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Elites and Transnational Educational Strategies

The Case of Sweden

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Extended Abstract

An increasingly important—and not sufficiently investigated—aspect of the phenomena that are commonly labelled globalisation concerns the way they affect the educational system and educational strategies, and vice versa. This is especially true for higher education. The growing number of students studying abroad contributes to the overall flow of individuals and ideas across national borders and to the development of transnational elites. Moreover, representations and interpretations of globalisation processes are produced and disseminated within the academic institutions together with different kinds of competences and techniques that are indispensable to the pursuit of international relations and business.

This article deals with the internationalisation of higher education in Sweden. The arguments are based upon studies, mainly conducted through questionnaires and interviews, of Swedish students studying in Paris (2000) and New York (1998), and of Swedish institutions of higher education (1997) and their investments in internationalisation.

In terms of student flows, the internationalisation of Swedish higher education has been rapid during the last two decades. The number of Swedish students studying abroad was just over 1,000 in the late 1980s, but well over 25,000 ten years later. Today, approximately ten per cent of the Swedish students spend at least three months studying abroad each year. One important reason for this expansion was the by international standards extremely generous Bill that was passed in 1989, which granted state student loans for studies abroad provided that the foreign institutions of higher education were recognised as such by the foreign national or regional authorities. Another factor was that the Swedish institutions of higher education in 1992 were given the opportunity to participate in EU exchange programmes.

Despite the improved situation for exchange studies, most of the students who invest in foreign education are still so-called 'free movers,' which basically means that they have organised their studies abroad themselves. To study abroad as a free mover or within an exchange programme imply two different kinds of educational strategies. The former involves a more wholehearted investment in a foreign diploma, while the latter constitutes a dual investment allowing the results

of the studies abroad to be added to a Swedish diploma. Thus, here the term ‘internationalisation’ has two socially disparate meanings.

Studies abroad can generate many different types of profit. They can be seen as investments in educational capital, general transnational capital, more nation-specific capital, language capital and transnational social capital. At an overall level, there are two ways of possessing this capital – via the school and via the place where studies are undertaken. Educational capital and transnational social capital are most obviously associated with school. The general transnational capital is more associated with place. Place can be so important that it constitutes capital in itself—a place-specific symbolic capital—as is the case with New York and Paris. Place is also the country of residence, which can function as a nation-specific transnational capital. Language capital can obviously be acquired both within the frame of school and outside it, even though two types of acquired language, namely an official and a more specialised language, dominate in the school environment, and an everyday language permeates other contexts. Transnational social capital can also be accumulated and maintained outside the school domain.

These returns are unevenly divided. Elite schools are defined, among other things, by the fact that they attract students with many different types of resources. They also transfer many different kinds of capital. Having studied at, for example, a *Grande École* or an Ivy League university usually means an investment in a significant educational capital; a capital that also has global importance, particularly in the case of the American educational institutions. Schools also offer access to an institutionalised transnational social capital that stretches across the whole world, and constitutes a large accumulation of different resources. The value of the actual teaching should not be underestimated either. Students are often provided with opportunities to acquire competences that are very difficult to find in other places. One has access to leading scholars and professionals, very sophisticated data resources, enormous libraries and, importantly, a milieu where the majority of students are capitally strong and motivated. More often than not, it is about acquiring *savoir-être* than *savoir-faire*. Students at American elite universities receive extensive training in the art of being interviewed; an experience that is very valuable for forthcoming job interviews. Another value lies right here, namely in the schools’ ability to place their trainees in very distinguished contexts. Enormous resources are spent in preparing students for, and guiding them to, the most lucrative careers. But—something that must not be forgotten—the majority of the educational institutions are defined contrary to these types of education in that they are distinguished by the lack of such resources.

In comparison with these elite schools, which are relatively safe investments (if you have been accepted at one of the most prestigious schools the likelihood is that you will also graduate), investments related to the place are much more uncertain. Obtaining benefit from all the opportunities and possibilities that the global city has to offer demands a lot of courage and patience. Competition is fierce. But if you succeed, you might also make it on a global scale. If you’re not so successful, however, you can still make it at other places. The place-specific symbolic value is wide ranging.

Investments in the school and the place can coincide, as is the case when studying at a respected school in central Paris or New York. In the majority of cases, however, it does not. Studying at a *Grande École* in Paris often means that living and studying at a campus some distance away from the city centre. The mythical life of Paris is something to enjoy on those Saturdays when you have time to spare. Many of the most respected schools in the USA are situated in relatively small suburbs and, in comparison to Paris, New York has a very poor selection of elite education.

