulation of finance capital wherein supranational organizations, including private corporations, can invest in local public sector operations such as schools. On one hand, the deregulation of finance capital, an essential feature of neoliberal reform, does not make sense without the decentralization of public industries such as schools because only then can multiple markets be made available for investment. On the other hand, decentralization guarantees too much autonomy that may hinder optimum returns on these investments. This point is made clear by the authors who devote an entire chapter to "addressing the macroeconomic threat" to highlight the key crisis points created by decentralization (Burki et al., 1999).

In this chapter the main question that occupies the authors is how to protect against overspending and bail-outs by subnational units. The problem of controlling subnational debt receives much attention and clearly there is a good deal of anxiety over local bodies--i.e., school districts, individual schools, private organizations, non-governmental organizations, and elected municipal governments--borrowing from international lending agencies and banks more than they can pay back. And there is the fear that the central government will have to bail them out, thus increasing debt and lowering investment confidence in the country. According to the authors, the only effective way to prevent this is to have a "hegemonic and internally disciplined political party with the power to suppress any defiant behavior on the part of subnational politicians" (p. 6). Later, they add that "(A)s long as the national government pursues a conservative fiscal policy, such a system can force mayors and governors to refrain from excessive borrowing" (p. 48). The authors are quick to point out that hegemonic governments are becoming rare in Latin America and once again reiterate the need to formulate new electoral rules that revise the use of proportional representation in these countries. The recommendations proposed here echo Lefebvre's foresight that the globalization of capital and the re-scaling of state territorial power are two intrinsically related processes within the same dynamic.

A crucial element of Lefebvre's theory of the deliberate production of state space--namely, politico-institutional and administrative configurations--is also apparent in the structural reorganization of education systems. For instance, the decentralization of education has spawned a wide range of new partnerships that include, but are not limited to, non-governmental organizations, private investment, multilateral institutions, local school districts, vouchers, competitive grants and transfers, civic bodies, parents, neighborhoods, school communities, private evaluation bodies, and so

on. None of these new forms and relations mirror the territorial state as such; that is, none of these replicate the territorial state at the local level. Rather, the territorial state is superimposed upon, and at the same time decentered by, these myriad forms and relations in ways that constitute a new political geography in which relations between local bodies and suprastate agencies are increasingly structured and rationalized towards meeting global financial interests.

However, the re-scaling of state territorial power cannot function in an orderly manner without the mental space produced by the state wherein consensus is established on the regulatory priorities of the state. This consensus is engendered, in part at least, by articulating the policy of decentralization with a discourse of democratization. In everyday political and administrative routines the state may be less present than before, strengthening instead its role in producing consensus for the normative framework that determines much of how decentralized relations will be self-governed and self-regulatory. Besides textual analysis, ethnographic research is needed to understand the processes by which the "mental space" of the state is created at the level of the everyday.

Conclusion

In this paper, I challenge the commonplace notion that decentralization of education implies a weakening of state power--a notion that is often forwarded by both supporters and critics of state power. Instead I have proposed that current education reforms are systematically reorganizing state and civil society in the context of globalization. Through the lens of Lefebvre's theory of the state as a sociospatial configuration that consists of multiple scales that are at once unified and fragmentary, I attempt to read an official proposal for decentralization of education in Latin America. I conclude that decentralization portends a different configuration of state sociospatial organization to manage the precarious equilibrium of global capital trade, investment and speculation. Such a configuration is one in which the state is at once decentered by opening the stage to multiple other actors who must coordinate and conduct the everyday business of education and, simultaneously, is strengthened by organizing the field of possibilities, and laying the boundaries for local policy. This process is pursued ironically in the defense of national interest when the definition of nation itself is under question. It is worth noting that while the new thinking on the state is elaborated upon and foregrounded in policy documents, the reconstitution of its counterpart--civil society--is minimally referenced in the policy discourse. What will civil society and democracy look like under the new edifice of the state is not addressed, except in vague and populist terms. The re-imagining of society and its polity remains mostly implicit and embedded within the artful redesigning of the state. Further research is needed to deepen our analysis of the new role of the state in managing the "satanic geographies" (to borrow Neil Smith's phrase) constructed by global capital.

