

Public-Private Debates in Education: Whither Private Without a Public?*

Irfan Muzaffar[^]
and Ajay Sharma[†]

Abstract

Pakistan's educational landscape has been changing fast in the last two decades or so. A prominent feature of this change is growth in the private schools, which now enrol over 30% of all school going children in Pakistan. Several comparative studies suggest that private schools are relatively more efficient compared with the public schools in as much as they produce more learning with less money. These developments and the associated policy suggestions have given rise to debates about the role of public and private sectors in financing and provision of education. In this paper, we argue that: the private/public pair does not carry the same meaning across different historical contexts. In the west there is a longstanding tug of war between the terms in this pair. The private is not shaped by a similar counter-concept of public in Pakistan as it is in the Western countries. The proponents and detractors of private [or public] education in Pakistan are, therefore, making a category mistake in their reference to schools as private or public; and the evidence about the apparent success of 'private' sector in countries like India and Pakistan is deployed to support privatization in both the east and the west. Following this line of thinking, we argue for looking beyond the public/private dichotomy and refocusing debates on the meaning and purposes of education and on harnessing all the resources of achieving them.

Keywords: Education, Public Education, Privatization of Education, Education Reforms, Education in Pakistan

* Authors are grateful to Campaign for Quality Education (CQE) Pakistan for its support in the development of this paper.

[^] Irfan Muzaffar is an independent education researcher. His research interests include educational policy analysis, teacher education, and political analysis of education reforms.

[†] Ajay Sharma is an assistant professor in the department of elementary and social studies education, at the University of Georgia, Athens, US.

Introduction

Quality education for all children in Pakistan is an increasingly important goal yet it remains an elusive target. Notwithstanding the government's endorsement of the ideal of *Education for All* (EFA) in 1990, the reiteration of this commitment by signing up to achieve *Millennium Development Goals* (MDGs) in 2001, and the recent declaration of education from age 5 to 16 as a fundamental and inalienable human right in 2010, many observers remain doubtful of the capacity of the state to deliver on these commitments (United Nations 2009). Despite two decades of efforts involving the multilateral and bilateral aid agencies, government, civil society organizations and the for-profit private sector, Pakistan is nowhere close to creating an equitable education system (Burki 2005).

With the state's school system failing, the last two decades have witnessed a phenomenal growth in what are referred to as non-state or private schools: this sector grew by an estimated 68% just between 2000 and 2005. At present, this sector enrolls 33% of all school-going children and employs 44% of all teachers in Pakistan (I-SAPS 2010). While the growth in the non-state provision of educational services is recorded for all sorts of non-state educational institutions, it is the so-called Low Fees Private Schools (LFPS) that are increasingly seen as possible alternative to the failing state-run schools as the means of achieving universal education coverage. This perception is strengthened by a series of comparative studies comparing the LFPS and public schools serving comparable student populations (Andrabi and Das 2008; Andrabi, Das and Khwaja 2011; Andrabi, Das, Khwaja, Vishwanat and Zajonc 2007). These studies report that non-state schools leave the state-run schools far behind when it comes to demonstrating learning gains for comparable student populations. Based on these claims, they also suggest that the state should facilitate the setting up of 'private' schools as a central plank of education policy. Similar claims and policy recommendations have also emerged from many other developing countries, including India (Tooley and Dixon 2003; Tooley, Dixon and Tyne 2003), several countries in Africa (Tooley, Dixon and Amuah 2007; Tooley, Dixon and Olaniyan 2005), and in Latin America (Naradowski and Andrada 2001). 'Private is good' is now being repeated as a response to diverse education problems. In a nutshell, the perception reproduced and strengthened in this discourse is that there exists a private school market in the developing countries that is more

efficient at provision of universal education of an acceptable quality.

The growth of private sector in education has its supporters as well as detractors. While the supporters ground their arguments in comparative studies of students' learning gains in the non-state and state-run schools, its detractors ground their arguments in the social justice discourses and the essential role of the state to ensure equitable distribution of quality education to all children. The supporters of privatization view education as predominantly a private good, and the detractors as a public good. We do not pretend to be neutral either. We sympathize with the detractors of privatization and worry about exacerbation of inequities in a society that, as the things stand now, is already highly inequitable.

The critique of privatization that we offer in this paper, however, is not at all directed against private schools *per se*, and is not aimed at belittling their role in Pakistani school education. Rather, this paper investigates the terms of this dichotomous debate to argue that the *public* and *private* do not mean the same thing across different societies. The assumption to the contrary, however, is naturalized in the arguments on both sides of the divide, which tacitly assume that these terms have a universal meaning. The critical task of this paper, then, is to *make this familiar assumption look strange*.

As concepts 'private' and 'public' have been part of the policy and societal discourses for quite some time now. The historians of concepts and ideas trace their creation and evolution in specific historical contexts (Koselleck and Tribe 1985). Our argument makes use of the history of the concept of public/private dichotomy in the West. It highlights the specificity of this dichotomy in the Western liberal democracies. Ignoring this specificity and assuming a universal meaning to the term leads to a category mistake with potentially disastrous consequences for education policies in countries like Pakistan.

In what follows, we first briefly summarize the scholarship on the history of concepts. We then use it to critically examine the private-public debate in the West and in the context of Pakistan. We should also note that while this latter analysis will be anchored in the specific context of Pakistan, the insights it helps to develop are hopefully applicable to other contexts as well. Large-scale privatization of education is not confined to Pakistan but taking place in most of the developing world. We

will end this paper by considering the implications of this analysis for policy and for further research.