One of the main results to emerge from the analyses of the Swedish students in Paris and North Eastern USA is that entry to the most desirable positions in the American, and particularly in the French system, often demands substantial investment in the Swedish education system. This should be understood in relation to the most central result of a parallel study of the internationalisation of Swedish institutions of higher education that increased internationalisation contributes to an increased *national* stratification and hierarchical formation of the educational establishment and the courses offered, where, thanks to their substantial investment in international resources, the most dominant seats of learning are able to distance themselves further from their national competitors. The leading educational institutions in every country align themselves with exclusive networks, where they can add the symbolic value that the exchange partners represent to their own resources, as a kind of social capital that is divided by similar inclusive institutions. This means that students that reach the top of the national hierarchies at the same time gain access to the most sought after positions in the global educational market and can enjoy the network's joint resources. Educational institutions that are ranked lower in the national hierarchy do not have access to these exclusive transnational networks, but are instead referred to less prestigious contexts, such as exchange agreements within the Erasmus and Nordplus programmes.

The social groups' education strategies follow a similar logic. The social elite have most to gain from internationalisation in that they meet many of the requirements necessary for successful education across national boundaries. The parental home has an abundance of cultural capital, economic resources and international experience, as the parents have often worked abroad, or in some cases been educated abroad, can speak several foreign languages and have travelled widely. In other words, internationality is an integrated part of the students' upbringing. This has considerable significance. Higher overseas studies ought to be seen as the result of a long process, where timely choices determine later possibilities. Language is an important factor, especially when it comes to non-English speaking countries. Having spent holidays in France, studied French at secondary school and perhaps having worked as an au pair in the country, makes it much easier to gain entry to higher education in France. The importance of economic resources should not be under-estimated either. Although many economic impediments have been removed in Sweden as a result of the provision of general student aid and free studies, different conditions prevail abroad. In the USA, for example, course fees are very high, which means that for those who study at an elite university, and/or in a city like New York, investments can often be in the class of a million or so kronor. A generous Swedish financial support of studies does not go very far in such a context, and thus presupposes an additional contribution from elsewhere.

The internationalisation of higher education is not only something that concerns the higher social classes. In many respects, globalisation is about changing scales. What was previously reserved for a small elite has now been "democratised" and become more widely available and accessible. Internationalisation has moved into schools and higher education. Upper class privileges are thus challenged via the education system. In parallel to this, there is also a commercialisation of international studies. All this has contributed to a significant expansion of transnational education and a consequent differentiation.

These new possibilities do not really change the actual state of things, however. When a system expands, those who already dominate see it as a necessity to acquire more of what counts. A parallel can be drawn with the expansion of higher education in Sweden. The fact that new groups step into the university world does not mean that the elite groups disappear from the system. On the contrary, adopting the correct positions becomes even more important. Overseas positioning and the internationalisation of higher education can increasingly be understood as an

internal differentiation of the Swedish system. When new groups make their entrance, it becomes all the more important to distinguish oneself. A degree from Stockholm School of Economics is no longer sufficient. Studies in foreign countries therefore serve as an important complement. In that considerably more criteria are involved in the selection for studies abroad than for education in general, and that fewer are offered the opportunity, the acquisition of exchange positions serves as an exceptional suitable indicator of school-related and social excellence—something that can also be paraphrased as the spirit of enterprise.

At a more detailed level, however, there are both changes and clashes. Internationalisation threatens the established educational establishments' positions in a way that doesn't make it easy for the social elites to choose a national course. Some students make an early investment in a transnational educational career through international boarding schools in Switzerland, or international schools in different parts of the world. These international schools often imply an investment in either American or British education, where the goal is higher education in one of these countries. Here the national (i.e. the British and American) culture is seen as an international resource. An alternative includes more nation-specific investments of the type we often meet among female students in Paris. University studies are often undertaken in France, and one imagines both a future and taking up a profession in the country. This kind of investment has a more limited international scope, in that it seldom stretches beyond the country where the investment takes place, but on the other hand means that completely different possibilities can be taken advantage of in relation to one's home country. It is thus possible to act as an international broker between national fields of power, as indicated by Yves Dezalay and Bryan Garth.

Both these types of transnational educational investments, in either Anglo-Saxon educational courses—that also serve as international—or nation-specific careers, can be seen as alternative strategies to investing in a Swedish education, and stand in contrast to those investments provided via the Swedish education system, namely exchange studies. The latter are to be regarded as components in a complementary strategy, where the value of overseas studies are added to Swedish ones, and where they probably have most significance within a Swedish employment market in terms of creating a distinction with those who only hold Swedish qualifications. At stake in all these types of strategy is the value of national investments in relation to the transnational. It is not the poor that are fighting for the right of definition and the rates of exchange, but rather those who make the most substantial investments—either in the Swedish or overseas systems—that have more to lose and, conversely also have most to gain.