

# Reclaiming the Role of Higher Education in Croatia: Dominant and Oppositional Framings

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## Abstract

*Framed within a critical theory perspective that draws on Fraser's (2000 and 2003) concept of justice, this chapter outlines the development of the neoliberal doctrine in higher education and analyses how it influenced the official discourse in Croatia with respect to the concepts of development, and the role of the state and higher education in particular. The analysis shows that the official rhetoric primarily advanced a marketised conception of higher education whose role is to service the labour market and contribute to economic growth. This dominant framing of the role of higher education is contrasted to the oppositional discursive framing by the Independent Student Initiative, a student protest movement in Zagreb that has rejected neoliberal reforms of higher education. The movement framed higher education as a public good and emphasised the role of the state in shielding public services from privatisation and commodification. The oppositional discourse of the Independent Student Initiative is interpreted as a transformative struggle against socio-economic injustice which has extended the spectrum of the political Left in Croatia.*

**Key words:** student protest movement, critical theory, neoliberal doctrine, higher education policy, Croatia

## Introduction

Critical reflections on the 'neoliberal turn' have in recent times taken on dramatic overtones (Giroux 2011, Saunders 2010, Lynch 2006). Neoliberalism has been described as "the most dangerous ideology of the current historical moment" (Giroux 2011: 1), which not only seeks to annul the contradictions between democratic values and market fundamentalism, but also weakens any viable political agency. Social movements that have opposed neoliberal politics initially spread under the anti-globalisation umbrella in the late 1990s, signalling the start of a "ferocious contest over people's interpretations and understandings of the supposed benefits of neoliberal economic policies" (Ayres 2004: 11). However, since at that time many Western states were experiencing periods of seeming prosperity, the contested framings of the effects of neoliberal policies were fighting an uphill battle. This situation has changed substantially since the start of the economic crisis in 2008 which, according to authors such as Streeck (2011), has exposed the ugly underbelly of neoliberal policies through a succession of growing public deficits and private indebtedness. After the global financial system meltdown, governments have sought to restore their respective economies by rescuing banks, and then passing the bill onto the average citizen who is paying for this rescue with their private savings, as well as suffering cuts in reduced public services and higher taxation (ibid.). The prospects of ordinary citizens today are now frequently discussed within the context of a 'Lost Decade',

so it is no wonder that the effects of the economic policies implemented since the early 1990s are undergoing a renewed wave of criticism.

The renewed struggle over how we understand the effects of neoliberal policies is happening within the field of higher education as well, and not only in Western Europe. Since 2008 student protest movements have emerged across Europe, in the United States and Canada, as well as in Chile, Mexico and other Latin American states. The Independent Student Initiative that was formed in 2008 at the University of Zagreb joined these movements in an affirmation of education as a public good based on democratic principles and the values of freedom and equality (Academic Solidarity 2012). This chapter focuses on this student protest movement as a case study of an oppositional discursive framing that rejected neoliberal reforms in higher education. After critically reviewing the genesis and development of neoliberal policies in higher education and introducing Nancy Fraser's conceptualisation of social justice, the chapter analyses ways in which the dominant neoliberal discourse has found its expression in government documents, as well as how this has been challenged through the emergence of the student protest movement in Zagreb.

The basic argument is that whereas constructions of higher education in official state documents predominantly reflect the neoliberal model, the student protests in Croatia construct higher education along the counter-hegemonic humanist tradition. It is argued that the protest movement in Croatia advanced a critique of capitalism and the neoliberal model of marketised education and, in Fraser's (2003) terms, a transformative struggle against injustice. The chapter suggests that the protest movement is a 'new subject' on the political playing field that has extended the spectrum of the political Left in Croatia, using equality as the main yardstick for judgements against neoliberalism as an "ideology of inequality" (Negri 1989: 55).

### **The neoliberal doctrine in higher education**

Neoliberalism is a diverse set of ideas, discursive representations, public policies and practices which have three core beliefs in common: the benevolence of the free market, minimal state intervention, and the individual as a rational economic actor (Saunders 2010). It represents the belief that market-led growth will trickle down to benefit all members of society, as well as the belief that the market is intrinsically more efficient than government (Self 1999). The political ascendancy of neoliberal policies is attributed to Thatcher's and Reagan's terms in office in the early 1980s, from where they spread across Europe and globally. This was a time when the concept of the welfare state was coming under "sustained intellectual attack" (Le Grand and Robinson 1984). The belief that many of the economic, social and political problems of the period were attributable to the continuing growth of the welfare state was established as a dominant doctrine (Pierson 1998). The public sector was accused as the main culprit for the sluggishness of Europe's economies and, as a result, government budgets sustained strong cutbacks (Le Grand and Robinson 1984, Thesiens 2004). Thatcher's and Reagan's governments broke the post-war consensus according to which the state intervened in the market to provide security, prosperity and greater equality (Judt 2010), and instead pushed for the liberalisation of trade and investment, tax cuts and cuts to public spending, deregulation and privatisation of state-owned industries (Ayres 2004).