The Life of Concepts

Reinhart Koselleck and Tribe (1985) describe concepts as more than words. As they put it: Each concept is associated with a word, but not every word is a social and political concept. Social and political concepts possess a substantial claim to generality and always have many meanings.

The concept is connected to a word, but is at the same time more than a word: a word becomes a concept only when the entirety of meaning and experience within a socio-political context within which and for which a word is used can be condensed into one word. Hence, a concept can possess clarity, but must be ambiguous (Koselleck and Tribe 1985:84).

The meanings of the concepts, under this view, persist as well as change both diachronically and synchronously. Consider the example of the concept of democracy. The ancient Athenian concept of democracy was modernized in the eighteenth century to conform to the organization forms of the modern. The liberal ideas of the rule of law and the terms such as equality modified it and created the complex of liberal democracy. Finally, as Koselleck and Tribe put it:

"democracy" became a general concept replacing "republic" (*politeia*), that consigned to illegality all other constitutional types as forms of rule. This global universality, usable for a variety of distinct political tendencies, made it necessary to refurbish the concept by adding qualifying expressions. It was only in this manner that it could retain any functional effectiveness: Christian, social, and people's democracies and so forth. (Koselleck and Tribe 1985:84)¹

These transformations in the concepts of democracy did not just come about spontaneously. The concepts evolve when challenged by their counter-concepts. Chantal Mouffe suggests this coupling of concept and counter-concepts in the very idea of liberal democracy:

¹Of course, there is also the Islamic Democracy, which Koselleck and Tribe forgot to mention. Needless to say, the term democracy means different things when prefixed with different qualifiers.

liberal democracy results from the articulation of two logics which are incompatible in the last instance and there is no way in which they could be perfectly reconciled...there is a constitutive tension between their corresponding 'grammars,' a tension that cannot be overcome but negotiated in different ways. (Mouffe 2000:84)

Mouffe is referring here to the odd couple of liberty and equality. This constitutive tension between liberty and equality, for instance, is obviously not expected to exist in, say, a "social democracy," or an "Islamic democracy." This is because in the latter cases, democracy is not living next to liberalism. The words, like people, are also known by the neighborhood they inhabit. Although the same word, democracy becomes a different concept when it moves from one discursive neighborhood to the other.

Like liberal democracy, the pair public-private must also be subjected to a similar analysis to develop insights about its behavior in different societal contexts. Indeed, as we will explain in more detail ahead, the pair is deeply connected with the two poles of liberal democracy-*Liberal with private and democracy with public*. Let us focus on one term of the pair in order to develop this story. The concept of 'private,' is shaped by a set of opposing concepts in the Western liberal democratic contexts. As we will explain ahead, concept of 'private' needs the counter-concept of 'public,' against which it asserts its existence. The resistance to the private by the public also shapes the specific form assumed by the former. It is not shaped by similar oppositions in the context of Pakistan, or in similar other contexts.

The Private-Public Pair in the West

The conceptual debates that we are concerned with here are between the persistent classical liberal (and now neoliberal) and the social justice oriented discourses in the West and their implications for education. The former prioritizes private, individual, liberty, and market. The latter prioritizes public, state, collective, equality, and social justice. Both have existed in an uneasy relationship within the structure of the Western modern liberal democratic state. In fact, as the political theorist Chantal Mouffe argues, these competing ideas flowed into each other, checking and balancing one another and thus forming the complex of *liberalism* and democracy, the so-called modern *liberal democracy* (Mouffe

2000). What are the implications of these discourses for education?

The logic of the liberal and neoliberal discourses requires education to be similar to other businesses. It assumes that free competition in the education marketplace will help everyone by providing better and efficient education services through innovation, competition and by bringing the prices down. Education policies, in this view, should be market-friendly and support, not compete, with the marketplace. The logic of the social justice oriented discourses has traditionally required the involvement and stake of state to ensure the production of politically competent and economically productive citizenry². As such, the social justice perspective defends the role of the state in ensuring the delivery of education to all as a public good.

Each of these discourses has its champions since the 17th century. If Hobbes advocated passionately for an authoritarian state [or big government] to *deliver justice and protect rights*, Locke provided an equally compelling case for the limited government to protect individual liberties. The standard bearers of the classical liberal impulse for free market and unfettered corporate freedom—Adam Smith³, Robert Lowe, Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman, to name a few—have been met on this ideological battlefield with their counterparts, J.S. Mill, Maynard Keynes and Amartya Sen among others. Notice that this strand of thought was asserting itself against the possibility of a totalitarian and large state trespassing on what was deeply valued for the health of the society, liberty in this case.

Thus, this discursive tension between market and state kept surfacing in debates about provision of education since at least the mid-19th century. The terms such as choice became naturally allies of liberty, and private provision of education became the mode through which they

² The lectures on education by Horace Mann, an American education reformer, are by far one of the clearest expositions of the need for the state to intervene and establish common schools. As Mann puts it, "The whole land must be watered with the streams of knowledge. It is not enough to have, here and there, a beautiful fountain playing in palace-gardens; but let it come like the abundant fatness of clouds upon the thirsting earth" (Mann 1855:58).

³ The interpretations of Adam Smith diverge. On the one hand he is credited for supplying the philosophical foundation for laissez faire capitalism. On the other hand Amartya Sen notes: "Adam Smith wasn't the free-market fundamentalist he is thought to have been" (Amartya Sen 2010).

could be guaranteed. Then, as now, the arguments for privatization sought legitimacy in the principle of individual freedom to choose and the ability of the free market to provide this choice.

