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The shifting geopolitics of higher education: Inter/nationalizing elite universities in Kazakhstan, Saudi Arabia, and beyond



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ABSTRACT

This article examines recent higher education projects in two resource-rich, developmental states: Kazakhstan and Saudi Arabia. These projects are indicative of broader trend across Asia to move beyond previous national universities, toward a state-initiated model of the globally competitive university, which is designed to become a regional hub for elite education. Drawing on a range of qualitative methods, I consider the geopolitical context in which these projects have been conditioned and materialized, with a focus on how they are legitimated by policy-makers in the two case countries. By reframing discussions about the globalization of higher education in terms of a geopolitics of higher education, I argue that the cases of Kazakhstan and Saudi Arabia are not exceptions set outside of the hegemonic liberal system, but that they are 'mirrors' of recent internationalization agendas undertaken by elite Western universities. Through considering localized discourses of promoting knowledge-based economies, I consider how elites simultaneously work with and reconfigure globally-hegemonic discourses, and specifically how these elite university projects are part of broader authoritarian political configurations in Kazakhstan and Saudi Arabia.

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Introduction

The monopoly of legitimate education is now more important, more central than is the monopoly of legitimate violence.

– Ernest Gellner (1983, 34)

American and European academics have been increasingly anxious about the so-called corporatization or marketization of the university (e.g. Castree and Sparke, 2000; Fisher and Chan, 2008; Olds and Thrift, 2005; Rhoads and Torres, 2006; Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004; Waters, 2006a). They identify this trend in a range of recent policy shifts, from university fee structures, to faculty review criteria, to the increasing reliance on adjunct or part-time instructors. Another dimension of this, which has received less attention, is that a growing number of Western universities are opening branch campuses and pursuing international partnerships in the non-West (acknowledging the difficulty of this binary, I use the 'West' only as shorthand for European and North American countries). However, these cross-border projects are increasingly coming under scrutiny, as they grow in scope and media coverage has increased (e.g. Daley, 2011; Harman, 2007; Langfitt, 2013; Lewin, 2013; Lindsey, 2013).

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These projects have been heralded by some, such as former U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who in 2011, praised New York University (NYU) President John Sexton's 'vision to expand his university internationally while maintaining its reputation for excellence and academic freedom' (quoted in Kaminer, 2013). And yet, much of the media coverage on NYU's branch campuses in Abu Dhabi and Shanghai, as with other universities' projects in similarly nondemocratic contexts, has been predominantly negative. It has frequently focused on widespread concerns about the ability of U.S.-based universities to deliver on precisely this promise of maintaining excellence and academic freedom in states where democracy, freedom of speech, and civil society are actively discouraged (e.g. Krieger, 2013; Page and Areddy, 2013; Redden, 2013; see Vora, 2014).

Not only does this set of critiques position the Western university as a bastion of politically liberal norms and values – and importantly one that is seen as being under attack in its extension into illiberal contexts – it is simultaneously positioned as an institution that should be outside the logics of economic liberalism. That is, Western universities' international ventures are critiqued as indiscriminate schemes to earn more money for the university (or in some cases divert it abroad), while failing to reflect the standards of the home campus and/or threatening to dilute the quality of the university brand. For example, several of the Persian Gulf

monarchies have provided subsidies for facilities, salaries, and tuition, as well as massive (but mostly undisclosed) donations, for the institutions that have opened branch campuses in their countries. Critics have challenged these contracts as corporatist, and potentially corrupting insofar as they are seen to be prioritized over the (non-financial) values of the home institutions (e.g. Lewin, 2008, 2013; Lindsey, 2013; Redden, 2013).

Yet these critiques of ‘academic capitalism’ and Western universities’ effort to expand their international presence represent only a partial perspective about shifting trends in the global landscape of higher education. Such critiques have been strategically articulated through the defense of liberal normative commitments, but they are infused with a certain anxiety about threatened hegemony within Western academia. As this article illustrates, considering these trends globally produces a more nuanced picture, and raises new questions and challenges that are glossed over in the simultaneously (politically) liberalist and (economically) anti-liberalist critiques dominating Western narratives. In fact, these critiques – insofar as they strategically manipulate and thus (re)produce the division between ‘liberal’ and ‘illiberal’ states and spaces – are one means by which actors in the hegemonic center articulate their dominance.