The implementation of these policies led to a dismantling of the post-war settlement between labour and capital, which used to be based on a strong welfare state, unionised

workers, the political objective of full-employment and Keynesian economic policies (Streeck 2011). The result was, according to authors such as Bourdieu (2003: 35), a steady erosion of the welfare state and the loosening of safeguards in “the interests of the dominated, the culturally and economically dispossessed, women, [and] stigmatised ethnic groups”. According to Brown (2005: 42), the new role of the state became facilitating competition and free trade, while the cost-benefit calculus was to become “the measure of all state practices”. Such a conception reduces the citizen to a consumer, an individual constantly in pursuit of ways to increase his/her human capital (Saunders 2010, Brown 2005).

These neoliberal economic policies were taken up by the European Union in its reforms during the 1990s (Judt 2010). The EU’s Lisbon Strategy was adopted in 2000 with the objective of boosting growth and competitiveness in Europe. This was a turning point in terms of the role of the state in EU policy discourse whereby the welfare state became colonised by economic policy-making. In other words, while in the 1980s the EU discourse on social policy was couched within the concept of the European welfare state, since the Lisbon Strategy the EU’s discourse on social policy has become much more economically-oriented (Dolenec 2007). Chalmers and Lodge (2003) trace it as being born out of the shadows of the Stability and Growth Pact, whereby the new politics of the welfare state were designed within the constraints of the procedures guarding macroeconomic performance which prohibit excessive government deficits and public debt. The Maastricht criteria from 1992 and the Stability and Growth Pact from 1998 effectively closed a number of policy options available for pursuing social objectives which has made it difficult to extract more resources for social policy (Green et al. 2000, Esping Andersen 2001). As a result, the EU’s policy prescriptions since the 1990s and the 2000s started to increasingly resemble those of international financial organisations such as the IMF and the World Bank (Guillen and Palier 2004). In a deliberate emulation of the US model of development, the Washington consensus on deregulation, the minimal state and low taxation travelled to Europe (Judt 2010).

In higher education the neoliberal doctrine is manifested as the construction of higher education as a private good to be purchased through tuition fees, through cuts in state funding, via the notion that the primary role of higher education is to drive economic progress, in the increase of adjunct labour, or through the focus on individual achievement (Giroux 2011, Saunders 2010). At their core, neoliberal policies in higher education represent a reduced reliance on public funding and a reorientation towards private investment both in the form of increasing student tuition fees and third-party investments. They also encompass the introduction of management practices from private sector enterprises which include the professionalisation of university management and the separation of academic from management functions, the introduction of quantified targets, regular assessments that are tied to funding and, finally, the progressive implementation of output-based public financing. In addition, the application of market logic to universities and learning emphasises the utility of knowledge and its relationship to the labour market (Olssen and Peters 2005). According to Brown (2011), a number of writers expound what they see as the benefits of this marketised higher education system compared to a government-controlled non-market system: increased efficiency, responsiveness to ‘customers’, and innovation and revenue diversification. Apple emphasises how in a period of crisis “We are told by neoliberals that only by turning our schools, teachers, and children over to the competitive market will we find a solution” (Apple 2001: 409).

Perhaps the key shift towards the neoliberal doctrine in higher education has been the assertion that its primary role is to drive economic progress and realise national economic interests (Jessop 2008). Indeed, since the 1990s public funding for universities has been made contingent upon a more direct contribution to the economy (ibid.). For obvious reasons, this rationale has particularly devastating consequences in the field of the humanities and liberal arts, as has been thoroughly documented (Nussbaum 2010, Giroux 2011, Collini 2012). In addition, by advancing the assumption of individuals guided by self-interest, the neoliberal doctrine has shifted the definition of citizenship towards one of 'consumer citizen' whereby the individual is supposedly free to choose, but is in exchange held responsible for his/her own well-being (Lynch 2006).