The collective good under this concept was an aggregate outcome of individuals pursuing their own self-interests. As Hayek put it: "Through the pursuit of selfish aims the individual will usually lead himself to save the general interest, the collective actions of organised groups are almost invariably contrary to the general interest" (Hayek 1976:138).

Furthermore, the moral priorities in the patterns of distribution were not allowed by the market mechanisms. They did not produce equality; indeed equality would be unhelpful in market terms. Markets produced, however, a 'natural' economic order in which it was assumed that the poorest, the losers in the market, would benefit from the progress of society as a whole. Hence the concept of the so-called 'trickle down' effect that involves driving down of the prices through competition so that the poor can also ultimately afford that which is afforded by only rich in the beginning.

However, in most countries where market and state fought pitched battles for the control of education, the arguments for the states to finance and administer mass education carried the day.

Without going into the details of how it came about, it suffices for the argument in this paper to merely note that state has historically asserted its stake in education by taking over its financing and management—consider, for example, the vast [and vastly criticized] public school systems in the United States, Britain, and Western European countries.

The purposes of education, however, were shaped by this tug of war within this concept and counter-concept complex of *public* and *private*. The collective stakes in education suggested *education as a public good* and the individual social mobility stakes suggested education as a 'private good.' Education, in liberal democracies, came to be defined as an arena that at once adapted to social inequalities characteristic of a liberal economy as well as promoted democratic equality (Labaree 1997). Below we quote at length from him:

The terms of this choice arise from a fundamental source of strain

Public-Private Debates in Education: Whither Private Without a Public?

at the core of any liberal democratic society, the tension between democratic politics (public rights) and capitalist markets (private rights), between majority control and individual liberty, between political equality and social inequality. In the American settings, the poles of this debate were defined during the country's formative years by the political idealism of Thomas Jefferson and economic realism of Alexander Hamilton. The essential problem posed by that tension is this: Unfettered economic freedom leads to a highly unequal distribution of wealth and power, which in turn undercuts the possibility for democratic control; but at the same time, restricting such economic freedom in the name of equality infringes on individual liberty, without which democracy can turn into dictatorship of majority. Each generation of American reformers has tried to figure out a way to preserve the Jeffersonian ideal of political equality in the face of Hamiltonian reality of economic inequality...Political equality and social inequality do not mix easily, and institutions that arise from efforts to pursue both of these goals reflect this continuing tension. (Labaree 1997:41)

So, in practice, the process of education remained in a state of balance between the two competing purposes exemplifying the generative tension between markets and democracy. While this has kept public education provision and financing of education in the west largely outside of the sphere of the market, such state intervention is deemed by some economists as essential for the health of the market economy itself. As Sen puts it:

the market economy has depended for its own working not only on maximizing profits but also on many other activities, such as maintaining public security and supplying public services-some of which have taken people well beyond an economy driven only by profit. The creditable performance of the so-called capitalist system, when things moved forward, drew on a combination of institutions-publicly funded education, medical care, and mass transportation are just a few of many-that went much beyond relying only on a profit-maximizing market economy and on personal entitlements confined to private ownership. (Sen 2009)

Ever since the early consolidation of public education as an

integral part of the modern democratic societies, strong networks of professional educators and pro-public education politicians have emerged as champions of public education. As such, then, the advocates of market-driven solutions for education in the liberal democracies have to face strong resistance by individuals and groups, which believe in the imperative for public education. Consider, for example, the idea of vouchers as stated by the Nobel laureate economist Milton Friedman. Recognizing that it would be politically impossible to roll up the public education system in the United States, Friedman is forced to promote vouchers as a mid-way compromise to make public schools more market-driven. Making his case for vouchers in *The New York Times*, Milton Friedman spoke of them as a political compromise. While a fully privatized school system was ideal, it was "outside the range of political feasibility." He spoke of the vouchers as "a more modest reform-one that would retain compulsory schooling, government financing and government operation, while preparing the way for the gradual replacement of public schools by private schools" (Friedman 1973). This example illustrates the ways in which the concept of *private* has changed over time in the face of the shaping influence of the entrenched discourse of *public*.

Over the past decade or so, however, the balance in this public-private complex has been apparently tilting in favor of the *private*, and markets have come to dominate areas of society where their belonging was hitherto much contested and restricted (Ball 2007; Soros 1998). Many scholars, such as Harvey (2005) and Lerner (2000), have recognized the growing global hegemony of neo-liberalism in policy and societal discourses as the prime engine of this transformation. There appears to be a regular pattern of declaring and reinforcing a sense of educational crisis for which public schools are routinely blamed. This trend is not restricted to education, but to all services traditionally within the realm of public provision, including disaster relief and security. Natural disasters such as hurricanes, tsunamis and earthquakes are being turned into opportunities of business-driven recovery and reform (Klein 2007). One example is the enormous growth of charter schools in the wake of Hurricane Katrina in the New Orleans (Saltman 2007). In education, the bipartisan NCLB law has been described by historian Diane Ravitch as a timetable for dismantling of the public schools in the United States. In England, the decision to turn most public schools into academies run by private

operators, one of the firsts by the newly installed Conservative-Liberal Democrats coalition government, is fiercely protested by groups such as the anti-academics alliance (Hatcher 2011).

