International Student Mobility in Crises: Globalization and Foucault’s Rhetoric Question

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Date received: 13 April 2020; accepted: 14 April 2020

Introduction
During the current difficult time of the worldwide fight against the pandemic, international organizations, governments, and civil society have been heatedly debating the strategies and measures that should be taken by the affected countries. Given the situation that China could call upon the whole nation to battle against the COVID-19 and currently put the epidemic under control, while countries in other continents are at the stage of coronavirus outbreak and struggling with death, depression, and shortage of medical supplies, the battle of narratives also breaks out, reflected by mass communication and varied media. However, mass media and social media not only report and depict the outbreak in China and now in other places but may also be utilized by politicians to stigmatize other countries, to provoke controversies, and to criticize human rights and political systems in other countries. The recent Nature Editorial also responds to such chaos and appeals the public to stop the coronavirus stigma (“Stop the Coronavirus Stigma Now”, 2020). The article points out “the pandemic is fueling deplorable racism and discrimination, especially against Asian people” (2020, p. 165) and makes “people of Asian descent around the world subjected to racist attacks” (2020, p. 165). In the light of the Western hostility, racism, and discrimination toward...
China and Chinese people as well as personal security problems abroad, some scholars and people from the civil society in China have started to question a large scale of international student mobility (ISM). While my preliminary thoughts on this matter come from my previous research on globalization and ISM as well as my personal experience and observation as a former international student and now a researcher in the area of the sociology of education, and international education and development.

**Globalization and Foucault’s rhetoric question**

I would argue that the amplified positive mirroring of globalization has stimulated global flows and ISM in the past two decades. Globalization as a concept was actually not familiar to the non-academic world until 1990 (Jones, 2006). To think rhetorically, we may find economists promote globalization and deem it as “the process whereby countries become more integrated via movements of goods, capital, labor, and ideas. International trade and capital mobility are the main channels through which globalization is occurring” (Bloom, 2004, p. 59). Historians have situated globalization within world history and regarded it as a set of historical processes. For example, Robertson (1992) depicts five phases of globalization, traced back to the early 15th century. He argues the fifth phase of globalization from the late-1960s to the early-1990s is distinguished from the previous ones because of the emergence of new phenomena such as, the development of global information and communications technology (ICT), which speed up the circulation of goods, capital, services, ideas and people, and raise global consciousness and global environmental concerns. Scholars in political science like Held et al. (1999) understand globalization as “a process (or set of processes) which embodies a transformation in the spatial organization of social relations and transactions—assessed in terms of their extensity, intensity, velocity and impact—generating transcontinental or interregional flows and networks of activity, interaction, and the exercise of power” (p. 6). In sum, Jones (2006) considers a number of scholars argue or agree that globalization “...can be usefully conceived as a process or a set of processes that embody a transformation of social relations and transactions which generate transcontinental or interregional flows and networks of activity, interaction and power” (p. 112–113). As Fuchs (2009) notices, “these definitions not only have in common that they stress increasing quantity, scale, and speed of social interactions, but also that they characterize globalization as a general phenomenon” (p. 2). These general definitions might lead us to concentrate on the positive sides of globalization while overlooking the negative aftermaths of contemporary globalization processes (Fuchs, 2009).

Michel Foucault’s classic rhetoric question of “what does it matter who is speaking?” has never been outdated as it always stimulates us to think rhetorically before we accept and internalize disseminated knowledge and information from elsewhere. However, this rhetorical thinking has been challenged by the overwhelming flows of information, images, and knowledge spread
through varied media in our daily life. In particular, “the mass media’s increasing ubiquity and ever divergent forms leave little question as to their pervasiveness” (Muzzatti, 2007, Abstract). Mass media has become an “agent of socialization,” and significantly influenced public opinion and our worldview, while “[its] narratives shape the way we see ourselves and the world around us” (Muzzatti, 2007, Abstract). It has also been enhancing globalization in that it “[facilitates] cultural exchange and multiple flows of information and images between countries through international news broadcasts, television programming, new technologies, film, and music” (Matos, 2012, para. 1). In the past two decades, we had just overemphasized the homogeneity of globalization and made globalization optimism prevail. We had been proud of our “global village” and global vision. We had been enjoying a deterritorialization of social life and free mobility worldwide as long as we get a visa. Indeed, imagination has been transformed via media and those narratives of possible lives, fantasies might stimulate people’s desire for acquisition and movement (Appadurai, 1996). As such, we have also witnessed a rapidly increasing magnitude of ISM worldwide.