The strengthening of the neoliberal doctrine within the higher education field has led to significant changes in the policies on public spending. Until the 1980s higher education was free or almost free for students across Europe, while today most countries charge some amount of tuition fees (Eicher 2000). On a similar note, while before the 1980s governments provided support for students' living costs mainly in the form of grants, since then there has been a shift towards the increased provision of loans for living costs. All of these reforms have signalled the privatisation of higher education – the shifting of the cost of higher education from public to private sources (Tilak 2005).

This change can also be observed in the Croatian higher education landscape: since the mid-1990s the growth of the student population has been based on the growing number of self-financed students (Matković 2009). While in the 1993/1994 academic year only 11.8 percent of students were paying tuition fees (Matković 2009), by 2010/2011 this share had increased to 60 percent (Cvitan et al. 2011). At the same time, the amount of tuition fees paid by undergraduate students grew over 50 percent from the mid-1990s, while fees for graduate studies increased even more substantially. Some indications of a reversal of this trend have been visible since September 2012, with the decision of the current centre-left government to fund tuition fees for all students at the point of enrolment and throughout the study course for students who acquire the required ECTS points. In addition, the newly introduced funding agreements with universities include social criteria such as increasing the enrolment of mature students, supporting students from low socio-economic backgrounds and students with disabilities, as well as increasing retention. These recent policies may be interpreted as tactical concessions which reflect the influence of the Independent Student Initiative, but their actual impact regarding the proportion of students paying tuition fees as well as their broader implications for access to higher education and social mobility in Croatia have yet to be established.

### **Critical educational theory and Fraser's conception of justice**

Already in the mid-1970s, in their seminal study on education and capitalism Bowles and Gintis (1976) argued that if we are to understand what drives policy change the field of education must be analysed within a political economy framework. How education is financed and regulated depends on political decisions, which are in turn guided by ideas about what education is for, as well as by broader worldviews regarding societal well-being, social mobility and emancipation (Gradstein, Justman, and Meier 2004). Within the political economy of education, critical educational theory focuses on how education is shaped by structures and processes of power in society, as well as ways in which education is a powerful force for shaping people's perceptions, beliefs and behaviours. While the dominant neoliberal doctrine repeatedly demands that we consider how education serves

the needs of the economy, a critical perspective asks what needs does the economy serve: does it enable us to do things we consider really important (Collini 2012)? The economy should not be understood as an autonomous system to which societies must yield – instead, societies should control and direct the economy to meet our individual and collective needs (Polany 1944).

Critical educational theory is therefore used to confront neoliberal policies in education with counter-hegemonic discourses that evoke popular power and collaborative governance (Brown 2005). It advances concepts of justice, ethics and equality, the autonomy of academic labour, the right to education, the university as a public sphere and the role played by the liberal arts and humanities in fostering a culture premised on the practice of freedom and mutual empowerment (Saunders 2010, Nussbaum 2010, Giroux 2011). While aiming to revive the idea of the Humboldtian university, this critique has been careful not to fall prey to nostalgia, aware that universities have always been sites of social reproduction and elitism (Ash 2008). In this conception, the university is above all a place to think rather than a place to prepare students to be competitive in the global market place. For authors such as Nussbaum (2010), the role of education cannot be reduced to supplying human capital to the market – it must nurture critical thought, a daring imagination and an understanding of the complexity of the world we live in.

In large part the literature on the spread of neoliberal policies, as well as on resistances that have followed it, focuses on the Anglo-American context and continental Europe – with few analyses of complementary developments in the post-communist context of the Western Balkans. We use Nancy Fraser's concept of justice (2000 and 2003) to interpret the student protest movement in Croatia as the initial site of resistance to the spread of the neoliberal doctrine. Fraser's (2000) concept of justice refers to both class and status forms of injustice and the struggles for redistribution and recognition. Redistributive struggles relate to the socio-economic axis of injustice such as poverty, economic exploitation, inequality and class differentials, where the focus is on the demand for a fair distribution of resources (ibid.). However, a socially just society should also resolve concerns comprising the cultural axis of injustice – disrespect, cultural imperialism and status hierarchy (ibid.). The focus of this axis is misrecognition, status subordination and inequalities relating to issues of gender and sexuality, ethnicity, religion and nationality. As the following analysis shows, the language of the protest movement is primarily couched in the critique of capitalism and the concepts of redistribution and socio-economic justice.