This recent push for liberalization of education services has generated what the British sociologist Stephen Ball calls the shift from 'government to governance,' which essentially preserved the concept of public interest through stronger regulatory regimes. Under this shift, the role of state in ensuring social justice and equity remains intact, and is reinforced through contracting mechanisms. Attempts are made to preserve the stakes of the state in delivery of *education as a public good* through appropriately worded contracts and through regulation. This shift is driven by the argument that private sector is more efficient and can deliver public services with less money. Faced with the financial crisis the governments are increasingly buying into this argument. Charter schools in the US and academies in the UK are amongst some of the notable effects of this shift.

We conclude the discussion in this section by emphasizing that in liberal democracies, the concept of *private* has been enabled and resisted by an equally potent counter-concept of the *public*. That is to say, the opposition from the conceptual tribe of *public, state, public good, social justice* and so on has checked and kept in balance the strides made by the discursive assembly of *private, market, private good, and choice*. This, as we argue in the next section, is not the case in societies where the liberal discourse is not countered similarly by an equally potent thrust to protect public interests. The specific situation in which the concept of market raises its spectre in many developing countries is not similar to societies where it emerged as already under a check. Unfortunately, the absence of the mechanisms to protect public interests in the face of an expanding marketization of education is never taken into full consideration by both the supporters and detractors of privatization in the developing countries.

The Private-Public Pair in Pakistan

We began this paper by recounting the imperative for Pakistan to meet the millennium development goals of universal quality education and the concerns about the failure to do so through the existing system of public schools. We, then, mentioned the meteoric rise in the number of private schools, particularly the LFPS, and the case presented by several

scholars, primarily economists of education, regarding the LFPS as a possible alternative to the public schools as means to achieve universal education. We then described the ways in which the concept of private has been balanced by a robust counter concept of public in Western traditions. The historically specific conceptual tensions between liberal and social justice oriented discourses within the liberal democracies imposed checks on both unfettered privatization as well as absolute equality in delivery of education. We also argued that the current shifts toward marketization, wherever they are taking place in the Western world, are also within a conceptual complex that keeps seeking mechanisms, whether direct financing or regulation, to protect the collective or public interests. Therefore, the shifts from public to various forms of private financing and provision of education, even where they are taking place, within a conceptual framework that preserves the stake of state through the so-called shift from "government to governance."

In this section we argue that the growth of private sector in education in many developing countries⁴ is not taking place under the similar conceptual framework as in the West. Our reference here is primarily to the absence of a robust conceptual framework associated with social justice discourses that could potentially provide a check on neoliberal discourses. That is to say, the concept of 'private' is not accompanied by a robust counter-concept of 'public.' This being the case, the privatization of education is likely to be shaped by the logic of unfettered neoliberalism (Mukhtar 2009). This in turn can potentially increase the risks to the well-being of society as a whole. Let me now consider the situation in Pakistan as an exemplar for this discussion.

The current public education system in Pakistan can be traced back to the mid-19th century. The then British colonial administration had begun an ambitious plan of expanding state controlled education. This effort, however, failed and by the late 19th century the colonial administration of education had effectively receded to the urban centres and served mostly the children of the elite (Allender 2006). The advocates of this retreat of public education included Lord Thomas Babbington Macaulay, who had famously written that it was impossible, "within our limited resources, to attempt to educate the body of people."(Macaulay

⁴ While we use the example of Pakistan, we believe that this discussion might find resonance in countries with similar circumstances.

1946) Thus, the colonial state found it expedient to retreat to urban centres and refocus its efforts to the development of a smaller number of educated natives.

This failure has never been effectively reversed after independence in terms of both access and quality of education. Even as the state has expanded the public education system due to multiple pressures, both internal and external, the quality of the schools that do not service the children of elite has remained abysmally low. Furthermore, with approximately 7.3 million children still remain out of schools the system is clearly failing in terms of both access and quality (UIS 2011).

The successive governments in Pakistan have usually explained this in terms of the paucity of resources. This paucity of resources is also adduced as a justification for inviting the private sector to shoulder the burden imposed by the requirement to educate everyone. Notice, here, that the governments did not argue for privatization to privilege *choice* and *individual liberty*. It wasn't a case of "big government" trying to give away what it already held to promote liberal values. Rather, these were governments arguing that they did not have the resources to achieve their policy objectives. Every government in Pakistan has followed, in varying degrees, a similar outlook towards private education with the exception of the first government of the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) from 1971-77, which followed the policy of nationalization of private schools. During its reign in the 1970s, PPP government had nationalized a little over 2000 schools. After the PPP government was sacked in a coup by the then Chief of the Army Staff General Zia-ul-Haq reversed the 1970s policy and announced new educational policy in 1979. The 1979 National Education Policy blamed the education policy of the PPP government for overburdening the national exchequer by a recurring annual bill of over PKR 150 million (Ministry of Education 1979). The 1979 policy minced no words about the inability of the state to meet the policy objectives:

Private sector plays an important role in the development of education in a country. It helps both in qualitative improvement and quantitative expansion. Private sector bears a good deal of burden of expenditure on this important social cause even in the most advanced countries. In a country like Pakistan, where the population growth rate is 3% annually and only about 50% of the existing primary group children are in schools, support of

private sector is most needed to share the huge burden. Government alone cannot build and run all the schools required for this purpose. Recognizing the government alone cannot achieve the policy objectives; it is imperative to seek volitional involvement of private sector in the expansion of education. (Ministry of Education 1979:23)

Consider another example of private sector friendly policies, the national education policy of 1992. The former lamented the fact that public-private ratio of educational institutions was still at 70:30. As the policy documents puts it:

