Stalin, the Soviet science wars, and “junk science” selling marketizing of education

written by Lois Weiner | September 18, 2013

One of the most glaring contradictions in policies being foisted on public schools (charter schools are generally exempt from these regulations) is that research on which they are based is fundamentally flawed. Ethan Pollock’s examination of “Stalin and the Soviet science wars” (Princeton University Press, 2006) teases out the complex relationship between science and ideology. The book provides a window on why research produced at the World Bank, the nerve center of the global project that aims to marketize education and convert teaching to contract labor, (to use a non-scientific term), stinks.

Pollock analyzes Stalin’s personal interventions in scientific debates and the shifting modus vivendi in which the Party both supported scientific research and attempted to control its conclusions. We do not (yet?) have a figure or body that directs educational researchers on what their conclusions should be, which Pollock explains Stalin did as “the coryphaeus of science” (leader of the chorus, with Soviets scientists singing “in rhythm to the commanding movements of his baton”). At the same time, educational research has become chillingly captive to ideology, as it was during the Cold War. Neoliberal assumptions currently drive both the **premises** of research at the World Bank (WB) and its **conclusions**.

Elaborate speculation, often based on data the researchers acknowledge is inconclusive or tangential, is used to force privatization and deprofessionalization of teaching on countries who want aid. Vouchers, for example, have been favored by the WB for years. Typical of the research supporting vouchers is the study conducted by Harvard economist, Michael Kremer, who evaluated the worthiness of a scheme (the study's poor construction doesn't make it worthy of the label "experiment") in Colombia by examining the projected incomes students who won a lottery for vouchers to attend private schools. The study never questions the predictive reliability of the income projections, which assume that Colombians will face the same job market and economy in a decade. The study assumes a study based on 300 students (that is, at its start, by completion the size had dropped) is large enough to drive a nation’s education policy. Nor does Kremer's study explore implications of his finding that voucher payments did not keep pace with increases in school tuition, which caused some students to drop out of the program.

However, the most significant flaw in the evaluation is his acknowledgment that pupils left behind in public schools may have been hurt by the departure of motivated classmates for private schools, a factor that his study cannot measure. Yet, Kremer concludes this negative effect can be ignored because the positive effects for winners of the lottery are so “clear cut.” While this is the kind of logic the pharmaceutical industry uses to pursue drug approvals, we still require medical researchers to address possible negative effects of treatments. That should be the standard we demand of research used to support privatization.

Pollock notes that during the 1920s the sciences were relatively free from Bolshevik intervention. Lenin defended “bourgeois technical experts” and the contribution bourgeois scientists could make to the society and state. Lenin would have rejected the kind of research conducted by the WB as ideologically driven, harmful to the nation’s future. What we’re seeing isn’t just “junk science.” It’s science used to endorse social engineering to put profits first.

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