When discussing ways of overcoming injustice, Fraser (2000 and 2003) distinguishes affirmative from transformative strategies. The key distinction lies in the contrast between the underlying social structures and social outcomes that they generate. Affirmative strategies for redressing injustice aim to correct inequitable outcomes of social arrangements without disturbing the underlying social structures that generate these outcomes. In contrast, transformative strategies aim to correct unjust outcomes by restructuring the underlying generative framework. The problem with applying affirmative remedies to identified injustices is that such strategies tend to reify collective identities, discourage innovation or dissidence – in a nutshell, they homogenise the group in question while at the same time reifying it (ibid.). Transformative remedies have opposite effects. Since they employ strategies of deconstruction, interaction and non-conformism, they effect a growth in solidarity without creating stigmatised groups. For Fraser, transformative strategies are more desirable, but they are at the same time more difficult to execute since they are highly vulnerable to collective action problems and feasible only in highly unusual

circumstances. Practical political actions usually fit somewhere along the continuum of the two identified poles of affirmative and transformative strategies. Applying this distinction, we interpret the student protest movement in Croatia as a transformative struggle focused on the socio-economic axis of injustice.

### **Empirical Strategy**

The central question guiding the analysis was how development, the role of the state and of higher education are framed in government documents and in the documents of the student protest movement. Discourse analysis was used for its understanding of discourse as constituting social reality and providing legitimacy to actions, guiding actors in their actions and providing images through which we understand ourselves and our surroundings (Nokkala 2008). In other words, discourse analysis enables the exploration of background assumptions of the analysed texts by relying on specific assumptions about society (Denscombe 1998: 309). As our introductory review has shown, we adopt a critical stance towards the neoliberal doctrine and the effects its policies have had in the field of higher education. Given that we were involved in the protest movement, a critical discourse analysis seems to be the most appropriate research strategy since it assumes an advocacy role on the part of the researcher (Meyer 2001). This method is fundamentally concerned with analysing structural relationships of dominance, power and control as manifested in language (Wodak 2001). It focuses on investigating inequality as expressed and legitimised by discourse, and it is 'critical' in that it takes an explicit political stance (ibid.).

The analysed official government documents are from the period from 2003 to 2007, when a centre-right government led by the Croatian Democratic Union was in power. The three key government policy documents which define societal development and the role of higher education within it are included in the analysis. The first is the Strategic Development Framework as the umbrella political document defining government objectives for the 2006–2013 period. The second is the Education Sector Development Plan 2005–2010 as the official document outlining the strategy of the development of the education sector for the period up to 2010, and the third is the Science and Technology Strategy (2006–2010), which outlines the government's research policy.

The oppositional discourse is reconstructed from the texts of the student protest movement led by the Independent Student Initiative for the Right to Free Education. The event that marked the emergence of the student protest movement at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences of the University of Zagreb was a public demonstration for free education that was held on 5 November 2008 and attended by 1,500 people (Independent Student Initiative 2009a). However, the defining moment for the movement was the blockade of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, which started on 20 April 2009 and lasted for 35 days. The blockade was in part a reaction to the disappointment that students felt at their demands being ignored while using conventional methods for expressing grievances, which radicalised the movement. Against the backdrop of more severe austerity politics that had unfolded since 2008, the continuous growth of tuition fees served as the immediate tipping point for the emergence of the student protest movement within the higher education field in Croatia. When it comes to the texts by the protest movement, the selection for our analysis was difficult since the movement produced many collectively authored programmatic texts as well as authored papers. We decided to focus on the texts produced at the very beginning of the student protest movement since this was the moment when the movement constituted itself as a new political actor and when it became an agenda setter in

the public debate in Croatia. We analyse the first issue of the pamphlet *Skripta* containing the manifesto of the Independent Student Initiative, the following four issues of the pamphlet, and the *Blokadna Kuharica* booklet which documented the Faculty blockade in 2009.

The next section discusses how development and the role of the state are constructed in the dominant and oppositional discourses, followed by a section that outlines how the role of higher education is constructed in the two discourses.

## **The struggle over defining development, the role of the state and the role of higher education**

### *The role of the state and development*

With the implementation of the Lisbon Strategy, the European Social Model, originally coined by Jacques Delors to signify an alternative to the American form of pure-market capitalism (Jepsen and Pascual 2005), underwent an important re-semantisation in an effort to adjust it to new circumstances. Making Europe the most competitive economy of the world required reforming the labour market and social policy (Sapir 2006). The emphasis shifted from the state as a safeguard for the unemployed, sick, elderly and other groups at risk to the state as an enhancer of individual chances, a state that focuses on fostering employment, improving the business environment and maintaining macroeconomic stability (Dolenec 2007). After the role of the state is redefined in these terms, social policies are designed to “level the playing field” through education, skills and improved employability on one hand, while targeting social assistance to the most disadvantaged in order to reduce poverty and social exclusion (ibid.). In other words, the original meaning behind the concept of the European social model, which used to refer to a generous welfare state (Scharpf 2002), was to a large extent abandoned. Can we trace the influence of the Lisbon Strategy regarding the framing of development and the role of the state in Croatian official discourse?