Participation of the private sector in educational development in Pakistan has a long and chequered history. After 1947 and till 1971, the Private Sector contributions expanded considerably through a variety of non-governmental organizations. In 1991, the Public to Private sector ratio has been estimated at 70:30. Had this trend continued, this ratio could easily touch 50:50 mark. (Ministry of Education 1992:55)

The point we wish to make here is that in its transition from the colonial system, the Pakistani state also inherited the colonial state's rationale that governing did not require educating the "body of the people" (Macaulay 1946). While it adopted the rhetoric of the nation-state that required educating all citizens⁵, in practice the new state continued to pursue the practice of the colonial state of finding it expedient to ensure quality education for only for a few. This is not to say that access to education did not expand after independence in 1947. However, the expansion of public education was not suffused with a political will that would dispose it against the failure—the evidence for this is a virtual absence of an outrage by the Pakistani public or elite against this failure. The concept of 'Public' was never *effectively* present to counter the advance of neoliberal policies if and when it was to be. As a result, the private school system in Pakistan did not grow as means to advance choice and liberty against a transgressing state. Its growth was akin to wild growth of weeds in an untended garden (Ravitch 2010a:227). As evident from the discussions of the national education policies above, the state's encouragement of private sector in Pakistan precedes the apparent

⁵ See Ministry of Interior (1947)

pressures from the international financial institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, who are usually held responsible for promoting privatization of social services through pressures on the developing economies to cut the expense on social sector programs through liberalization (see Bonal 2002:9). Apart from the seven-year long interlude during the PPP reign from 1973 to 1979, the education policies in Pakistan have always been encouraged non state actors to participate in education provision.

There can be many explanations for a state's predisposition toward and tolerance of education failure. The explanation that we wish to offer for discussion is in terms of an absence of strong concept of 'public.' The Pakistani postcolonial context does not present the same kind of discursive field between the market and the state, which was a historically specific characteristic of the systems we discussed in the last section. What is referred to as 'Private,' therefore, finds itself in a different discursive neighbourhood in Pakistan, largely unchecked and unfettered, that is, by a counter impulse.

The weakness of 'public' is also evident in the absence of a well-articulated demand for access to quality public education. The concerned educators in Pakistan have often found it paradoxical that an apparently huge demand for education expressed by individuals during household surveys remains unarticulated in the political sphere. This was stated succinctly in a recent newspaper article in following terms:

We know that the demand for education, revealed in surveys as well as revealed through the willingness of parents to pay for education, is quite strong in Pakistan. And it does not matter where in Pakistan you do these surveys. The demand for education comes out to be fairly strong across all the usual divides that we talk of: income, gender, rural-urban and geography. We also know that the general perception of the quality of education being imparted at public schools is poor and most parents are aware of that. Yet, the politicians said that they do not have parents coming to them and breaking down their doors demanding better quality education through the public sector. (Bari 2011)

Arguably, the demand does not have a vehicle in the public discourse. This also explains a high degree of national tolerance of the

educational failure.

This is not to suggest that the conceptual matrix is completely devoid of a countering impulse to the privatization. However, the counter-concept in this case is, arguably, expressed through a category of institutions that are erroneously counted as private due to a definition of private that embraces all non-state entities: the religious and philanthropic foundations that administer schools on not-for-profit basis are arguably antithetical to the private for-profit schools and should be seen as attempting to fill the gap left by the state. The actual share of this sub-sector is not accurately known. The concept-counter-concept complex of private and its opposite-may need to be redefined for the Pakistani context in ways that recognize the absence [or half hearted presence] of state in education. Using the conceptual category to map and count the all non-state schools as private might be an error generally labelled as a "category error."⁶

This category error pervades the scholarship on private schools in the developing contexts. The West dominates other societies in the production and dissemination of knowledge and conceptual frameworks about social issues, including that of education. This, unfortunately, has engendered an influential body of scholarship that rests upon unproblematic and simplistic applications of concepts and frameworks that originated in and/or have relevance in the social-historical contexts of western nations to developing societies. As a result, the quality and rigor of this scholarship is much compromised by "category mistake" we described above. However, because much of this scholarship emanates from the knowledge production centres of the West, it nevertheless manages to exert overbearing influence on policy discourses on education and other social issues in developing societies, including Pakistan.

The unproblematic application of the socio-historically situated concept-counter-concept complex of public and private is best understood when accompanied with an example of this kind of scholarship, which we present in the next section.

⁶ The term "category error" was introduced by Gilbert Ryle in his book *The Concept of Mind* (2002).

Tooley's *The Beautiful Tree*: Not so Beautiful yet Influential

There is burgeoning scholarship that indiscriminately and unproblematically uses public and private as categories of analysis in comparative education research. The findings from this body of research are used as a sword with two edges. On the one hand, this research imposes pushes for more (neo)liberalisation and privatization in the developing countries and on the other hand, some scholars use their findings of relative superiority of the non-state schools in the 'East' to fuel their assault on the public schools in the "West". In this section we critique an influential exemplar of such research: *The Beautiful Tree* by James Tooley (2009). The work of Tooley exemplifies a currently influential strand in policy analysis which offers private schools as a solution to the public policy problem of universalizing education in the developing countries, their existence is simultaneously described and validated by an appeal to the laissez-faire economic philosophy.