**Discussion: “Neoliberal globalization” and student mobility in crises**

I personally use the term neoliberal globalization in that I critique “neoliberalism as an ideology, political philosophy, economic doctrine and policy model has been embraced by many Western countries and multilateral institutions and embedded in contemporary globalization” (Zheng & Kapoor, 2020, Neoliberal globalization and opening-up section, para. 1) and argue ISM across national borders has been significantly influenced by neoliberal globalization and neoliberalism-doctrined supranational organizations like the World Trade Organization and the World Bank, which promote the removal of barriers and the liberalization of international trade. “More than effects of globalization, ‘flows’ are carriers of global effects and creators of global effects that keep on circulating in continuous feedback loops . . .” (Marginson & Sawir, 2005, p. 281). Accordingly, ISM can be regarded as a flow because it bears the specific social and educational meaning and has caused some global effects as an increasing number of international students cross borders for education (Zheng, 2010). A few models like “central-peripheral” and “push-pull” have been proposed to explore ISM. However, the conceptualization and theorizing of these models are based on a sound operated world and national system. In case of national border shutdowns, travel restrictions, suspension of routine visa services during the pandemic period, and thereafter, what might happen to ISM? “How might we manage these changes when yesterday is no longer a good predictor of tomorrow,” given the “inherent slowness of education” (Brehm, 2020, para. 5)?

ISM certainly will be affected by global public crisis, global political economy, national security, and international relations. This has been supported by my previous research between 2008 and 2010 on international student flows from China to Canada for graduate studies. Some of my research participants revealed that they decided to pursue further studies in Canada considering
the aftermath of 9/11. Provided that the U.S. government tightened up visa-screening procedures and refused visa application for graduate studies in some sensitive majors, some of my research participants thought Canada would be a much more friendly and safer country where they can also obtain high-quality graduate education. In terms of China, since the government started to expand the enrolment of foreign students in 2003, China has been playing a part in higher education export service. “The current coronavirus (COVID-19) threat may cast a shadow over booming international education in China and affect China’s ability to attract more international students” (Tian & Liu, 2020, Conclusion, para. 1). Nevertheless, it just offers us time and opportunity to rhetorically reflect upon our rationales and strategies for facilitating ISM. Why do we facilitate ISM? How do we facilitate ISM if it is a must or a trend? Slightly different from inbound ISM in the West, China’s case is not merely driven by neoliberal ideology or economic rationales for profits, but pushed forward by political and academic rationales of the state (Pan, 2013). As such, inbound ISM will resume after the end of the pandemic and more foreign students might pursue academic studies in China if China is a safe and friendly country, if the Chinese government adheres to international student enrolment expansion policy, and if China could offer high-quality higher education. But, China’s outbound ISM might be affected in that it is confined to many uncertain factors, such as the capacity of foreign higher education institutions, available financial support for Chinese students from the Chinese government, students’ family, or foreign higher education institutions, and visa requirement of foreign countries. Tian and Liu (2020) underestimate the situation, given that the COVID-19 prevails later in all continents. Not only China but some OECD countries like the U.K. and Australia which deem education as a knowledge-intensive export industry, “exporting educational services directly to foreign countries and by attracting foreign students, scholars . . .” (Barrow et al., 2003, p. 13) might be affected in a certain period of time. But their consideration that both countries and universities should “raise awareness of the need for risk management and crisis response strategies to ensure sustainability” (Tian & Liu, 2020, Conclusion, para. 1) deserves our rethinking the rationale and pattern of ISM.

**Conclusion and anticipation**

ISM will continue. However, the pandemic has seriously challenged neoliberal globalization and neoliberal logic of “free market, free trade, and free mobility,” thereby leading us to critically revisit the rhetoric of globalization and ISM, shifting our focus from prismatic global mediascapes composed of flows of information, images, and knowledge to the reality of ISM in crises, and planning the future. While during the pandemic and post-pandemic period, we can definitely try a non-face-to-face distance delivery model of education, given the speed and global reach of the internet together with varied novel forms of ICT. China and other affected countries have been working on online course offerings during the current pandemic, although it has challenged
traditional pedagogical model and been a bit stressful for teachers to prepare and put everything online. At the recent video conference on international platform and course construction for online teaching in higher education, Yan Wu, head of the MOE Department of Higher Education, reveals that China is planning to share online teaching experiences and courses via two international teaching platforms namely “icourses” and “xuetangzaixian” with university students worldwide to support higher education in such a crisis time (Wang, 2020). In addition, scholars like de Wit and Altbach (2020) early this year propose short-term mobility reduction and advocate “collaborative online international learning or virtual exchange” (Increasing internationalization at home, para. 1) as alternatives to short-term academic mobility. This strategy could save cost, protect environment, benefit more students, and contribute to education as a global common good. For example, the Comparative and International Education Society finally adopted online format this year, instead of inviting scholars and students to travel all the way to Miami. Further, universities might also attempt to offer distance or online accredited degree programs to international students, while physical ISM for education abroad will still persist. This in particular happens to those who can afford, who want to pursue a long-term real and interactive living and study experience abroad, and who want to work in or immigrate to a foreign country after they complete their studies abroad.

**Author’s note**

The coronavirus crisis, cross-border student mobility, and choices for Chinese students. This forum was sponsored by China Postdoctoral Science Foundation [Grant No. 2018M640358].

**Declaration of conflicting interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

**Funding**

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The completion of this paper was funded by National Education Sciences Planning Project for “13th Five-Year Plan” (Grant No. BIA180196).

**Note**

1. For example, David Held, Anthony McGrew, Anthony Giddens, David Harvey, and Manuel Castells.

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