The Introduction to Croatia’s Strategic Development Framework (SDF) reveals somewhat of a balancing act in how it envisions development. The main strategic goal is defined as “growth and employment in a competitive market economy acting within a European welfare state of the 21<sup>st</sup> century” while the results of the measures it proposes, if applied, would lead to “an average increase of about 5% in the rate of economic growth in the period up to 2010, and above 7% after 2010”. The formulation of the main strategic goal and the means by which its attainment will be measured reveals a strong focus on economic growth as the primary societal objective. At the same time, the second part of the formulation referring to growth “within a European welfare state of the 21<sup>st</sup> century” seems to signal the safeguarding of social and economic rights. Throughout the document, the reference to the European welfare state appears either with the prefix “modern” or the suffix “of the 21<sup>st</sup> century”, and never on its own. It seems that the writers wanted to simultaneously communicate some guarantee of existing social and economic rights and a necessity to redefine what a welfare state entails. A search through the document reveals no clear indication of what this change might be, apart from referring to the European welfare state “adjusted to the conditions of the 21<sup>st</sup> century” (Government of Croatia 2006: 6). This qualifier seems to send out a warning sign.

While the SDF does not explicitly formulate what a European welfare state for the 21<sup>st</sup> century encapsulates, its discussion of social policy and of the changed role of the state (a chapter in the document is entitled *The New Role of the State*) testifies to the strong discursive influence of the Lisbon Strategy, which is cited on three occasions in the document. Already in the Introduction, the SDF mentions “the new role of the state” and stresses the need to change “the traditional role of the state”, followed by a formulation according to which the state should be transformed into “an efficient and effective service acting for its citizens and entrepreneurs” (ibid.: 12). In this “new, open world” of “efficiency” and “effectiveness” the state is no longer an instrument of social intervention, but of social mediation. The state is no longer the “creator, leader and executor of change” (ibid.: 12), but works together with the private sector on a partnership basis in search of the best development solutions. Even though Croatian citizens exhibit an egalitarian political culture as well as high expectations from the state in the provision of social services (Županov 1969, Štulhofer 1997 and 2000), the SDF diagnoses that

“Although the effects of egalitarianism that was promoted for decades and the expectations that the state will take care of the individual still exist, such beliefs are slowly disappearing. New generations are maturing and realising that their greatest support in life is in the results of their work.” (Government of Croatia 2006: 13).

The use of the word “maturing” is particularly telling since immaturity seems to stand for not realising the value of self-reliance and individualism.

The chapter *The New Role of the State* completes this redefinition by focusing on the need to reduce the public sector as well as make it a more efficient service provider. More specifically, the reform should start from “the basic principle that the state should relinquish to the market all those activities which the market performs more efficiently and intervene only in correcting market failures” (ibid.: 64). At the same time, the “institutional and administrative competencies of the state must also be enhanced to create a stable, predictable and transparent business environment” (ibid.:64). Therefore, even though on the surface the SDF seems to balance the ‘social’ and the ‘market’, its discussion of objectives, priorities and measures reveals a strong belief in the market and a preference for the retrenchment of the state. This retrenchment is particularly acute in terms of distancing from the previous regime, framed in terms of the need to nurture the will to succeed and take on personal responsibility, which are presented as values which had been “for decades suppressed in socialism” (ibid.: 13). It is interesting to note that, although the SDF pronounces clearly which political and economic set up it is against (socialism), there is no explicit mention in the document of capitalism. The adoption of capitalism is thus revealed as fully naturalised; an unquestioned state of affairs to which there is no alternative.

The government discourse in the SDF mirrors the Lisbon Strategy discourse on development, centring on economic growth and a retrenchment of the welfare state. Entrepreneurship is a key concept within this framework and a chapter in the SDF focuses exclusively on this. The SDF argues that Croatia should put science, technology, innovation, a large part of the state administration and the education system “at the service” of entrepreneurship: the positive effect on entrepreneurship “must become one of the basic criteria to assess all activities of the state and all forms of spending taxpayers’ money” (ibid.: 56). Along these lines, the SDF states that “wherever there is competition there are

better results” (ibid.: 23). Similarly, privatisation is advocated as a superior strategy of allocating resources since “private ownership has clearly proven to be far more successful than state ownership” (ibid.: 59). In other words, the key ingredients for Croatia’s development are a retrenchment of the welfare state, entrepreneurship, privatisation and competition – the central components of the neoliberal doctrine. Similarly to Nokkala’s (2008) observations about the narrative construction of Finland as a “small country” in official documents, the SDF also constructs Croatia as a “small economy” (Government of Croatia 2006: 11 and 46) and “small country” (ibid.: 16 and 56) whose survival depends on these ingredients. The proposed reforms are presented as unavoidable, with no room left for alternatives.