The Beautiful Tree is an argument about how small scale LFPS are transforming the education landscape for the world's poorest. James Tooley begins his story by his sudden discovery of LFPS in the 'backstreets' of Hyderabad in India. After this, he leads the reader of *the Beautiful Tree* into the sprawling world of the LFPS schools growing like mushrooms in the peri-urban and rural areas of India, China, Nigeria, Kenya and Ghana. Describing the results of this journey, he says, "Something remarkable is happening in the developing countries today that turns accepted wisdom on its head." The 'accepted wisdom,' a reference to the financing and delivery of education by state systems, is challenged by accounts of poor parents choosing to send their children to LFPS run by the so-called 'entrepreneurs.' These unregulated, unofficial, unregistered and unaided LFPS make up what he refers to as a 'dynamic school market' where competition between the schools would lead to, as it must in the case of any other business, both better quality and affordability by driving the prices down and the quality up. LFPS, in this narrative, come across as isomorphic with any other business.

These LFPS, in Tooley's narrative, are also isomorphic with an indigenous system of schooling, which preceded and was displaced by the public system of education put in place by the state. From India to

England, Tooley argues, there was once a thriving system of private schools, which was displaced by the state intervention. This thriving system of private schools existed everywhere on the globe regardless of the differences in history and geography. Giving the example of England and Wales, he says: "When the government made its debut in education in 1833 mainly in the role of subsidizer it was as if it jumped into the saddle of the horse that was already galloping" (Tooley 2009:237). Likewise in India, Tooley argues that the British crowded out the existing private schools with the state-run public schools. The message of the book, to put it rather briefly, is this: One, there are LFPS in the developing countries that are similar to the indigenous schools that existed before the colonial state intervened. Two, the LFPS work better than the public schools, yet the development practitioners deliberately ignore evidence to this effect. Three, unlike the Western countries, there is a *genuine market* of LFPS in the poor countries. As he puts it: "In some of the poorest areas of the world, private education makes up the vast majority of school enrolment. In the West, however, private education is only a small fraction of total enrolment, around 7 per cent in the United Kingdom, for instance" (Tooley 2009:257). Four, public education is a historical error, an aberration. As he puts it: "Public schooling seems to many to be a permanent, timeless feature of human civilization. But it's a temporary aberration; the revolution that is taking place in developing countries is seeing to that" (Tooley 2009: 273).

This description of a private *genuine market* in the developing countries is quite sanguine in as much as it completely ignores the historical concept-counter-concept complex within which the idea of market was *shaped* and kept in check by a counter-concept of *state*. The very term liberal democracy, as we have discussed above, is an embodiment of this conceptual tension between the private and public. Borrowing the term 'private' from the liberal democratic complex and using it for the indigenous schools that existed prior to the state intervention in India [or in Britain] is, therefore, a gross category mistake.

Using the term "private" without qualifications for the LFPS in the context of developing countries and describing them as part of a *genuine market* is more than an error, since the social consequences of unchecked free market can be potentially disastrous. If Carl Polanyi is to be believed, *laissez-faire* economy was tried and given up in 19th century Britain when both the elite and laity realized the horrible consequences of

it (Polanyi 1957). Dominance of market-friendly view in a context where forces for social justice and democracy exist in an emasculated state, can lead to a dangerous situation. The tug of war that exists in west between the concepts of liberalism and democracy does not exist with the same gusto in Pakistan, and this recognition is important to understand the danger in indiscriminately using the comparative categories of private and public. This difference is critical. By Tooley's own account, most LFPS in developing nations are unaided, unregulated and unregistered. This reflects weak state action. This unfettered private sector, then, is closer to what other economists, such as Milton Friedman, also aspired for in the West but could not achieve in its fullness due to a robust counter-concept of democratic equality in education.

In the passing, we should also note that 'evidence' of success of LFPS in the developing contexts is not just offered as a solution to the problem of universalizing education in developing countries, but also deployed in arguments against public schools in the West. As Nambissan and Ball observe, the work of Tooley does not merely demonstrate the potential for profitable markets in schooling for poor children but to also show that "these developments will generate evidence and political support which demonstrate to the West-that "for-profit" education can work and "if India can do it so can we" (Nambissan and Ball 2010:340).

Interestingly, the counter-arguments designed to push back and check the advance of liberalization of education in the West also refer to evidence from the developing countries. The burgeoning private sector education in Pakistan-which is characteristically similar to the one eulogized by Tooley in India and Africa-was, for example, mentioned by Diane Ravitch, an eminent historian of education in the United States as part of the rationale for reinforcement of her support to the public schools in the United States. In an interview with *The New York Times*, Ravitch (2010) said she had undertaken a study of Pakistan's weak and inequitable education system dominated by private and religious institutions and this finally convinced her that "protecting the United States" public schools was important to democracy" (Ravitch 2010b). Notice the potent presence of "democracy" here as the counter-concept and the ways in which the evidence from Pakistan about the rising inequities bolsters the case for public schools in the United States.

Conclusion

In the foregoing analysis, we have argued two things. First, the category "private" cannot be assumed to carry the same meaning in the context of Pakistan, and other similar contexts, as in the West, primarily because it is located in different discursive habitats. That is to say, it is not checked and shaped by an equally robust counter-concept of 'public.' Second, we have argued that evidence generated by the use of these categories in the developing countries is used to destabilize the balance between the liberal and social justice oriented discourses in the West in addition to influencing the pro private sector policies in the developing countries.

