

## **Every School as a Small Business**

A privatization of the political is occurring worldwide today.

*By Ingrid Lohmann*

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### EVERY SCHOOL AS A SMALL BUSINESS

Privatization of Education. The “good reputation” of a school has long depended on its participation in projects of the Bertelsmann foundation

A privatization of the political is occurring worldwide today. The weights between the economy and politics are shifting. This is accompanied by the planned financial drying up of the public sector, as propagated by the OECD (Organization for European Cooperation and Development), the IMF, the World Bank and other transnational actors. The main actor in this transformation – that the sociologist Arno Klönne describes as an “upheaval” – is the Bertelsmann foundation in Germany.

The Bertelsmann foundation is an asset of the Bertelsmann corporation, the fifth-largest media corporation in the world with around 80,000 employees and six business sections. Through the strategic axis between corporation and foundation, the line between philanthropy and profit interests is sometimes blurred beyond all recognition. What is good for Bertelsmann is good for the entire republic. In this way Frank Bockelmann and Hersch Fischler in their Bertelsmann book summarize the worldview of Reinhard Mohn and provide ample evidence. We owe the ideas of a low-wage sector, the development of the “Alliance for Work,” “Agenda 2010” and “Hartz IV” to the rich imagination of the Bertelsmann foundation.

### PERFORMANCE CODES

In 1994, the foundation established the “Center for University Development.” Since then, this think tank has promoted the reorganization of universities according to managerial criteria and introduction of the Bachelor-Master study system and student fees. In 1995, the “Center for Applied Political Research” (CAP) at the University of Munich was added with around 60 co-workers. This center is directed by Werner Weidenfeld, a political scientist and networker who was a member of the board of the Bertelsmann foundation since 1992 and later its president. Together with the foundation, CAP pursues many strategic projects for Europe’s future – including influencing the draft of a European constitution and plans for a re-militarization of the European Union (EU).

Meanwhile the Bertelsmann foundation is preparing the further expansion of corporate business fields in the education- and science system. To this end, the Bertelsmann house anchors principles for performance measurement and optimization in education institutions across Europe. Operational efficiency has the highest priority. Bertelsmann keeps a tight rein on pub-

lic libraries, schools and universities with the introduction of performance standards, permanent rankings, evaluations and other control instruments.

In Germany, this entire first began in North Rhine-Westphalia. With support of the regional government, the operational transformation of the schools was started in the early 1990s with a model experiment later expanded to the “international network of innovative school systems” (1997-2005). At this time, Reinhard Mohn of the NRW education commission supplied the central ideas for a future-oriented school system. In 2005, the Bertelsmann project “Responsible Schools and Quality Comparisons in Education” was tackled with the start-up assistance of the Lower Saxony government. Around 130 general education schools have committed themselves “to the way of personal responsibility.” A year later 1255 schools in all the German states were using “Self-evaluation in Schools,” the software instrument for “improving the quality of schools,” – naturally from Bertelsmann.

Whoever warns that the voluntariness, spontaneity or autonomy of schools is violated is stamped as a diehard. The territorial governments have long made their allocation decisions and the “good reputation” of a school dependent on participation in Bertelsmann projects. Bertelsmann representatives have long served in the cultural ministry of the German territories to insure that the new independence in school affairs goes in the right direction. Whether school administrations are willing or not, they either participate in a Bertelsmann project or the respective territorial government forces them – caught between the politics of “empty treasuries” and evidence of quality demanded from them. The Bertelsmann foundation makes available “standardized control instruments” for planning and evaluating school development processes to “interested” schools. “Reports on Schools” are offered. These reports then serve as a basis for planning scholastic measures that accelerate the competitive transformation of the respective school into a goods-producing business. In this way, their hostile takeover by the education industry occurs that is not usually recognized or seen as dangerous because Bertelsmann also dominates the media public.

## COMMERCIALIZATION

In the process of abolishing universal public education, this form of privatization is dominant today in Germany on the academic plane and is currently more important than direct forms of commercialization that mark US development (where university graduates enter the labor market with an average \$20,000 in debts on account of tuition). Privatization and commercialization are interwoven and imply and reinforce each other. In Germany, “fields of economic activity” have long come out of educational institutions. These institutions function according to the rules of public institutions, as the educator Elisabeth Flitner described the business interests behind the PISA-study of the OECD.

The all-pervasive propagation of comparative performance measurements is part of the logic of the capitalist commodity-form. With these measurements, schools and universities will be changed into many small business units prepared for further rationing by the domestic and foreign media industry. Bertelsmann positions itself for that on the national and international market.

As earmarked in the GATS world trade agreement (General Agreement on Trade in Services), educational institutions fall under the term service providers. This is also the perspective of EU-domestic market policy, in perfect harmony with Bertelsmann. Whether the existing

agreement of interests between the Bertelsmann “octopus” and the “mosquitoes” will continue in these nascent processes of privatization and commercialization is dubious. The once ingenious chess move of the Bertelsmann could turn against itself.

## NEW ACTORS

The fact that foundations can play a dominant role today in the reconfiguration of civil society and educational spaces is very ambivalent. New possibilities for democratic organization may be offered here. In its new form, the German foundation is an effective lever of tax advantages of the rich and super-rich... The goal is building a third sector between the state and the economy. Supplementing the strategic policy of “empty public treasuries,” this way to the presumed strengthening of “civil society” promotes the current inequality between poor and rich and exclusion of a large part of the population from political involvement. Since there is historically little reason to transfigure the social structures that defined Germany in the past, the genesis of this third sector may produce new possibilities for action. Why shouldn't new actors be involved?

What can people do who work in the pedagogical area? At least three things: firstly, consider more carefully with whom one cooperates. Foundations and third parties are not identical. All “civil society” is not the same. Secondly, they should ask whether the general pedagogical idea that enlightened conduct should have its own structure and logic over against the economic can really be harmlessly thrown overboard. Thirdly, more network analyses of new post-national influencing structures should be pursued and publicized as long as we still have a public.

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[Clemens Knobloch began the series “On the Human Right to be a Brand Name” (Freitag 27/28) that focused on privatization tendencies in the education sector. In Part 2, Ingrid Lohmann explains how the Bertelsmann foundation reorganizes schools according to market criteria.]