Although the manifest of the student protest movement (Independent Student Initiative 2009b) largely focuses on higher education, like other student movements globally, the movement had more ambitious objectives. Callinicos’ (2006) remark with respect to the UK student protest movement according to which “preserving and developing what is valuable in existing universities cannot be separated from the broader struggle against capitalism itself” may as well have been applied in the case of the Independent Student Initiative in Zagreb. The manifest is quite explicit in this respect: “The stock markets have crashed as a result of a neoliberal capitalist doctrine which promotes private business, whose main aim is maximising profit, being understood as untouchable [...] our long-term goal is to end the neoliberalisation of this society”. In addition, the *Blokadna Kuharica* (Independent Student Initiative 2009a: 71) makes it clear that “the student fight for free education needs to be understood as part of a more encompassing fight for defending the interests of the majority, and not particularistic and selfish [...] as some media and politicians try to present it”.

Regarding the role of the state, the manifest notes that its role in terms of providing social services is being labelled as socialist; “a word which in the media context is the equivalent of complete disqualification”, whereas the offered alternative is Social Darwinism “in which individual consumption and shopping malls should compensate for the loss of social security and collective solidarity”. The *Blokadna Kuharica* describes this as “a neoliberal attack on social rights”. In other words, the protest movement develops a far-reaching and systemic criticism of the existing economic relations and policy priorities, emphasising development in terms of public goods and collective solidarity. In Fraser’s (2003) terms, the movement does not adopt an affirmative approach which would focus narrowly on furthering their interests and social position, but a transformative approach which challenges the neoliberal order and emphasises the redistributive role of the state. The following quote illustrates this:

Private capital is the fundamental pillar of the neoliberal capitalist order and it is therefore unrealistic to expect that private investors will willingly give up the control of their private playgrounds that we naïve people call states. If we go back just a little bit, it becomes evident that the money that states used to avoid bankruptcy of banks is the money of tax payers – that is, our money. Private capital remains protected and it always gets another chance of accumulating new profit. Metaphorically speaking, the people are scraping leftovers from an already empty mug after the capitalists have skimmed all the cream. There is money, but it is the people who make this money that should decide what to do with it, and force the state to distribute it more justly (through pressure from below) (Independent Student Initiative 2009b, FAQ section, our translation).

Unlike the SDF document which critiques socialism and does not mention capitalism, the student manifesto aims to rehabilitate the socialist tradition and offers a scouring critique of the capitalist economy as benefiting the privileged elites at the expense of the citizens. The discourse of the manifesto, their relationship with respect to the former regime, as well as the intellectual tradition which they invoke (e.g. David Harvey, Slavoj Žižek etc.) position the student protest movement within the neo-Marxist political tradition. The fact that they were disparaged by the mainstream media as Yugo-nostalgic and communist further supports the conclusion that they were successful in positioning themselves as a political actor of the radical Left. It seems that the SDF's idea of 'maturity' was turned on its head by this generation of student activists.

### *The role of (higher) education*

When it comes to discussing the role of education more specifically, it features prominently in the SDF, which aims to develop and transform Croatian society and the economy into a "knowledge society". This concept is a direct transfer of the language of the Lisbon Strategy, which committed the EU to becoming "the most dynamic and competitive *knowledge-based economy* in the world" (our italics). The knowledge society narrative emphasises the importance of higher education for the competitiveness of nation-states, regions and individuals (Nokkala 2008). This orientation is especially prominent in the goals formulated in Chapter 2 of the SDF (Government of Croatia 2006), *People and Knowledge*: a better balancing of labour force supply and demand, reducing long-term employment, promoting lifelong learning, modernising vocational education, extending compulsory education, increasing the share of people with higher education in the total population, increasing total allocations to education but also the efficiency of spending, and finally stimulating the participation of the private sector in the financing of regular education and in-service training (ibid.: 20). This formulation of objectives reveals the education sector as conceived primarily in terms of its economic impact, i.e. the better functioning of the labour market and ways in which it can increase economic competitiveness. The following extracts further illustrate this:

One of the key features of the Croatian labour market is the relatively weak link between educational results and market needs, that is, insufficient influence of the labour-force market (i.e. the needs of the labour market) on the features of the educational system (ibid.: 19);

Introducing measures to encourage the commercialisation of academic research – with the aim of efficient cooperation between the university and research institutions with business structures (ibid.: 26).