Notes

1. A version of this paper was presented at the Northeast Regional CIES Conference, Teachers College, New York City. February 5 - 6, 2000. I wish to thank the students at TC for providing me with an engaging and interested audience. I have also benefited greatly from discussions with my students in the Globalization and

Education Policy graduate seminar at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. I also owe thanks to Steven Klees and Gita Steiner-Khamsi for their interest in this work.

2. From the early 1980s, similar large scale reforms in K-12 education were carried out in England under the Thatcher government. This has been followed by similar set of reforms in Australia, U.S., and Canada. The reforms usually include the standardization of curriculum and assessment procedures making teaching "teacher-proof", local management schemes, devolution of budgetary responsibilities, decentralization of power from central government to local communities and to individual schools, privatization of public schools through vouchers and charter schools, and increased corporate investment in schools. An almost identical set of reforms and discourse on education has been introduced by the IMF and World Bank in various countries of the Southern and Eastern hemisphere as part of a comprehensive restructuring of state and economy in the Third World. I use the term "reform movement" to capture both the geographical sweep of these changes and the fundamental effects of these new policies. See David, 1992 for a discussion of the education reform movement in the U.S. and the U.K.
3. In brief, Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) comprise a set of conditionalities that have been imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank in over 70 countries of the Third World and Eastern Europe. The conditionalities emphasize opening the country to foreign investment, privatizing public sectors, devaluation of currency, reduced subsidies and credits, and cuts in social sector spending. The reforms in education, health and other soft sectors are carried out by the World Bank, and hence the rest of paper will refer to the World Bank as the main actor among the set of international agencies involved in policy making for the global economy.
4. In 1990, on the initiative of the UN and the World Bank, 155 countries met in Jomtien, Thailand to set specific targets that would make "Education for All" a reality. An important, albeit ambitious, agreement made at this conference was to guarantee universal access to primary education across the globe by the year 2000. Follow up studies indicate that for most countries of South Asia and particularly sub-Saharan Africa the prospects of achieving this target are extremely bleak, leading to a new set of time lines and forecasts.
5. After the recent East Asian financial crisis, the World Bank has retreated from its earlier position of a minimalist state and now stresses the importance of an "effective and strong state" (World Bank, 1997).
6. Notice the ontology of nature (dominant in the West) which is generally applied to humans (maturation leads to autonomy, freedom) is also extended to "the market" in notions of "free market".
7. For a more in-depth analysis of the causes of education reform, see Samoff, 1994.

8. Interestingly, Bray's paper is part of a volume on the "dialectic of the global and the local" in comparative education.
9. The 108 page paper is written by Shahid Burki, Perry Guillermo, and William Dillinger. Burki and Guillermo are senior officials at the Latin American and Caribbean Regional Office of the World Bank. The paper is published by and archived at the World Bank, Washington D.C. and serves as a discussion piece for policy analysis at the World Bank, and could potentially serve as a basis for policy decisions in the future. However, it is not an institutionally approved publication. The paper includes a disclaimer citing that these are views of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the World Bank. My reference to it as a World Bank report is thus a provisional one and is based on my assessment that the report does coalesce an emergent perspective at the Bank which is present in a scattered form in a number of speeches and articles by senior officials at the World Bank.
10. Although Henri Lefebvre's main body of work was published in French in the 1970s, his texts have only recently been translated into English. The Production of Space on which much of Neil Brenner's article is based was translated in 1991, and has generated much interest among North American social theorists. I find Brenner's article an excellent introduction to Lefebvre's theory of state and appropriate to my purpose here, since it is one of the first ones to relate Lefebvre's analysis to globalization.
11. The struggle of the Zapatistas (EZLN) represents one of the most well-known instances of an incessant struggle to formulate alternative modalities or forms through which to voice, negotiate, and build consensus on their demands. See Holloway and Palaez, 1998.
12. Chomsky (1989) and Zinn (1990) have so eloquently documented in the political history of the U.S. that when democracy inconveniences political stability, it is the former that is sacrificed.

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