Accordingly, I treat narratives about recent transformations in the global landscape of higher education as geopolitical scripts, whereby global space is hierarchized (Agnew, 2003, 21) as situated actors categorize and make sense of the world through interpretive cultural practice (Ó Tuathail, 2006, 7). Rather than critique these Western narratives, I am keen to move beyond the center’s discursive dominance and, instead, consider two ostensibly peripheral cases in this article. Through a joint case study of recent higher education developments in Saudi Arabia and Kazakhstan, I consider how Western universities’ internationalization agendas have coincided with extensive nationalization agendas in other parts of the world, and how we can discern a broader geopolitics to these parallel developments. This article thus advances the literature on the globalization of higher education by reframing it in terms of a geopolitics of higher education, so as to highlight these political geographies in such a way that does not merely reproduce stigmatizing liberal/illiberal binaries, and hopefully, to escape banal critiques of neoliberalism as inherently bad (Ferguson, 2010).

Domesticating higher education in the non-West

Universities in the United States, as well as in Canada and Western Europe, have long held a privileged position in higher education’s hierarchy of prestige. Overwhelmingly dominating global ranking charts (Jöns and Hoyler, 2013), they attract students from around the world. Although many international students study on an individual basis (either offered university scholarships or paying their own way), many arrive on scholarships funded by their home governments. Where material resources and governmental agendas align, policy-makers in non-Western countries have developed extensive programs to send students abroad to receive a Western education at these prestigious institutions. These include various state-sponsored scholarship programs, such as those in Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, just to name a few. This is clearly a substantial financial boon to the destination universities. However, even in the cases I analyze here, Saudi Arabia and Kazakhstan, two oil-rich countries with a long history of sending their students abroad to U.S. and European universities, this trend is beginning to change. These governments are now intensifying their efforts to domesticate elite higher education – that is, they are trying to bring Western education to their students rather than sending them abroad. This process, I

argue, is intimately connected with ongoing Western internationalization projects.

Globally, this domestication of higher education has mainly taken three, often co-existing, forms in the non-West. The first is the explosion of private universities in a diverse range of ‘neoliberalizing’ states, like Chile, Mexico, Lebanon, Turkey, Kyrgyzstan, and China. In these cases, loosening state regulations, both in terms of education policies and market liberalization, has enabled the founding of new universities, in settings where higher education options were previously tightly controlled. The second form is the proliferation of branch campuses, found in clusters like Qatar’s Education City (Vora, 2014; Kane, 2012; Tetrault, 2011), as well as individually in the cases of NYU-Abu Dhabi and Shanghai, Clark University in Poland, and a host of second-tier Western universities around the world (for an incomplete list, see www.globalhighered.org/branchcampuses.php).

The third trend, which is the subject of my ongoing research, is the strengthening of existing, and development of new, state-sponsored universities. These are not quite the national universities of afore (e.g. Mitchell, 1988, 113), but are rather framed as being globally-competitive universities, which are to serve as hubs for elite education, not just in the host country, but regionally. Examples include the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy, National University of Singapore, Nazarbayev University in Kazakhstan, King Abdullah University of Science Technology in Saudi Arabia, and Qatar University. In all these cases, the governments have invested significant funds to attract Western scholars to staff them – often with a stated agenda of becoming their world region’s Harvard or Oxford.

The latter two trends are of particular interest for geographers for the way they actively blur the lines between the foreign and the domestic. Though are typically legitimated domestically through the language of nationalism – and especially in response to calls to spend education dollars at home – much of the money to develop local elite universities goes to hiring Western faculty and administrators, enticed there with high salaries, free housing, and reduced workloads, etc. So extreme is this dependence on the foreign that Vora (2014) has aptly labeled these new universities as ‘expert/expat camps.’ This article explores just one aspect of this rhetorical and conceptual tension and considers why we have seen this recent shift in resource-rich states toward massive investment in developing globally-competitive (Western-style), but still avowedly local, institutions of higher education.

Resource-rich states are frequently characterized as being defined by a ‘ruling bargain,’ in which citizens ‘exchange all political rights for extensive welfare state goods’ (Kanna, 2011, 26). In this narrative, the role of nationalism and ideology is uniformly dismissed – and undeservedly so. Through a joint case study of the King Abdullah University of Science Technology (KAUST) in Saudi Arabia and Nazarbayev University (NU) in Kazakhstan, I illustrate how nationalism is a significant force in both Kazakhstan and Saudi Arabia, albeit taking different shapes. In both places, these recent higher education projects are part of broader agendas to nationalize their economies and their polities. In Kazakhstan, this has been primarily connected to the ‘Kazakhification’ of the country in the years since the end of the Soviet Union (Sarsembayev, 1999). Although many ethnic Russians emigrated upon independence, Kazakhstan still has a large Russian minority, which by most accounts, has slowed the trend toward de-Russification that has characterized many other post-Soviet settings. Now over 20 years since gaining independence, Kazakhstan’s elite is increasingly dominated by ethnic Kazakhs, and there has been an ever-expanding move toward promoting Kazakh culture and language. As I have considered at greater length elsewhere (Koch, forthcoming), the realm of higher education has been one

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