When discussing education and research, the SDF states that "the role of the state and the public sector in encouraging the transfer of knowledge and technology is necessary and justified, because innovation and the dissemination of knowledge and technologies create important positive social effects. State investments are necessary in creating the conditions for research and higher education, because these are areas where shifts in financing may produce significant positive results" (ibid.: 25). Unfortunately, this objective of increased public investment in higher education and especially in research and development has not been implemented. The current government's legislative proposal from early 2012 refers to Croatia's investment in research and development as being at 36.5 percent of the EU

average, while Croatia's public investment in higher education is at 83 percent of the EU average (Academic Solidarity 2012). This reflects an international trend whereby "higher education is expected to play [a role] in advancing global competitiveness within a context of constrained public spending" (Robertson 2010: 201). Supposedly to make up for the shortfall in public spending, the SDF notes the importance of private investments, illustrating the faith in private initiative and competition:

It is necessary to stimulate private initiatives in education (at the same time respecting high quality standards), as well as partnerships with the private sector. It is crucial to develop public private partnerships through the inclusion of the private sector in improving the material conditions and infrastructure of the educational system (Government of Croatia 2006: 23).

Like the SDF, which presents a failed attempt at balancing societal development and market allocation by dominantly framing higher education as a mechanism of economic growth, the Education Sector Development Plan 2005–2010 (ESDP; Ministry of Science, Education and Sports 2005) also tries to balance social and economic priorities. For instance, in its definition of the role of education it evokes concepts such as equal opportunities and the common good:

The role of the education system is to create and develop intellectual, professionally competent and humanistic-oriented human capital that will benefit the country and the common good. Education has a crucial role in equipping all children, young people and adults with equal opportunities when entering society and the labour market, regardless of their social background (ibid.: 5).

Although this document draws on terms such as the common good or equal opportunities, the role of education is again firmly couched within the context of the Lisbon Strategy and the knowledge economy. The ESDP directly mentions the Lisbon Strategy as the foundation of its principles and goals, and evokes the need to modernise education systems "to allow the EU to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world" (ibid.: 9). In addition, the education system needs to respond to labour market needs by improving efficiency and including the adult population in education, thereby contributing to a reduction of the unemployment rate.

The ESDP formulated four overall priorities for the education sector: improving the quality and effectiveness of education; improving teacher education; improving management and efficiency of the education system; and promoting education for social cohesion and economic growth and development. In terms of the fourth objective of education for social cohesion and economic growth, the ESDP primarily has in mind the development of lifelong learning. As it specifies: "Due to the increasing pace of social and economic change, it is necessary to improve the flexibility of the education system, so that individuals have greater opportunities to change their education/training, in line with the changing needs of the labour market and the concept of lifelong learning" (ibid.: 21). This conception of the individual as taking on the risks in an ever-changing market through constant education (Nokkala 2008) is a close reflection of the role of education as conceptualised in the Lisbon Strategy. Jessop (2008: 14) labels this as the "subordination of information, knowledge and learning to the demands of the expanded reproduction of the globalising knowledge economy". Further examples of this in the ESDP include: "adapting the enrolment policy to meet labour market demands in the Republic of Croatia" (Ministry of Science, Education and Sports 2005: 34).

The Science and Technology Policy of the Republic of Croatia 2006–2010 (STP; Ministry of Science, Education and Sports 2006) reveals the same strong reliance on the Lisbon Strategy in conceptualising objectives for Croatia’s research and technology policy, as well as the context of globalisation, European integration and the imperatives of knowledge economies. The Foreword invokes the Lisbon Strategy’s goals and invites Croatian citizens to be prepared for permanent education as “a factor of self-improvement and social advancement [that] should become a way of life” (Foreword). The overall objective is to “stimulate scientific excellence and enable the transfer of knowledge and results of scientific discoveries to industry and business in order to increase competitiveness and generate sustainable growth and productivity” (ibid.: 12). Again the rhetoric of “self-improvement”, “competitiveness” and “excellence” dominates.

