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A Conversation with Mahmood Mamdani

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Dr. Mahmood Mamdani addressed the Committee on Social Theory last October as the 2015 Distinguished Speaker. His lecture, “Political Violence and Political Justice: A Critique of Criminal Justice as Accountability” introduced justice as *disClosure*’s subsequent theme. Dr. Mamdani is director of the Makerere Institute of Social Research at Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda, Herbert Lehman Professor of Government, and professor of Anthropology, Political Science, and African Studies at Columbia University. He is author of several books, including *Scholars in the Marketplace: The Dilemmas of Neoliberal Reform at Makerere University, 1989-2005* (Codesria, 2007). We sat down with Dr. Mamdani to get a transnational perspective on neoliberal economics in education.

***disClosure* Editors:** Your book, *Scholars in the Marketplace*, discusses the impacts of neoliberalism on higher education, particularly at Makerere University in Uganda. Though you focus on that university, it is clear that this type of neoliberal reform could impact any public university, particularly those that exist in a very market driven or capitalistic environment. Could you talk a little bit about how you see this impact in today’s public universities, especially considering the continuous global expansion of neoliberalism? Has it evolved or increased, and if so, what are the implications of this? We’re interested in your take on this issue, especially since you get to see university systems develop in so many different places.

Mahmood Mamdani: Sure. The U.S. had a great public university system. I think the shining example was the University of California, which is falling apart now. The idea behind the University of California system was that any kid could join the system given that the system had multiple entry points, from a community college to core colleges in the system. Theoretically, this kid had the possibility of moving from the community college right into Berkeley or UCLA or Irvine. Lack of funds, or inadequate preparation in high school would not be compelling factors. Since the whole system was knit together, one had the possibility of moving from the least to the best resourced unit.

There have also been other experiments like after the end of apartheid in South Africa. The University of Western Cape declared an open admissions policy, they said anybody who had passed Matric, which is their exam at the end of high school—just passed it, whatever the grade—that this person could join UWC. Years later, they carried out a survey. The survey showed that there was no connection between the grades with which students came in and the grades with which they went out. It raised

questions about entrance exams and what they measure. Are they measuring capacity? Ability? Merit? Or are they measuring privilege and opportunity? At Makerere University, for years now, we've had an affirmative action program for women students. The entry requirement for women applying to the university is lower than that for male students. Recently, there was a survey of women who came in at a lower curve point, and how they did at the University, and again, the same results appeared: they didn't necessarily do worse than those who had come in with higher grades. All of this raises questions.

The neoliberal influence in education begins in higher education. It begins with the World Bank sponsoring a whole series of studies, emphasizing one conclusion regarding the profitability of investment. The Bank measured the profitability of investment by comparing the amount of money it takes to graduate a primary school kid as opposed to a secondary school kid or a university graduate. Then they concluded the obvious, that it takes more money to graduate a university student, less to graduate a secondary school student, and even less to graduate a primary school student. On the basis of that, they claimed that higher education is a luxury, and public funds should be moved from tertiary to primary education. The World Bank marshaled the language of democracy to make this argument. This happened in Uganda starting in the late 1980s. This is the background to what I was writing about.

The second thing the World Bank did, was to say that university courses must be market responsive. So it shut down the departments that were not getting enough people, philosophy, for example. This kind of logic has guided so-called reforms in many parts of the Western world, Britain for example. And, I think to great damage to the education system. Everybody is assessed on the basis of profitability and productivity as per unit output. In Uganda, in the case of Makerere University, this experience destroyed the university as a research institution because the Bank argued that state funding for universities should be cut down. At the same time, the numbers enrolled should be increased exponentially by admitting more private fee paying students. Then they went to the faculty, and said, "Look, with the fee paying students, 80 percent of fees would come to the department where the student registers, or the faculty where the student registers, and you can decide what you want to do with these fees. For example, you can decide to double your salary. If you teach the same courses in the evening that you are teaching in the daytime, your salary will double but not your work." And indeed that's what happened because salaries were so low. The faculty decided to double and then triple or quadruple the intake of students, just to make ends meet, ended up teaching 80 hours a week, you know, like a high school, with hardly any research time.

A whole series of developments set in motion. The size of the university went up. I think by the end of the 1980s the student population was about 6,000, and rose to about 48,000 or 50,000. At the same time, classroom space had increased maybe around 5%. So you'd have "off room" classrooms. You'd have students sitting in windows that were open, students sitting on windowsills. From there, too, you got students registered for four courses, only to find that two of their courses were meeting at the same time. So this student agrees with a friend that she will attend one course, the friend will attend the other course, and they will exchange notes. That, then, led to a growing demand for teachers to circulate printed notes, and spoon-feed the students. So teaching standards and learning standards were lowered. The outcome has been tragic. There were no tutorials. At some point, they just stopped all tutorials because they didn't have the staff to do tutorials with exploding student numbers. The last step was to begin hiring teaching staff on a temporary basis, so as to go around the formal appointment procedures with their required standards. So you have staff that are appointed on a semester basis, but have been there for six or so years.

Sadly, this has happened in the US with adjuncts. You could hire somebody temporarily, for a semester, and yet that person could teach for ten years because they are renewed every semester and are paid a quarter of what people on regular appointment get. There is no evaluation, except by the head of

the department. There is no uniform standard, and hiring is always a response to a need, an emergency where they say, “Okay, we don’t have anybody else, let’s just get this person for now.” The standard is lowered to meet that need. And then, this can always be rationalized after the fact as financially sound because it doesn’t cost that much. So that is the system that is currently going around. Everybody knows that the student cannot pay for university education. In no university in the world is the cost met by fees. So, either you have private endowments or you have state funding, one of the two has to be there. But you have to have a way of meeting the shortfall.

Even at Makerere, we understood that though students were paying fees, there was always a deficit. Ironically, as the number of fee-paying students increased, the deficit increased. So the increase in student numbers created a financial problem, rather than solving it.

disClosure Editors: Thank you for speaking to that. No doubt, online education factors into this now more than ever. So many adjuncts take online courses because they’re working at multiple places, as online courses are easier for them to manage. Your book was fascinating and we think your clear explanation of the multiple layers of these economic issues is helpful to our understanding of it.