We have argued that the idea and practices associated with the term *private* are shaped by the equally robust concept of *public*. The situation is not similar in Pakistan. *Private* here is not checked and fettered similarly. When the opposing thrust of social justice-oriented discourses, incarnated as *educational justice* in the case of education, is not available to check the advance of private sector, other alternative counter-concepts are likely to develop under the force of history. However, they are less likely to be similar to the Western concept-counter-concept complex of liberal democracy. The agenda of denominational philanthropic organizations or other non-state forces can fill the space left by social justice oriented discourses as a counterpoint to, or simply parallel to, unfettered liberalization. Thus, different ideological agendas can find their way into the curricula of the proliferating unregulated non-state schools. Given the potential for such developments, the risk to the state is likely to be exacerbated, not reduced, if it withdraws from the provision of public services in the context of Pakistan.

Some social justice oriented scholars and activists recognize this threat, but their criticism of the current thrust to liberalize education markets is rooted in the same categories of analysis as the ones that are used to make the arguments in the first place. An extremely problematic framework based on the incorrect transposition of public - private pair to socio-historical contexts, such as Pakistan, that are fundamentally distinct from western societies has managed to structure the issue of educational access in ways that facilitates dissemination of neoliberal ideas to contexts least suited for them. "A recent *Reply to Tooley, Dixon, and Gomathi* on private education in Hyderabad", published in the *Oxford Review of*

Public-Private Debates in Education: Whither Private Without a Public?

Education by Sarangapani and Winch (2010), is an example of how even the parameters and terms of the debate on privatization of school education have been influenced by the problematic framework critiqued in this paper. As Sarangapani and Winch put it:

The state has to ensure that education serves the interests of the community. It could be done privately under state supervision, as Adam Smith suggests in Book V of *The Wealth of Nations*. Tooley et al., however, seem to think that schools that are completely unsupervised do a better job than state schools which have a public purpose in mind. This second claim is an extremely strong one and only makes sense if one thinks that the public benefits are either very minor or that they will flow automatically from unregulated private provision. Both these claims are false. (Sarangapani and Winch 2010:501)

In their attempt to prove Tooley wrong, they refer to the positive externalities of education, and the role that state must play to ensure that public good aspect of education is materialized through the process of education. Implicit, in this argument is the same concept-counter-concept complex that uses state to balance private transgression in the West. However, as we have argued, the concept of "private," in practice does not inhabit the same neighborhood as it does in the West. When Ravitch argues against the pro privatization policies in the West, she does it from within the tradition of public education in the West. This, as we have argued, is not the case everywhere. The scope of such criticism, therefore, is narrow inasmuch as it is mostly applicable in the West. Although Sarangapani and Winch are not addressing an audience in Pakistan, we have come across similar arguments against privatization here as well. But unlike the defenders of public schools in the west, the defenders of public school in Pakistan do not have the support of history, an established discourse and *public* with them.

Perhaps, there is a way out of this dilemma but it will involve refocusing on the purposes and all the means of a sound education in our society without reference to the comparative private-public pair (Muzaffar and Bari 2010). The private-public debates are robust and useful in the Western context, but dangerous and fruitless in the Pakistani context.

References

- Allender, Tahir. 2006. *Ruling Through Education: The Politics of Schooling in the Colonial Punjab*. New Delhi: New Dawn Press.
- Andrabi, Tahir, Jishnu Das, Asim Ijaz Khwaja, Tara Vishwanath, and Tristan Zajonc. 2007. *Learning and Educational Achievements in Punjab Schools (LEAPS): Insights to Inform the Education Policy Debate*. Washington, DC: World Bank.
- Andrabi, Tahir, and Jishnu Das. 2008. "A Dime a Day: The Possibilities and Limits of Private Schooling in Pakistan." *Comparative Education Review* 52(3):329-355.
- Andrabi, Tahir, Jishnu Das, and Asim Ijaz Khwaja. 2011. "Students Today, Teachers Tomorrow? Identifying Constraints on the Provision of Education." World Bank Policy Research Working Paper No. 5674. Washington DC: World Bank.
- Ball, Stephen J. 2007. *Education plc: Understanding Private Sector Participation in Public Sector Education*. New York: Routledge.
- Bari, Faisal. 2011. "Public Demand for Education Reform." *Daily Times*. Retrieved on August 15, 2011 (http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2011%5C07%5C27%5Cstory_27-7-2011_pg3_5)
- Bonal, Xavier. 2002. "Plus ça Change...The World Bank Global Education Policy and the Post-Washington Consensus." *International Studies in Sociology of Education* 12(1):3-22.
- Burki, Shahid J. 2005. "Educating the Pakistani Masses." Pp.15-32 in *Education Reform in Pakistan: Building for the Future*, edited by R. M. Hathaway. Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.
- Friedman, Milton. 1973. "Selling Schooling Like Groceries: The Voucher Idea." *The New York Times Magazine*, September 23. Retrieved on August 30, 2011 (<http://www.edchoice.org/The-Friedmans/The-Friedmans-on-School-Choice/Selling-School-like-Groceries--The-Voucher-Idea.aspx>)

Public-Private Debates in Education: Whither Private Without a Public?