In summarising all three documents we may say that, although competing narratives are present whereby social cohesion is married to competitiveness, as well as sustainability to economic growth, when these contradictory objectives are forced into a showdown, the neoliberal objectives of employability, economic growth and competitiveness repeatedly carry the day. Social cohesion is revealed as a secondary objective, almost a necessary internal stabiliser for the market mechanism at work.

In opposition to the concern for economic growth and the economic role of higher education and research, the main concern of the Independent Student Initiative is the education system as a public good and the idea of social justice. The manifesto states opposition to the “privatisation of higher education”, to higher education institutions becoming profit-making, and to market logic in terms of hiring which “can be especially detrimental for the academic world”. The framings in the manifesto enable a characterisation of this protest as a transformative struggle against socio-economic injustice. Firstly, there is a strong and repeated emphasis on the economic status of individuals and the fact that economic status should not be a barrier to accessing higher education. Access to higher education is framed as a right, with references to the UN’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights, while attempts to restrict this right are characterised as socially destructive and polarising. The following quotes illustrate this:

In light of the fact that the right to education is a right that belongs to everyone, regardless of the economic status of the individual, our action is a sign of protest against the reckless and socially insensitive taking away of that right.

We are taking our part of the responsibility to defend general social interests from the socially destructive processes of commercialisation and social polarisation based on economic status.

We demand the abolition of tuition fees on all levels: undergraduate, graduate and postgraduate. The taxes that we are paying must be sufficient to guarantee elementary rights and institutions of social justice and equality (Independent Student Initiative 2009b).

In addition, there is a rejection of the argument according to which there ‘simply is not enough money in the public purse’, whereby the claim made is that the taxes paid by ordinary citizens must suffice to guarantee the right to higher education. This discussion according to which there simply is not enough public funding for higher education as not an objective necessity but a matter of political priorities is elaborated in the FAQ section of

the first pamphlet *Skripta* and it is revisited again in the *Blokadna kuharica* document that came out several months later. The Independent Student Initiative rejects the justification based on the budget deficit as an objective necessity and opens up the question of progressive tax policies directed at banks and large corporations as a source of additional funding for education. All the identified elements of the manifesto point to a socio-economic conceptualisation of injustice, whereby the redressing of injustice is seen in redistributive measures that would guarantee a right to education. Moreover, the movements' objectives are clearly formulated as a transformative struggle since they do not aim to affirm the rights and privileges of one social group but instead point to the underlying societal framework, and the injustices that are generated by neoliberal policies across diverse social domains.

## **Conclusion**

Since the mid-2000s the official discourse in Croatia has been uncritically copying the Lisbon Strategy policy objectives as a set of ideas directed towards increasing the competitiveness of European knowledge-based economies. The current economic crisis has revealed that, instead of the prosperity of all, the implementation of these policies has led to increasing inequality, rising unemployment and reduced social mobility across Europe. However, even if one remains a staunch believer in free markets in the face of the current crisis, there is still the question of whether in Croatia the objective of creating a globally competitive knowledge economy was ever intended to be actually implemented. As we have shown, in Croatia levels of public investment in R&D and higher education are substantially lower than the EU average. Perhaps in Croatia the Lisbon rhetoric of competitiveness has instead been used to downplay the responsibility of the government for the higher education sector and for societal well-being more broadly. Since the economic crisis, the competitiveness rhetoric seems to have been primarily used to justify reduced public spending on higher education and research and to camouflage an increasingly insecure future for universities.

As our analysis has shown, the discursive split regarding the role of the state and higher education between the official discourse in Croatia and that of the student protest movement is stark. The official discourse during the 2003–2007 period of a centre-right government dominantly advanced a narrow conception of higher education whose role is to contribute to a skilled workforce for the economy. The commodification of higher education was constructed as a necessity for economic growth, a developmental path to which there was no alternative. A critical perspective that challenged this view emerged at the University of Zagreb during 2008 and 2009. The Independent Student Initiative rejected this dominant framing of higher education by demanding that the state protects public goods against privatisation and commodification. It has drawn attention to the fact that Croatia has been witnessing cuts in public spending and a changed role of the state not only in the field of higher education, but across diverse social domains from healthcare to pensions. Employing Fraser's (2000 and 2003) concept of social justice, the protest movement was characterised as a transformative struggle against socio-economic injustice which challenged the implementation of neoliberal policies. Finally, we have hinted at recent developments which suggest that the protest movement has extended the spectrum of the political Left by introducing topics pertaining to socio-economic inequalities into the public debate. These developments surely merit analytical attention and charter further avenues for research.

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