- Gardner, David P. 1983. *A Nation at Risk*. Retrieved on July 15, 2011 (<http://www2.ed.gov/pubs/NatAtRisk/title.html>)
- Harvey, David. 2005. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hatcher, Richard. 2011. "The Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition government's 'free schools' in England." *Educational Review* 63(4):485-503.
- Hayek, Friedrich A. V. 1976. *Legislation and Liberty: The Mirage of Social Justice*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- I-SAPS. 2010. *Private Sector Education in Pakistan: Mapping and Musing*. Islamabad: Institute of Social and Policy Sciences.
- Klein, Naomi. 2007. *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*. New York: Metropolitan Books.
- Koselleck, Reinhart. 1985. *Futures Past: on the Semantics of Historical Time*. Translated by Keith Tribe. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Labaree, David F. 1997. "Public Goods, Private Goods: The American Struggle Over Educational Goals." *American Educational Research Journal* 34(1):39.
- Larner, Wendy. 2000. "Neo-Liberalism: Policy, Ideology, Governmentality." *Studies in Political Economy* 63:5-25.
- Macaulay, Thomas Babington. 1946. *Lord Macaulay's Legislative Minutes*. G. Cumberlege, Bombay: Oxford University Press.
- Mann, Horace. 1845. *Lectures on Education*. Boston: W.M.B. Fowle and N. Capen.
- Ministry of Education. 1979. *National Education Policy*. Islamabad: Ministry of Education, Government of Pakistan.
- Ministry of Education. 1992. *National Education Policy*. Islamabad: Ministry of Education, Government of Pakistan.
- Ministry of Interior. 1947. *Report of the Education Conference*. Karachi: Ministry of Education, Government of Pakistan.
- Mouffe, Chantal. 2000. *The Democratic Paradox*. London: Verso Books.

Public-Private Debates in Education: Whither Private Without a Public?

- Mukhtar, Ahmad. 2009. "The Neo-Liberalization of Education Services (not including higher education): Impacts on Workers' Socio-Economic Security, Access to Services, Democratic Accountability and Equity: A Case Study of Pakistan." Pp. 12-139 in *The Developing World and State Education: Neoliberal Depredation and Egalitarian Alternatives*, edited by D. Hill and E. Roskam. New York: Routledge.
- Muzaffar, Irfan and Faisal Bari. 2010. "Education Debate in Pakistan: Barking Up the Wrong Tree." *Social Science and Policy Bulletin* 11(4):2-6.
- Nambissan, Geetha B. and Stephen J. Ball. 2010. "Advocacy Networks, Choice and Private Schooling of the Poor in India." *Global Networks* 10(3):324-343.
- Naradowski, Mariono and Myrian Andrada. 2001. "The Privatization of Education in Argentina." *Journal of Education Policy* 16(6):585-595.
- Polanyi, Karl. 1957. "The Great Transformation." Pp 38-62 in *Readings in Economic Sociology*, edited by N. W. Biggart, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Ravitch, Diane. 2010a. *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice are Undermining Education*. New York: Basic Books.
- Ravitch, Diane. 2010b. "Scholar's School Reform U-Turn Shakes Up Debate." *The New York Times*. Retrieved on August 30, 2011 (<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/03/education/03ravitch.htm>)
- Ryle, Gilbert. 2002. *The Concept of Mind*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Saltman, Kenneth J. 2007. *Capitalizing on Disaster: Taking and Breaking Public Schools*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers.
- Sarangapani, Padma M. and Christopher Winch. 2010. "Tooley, Dixon and Gomathi on Private Education in Hyderabad: A Reply." *Oxford Review of Education* 36(4):17.

Public-Private Debates in Education: Whither Private Without a Public?

- Sen, Amartya. 2009. "Capitalism Beyond the Crisis." *The New York Review of Books* 56(5):26. Retrieved on June 10, 2011 (<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2009/mar/26/capitalism-beyond-the-crisis/>)
- Sen, Amartya. 2010. "The Economist Manifesto." *New Statesman*, April 23. Retrieved on July 15, 2011 (<http://www.newstatesman.com/ideas/2010/04/smith-market-essay-sentiments>)
- Soros, George. 1998. *The Crisis of Global Capitalism: Open Society Endangered*. New York: Public Affairs.
- Tooley, James. 1992. "The Prisoner's Dilemma and Educational Provision: A Reply to Ruth Jonathan." *British Journal of Educational Studies* 40(2):118-133.
- Tooley, James. 1994. "In Defence of Markets in Educational Provision." Pp. 138-153 in *Education and the Market Place* edited by D. Bridge and T. McLaughlin. London: Falmer Press.
- Tooley, James. 1995a. *Disestablishing the School*. Aldershot: Avebury Press.
- Tooley, James. 1995b. "Markets or Democracy for Education? A Reply to Stewart Ranson." *British Journal of Educational Studies* 43(1):21-34.
- Tooley, James. 1997a. "Choice and Diversity in Education: A Defence." *Oxford Review of Education* 23(1):103-116.
- Tooley, James. 1997b. "On School Choice and Social Class: A Response to Ball, Bowe and Gewirtz." *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 18(2):217-230.
- Tooley, James. 2009. *The Beautiful Tree*. Washington: Cato Institute.
- Tooley, James. and Pauline Dixon. 2003. *Private Schools for the Poor: A Case Study from India*. Reading, UK: Centre for British Teachers.
- Tooley, James, Pauline Dixon and Isaac Amuah. 2007. "Private and Public Schooling in Ghana: A Census and Comparative Survey." *International Review of Education* 53(4):389-415.
- Tooley, James, Pauline Dixon and Olanrewaju Olaniyan. 2005. "Private and Public Schooling in Low-Income Areas of Lagos State, Nigeria: A Census and Comparative Survey." *International Journal of Educational Research* 43(3):125-146.

Public-Private Debates in Education: Whither Private Without a Public?

- Tooley, James and Pauline Dixon. 2003. "Providing Education to the World's Poor: A Case Study of the Private Sector in India." Pp. 342-354 in *Handbook of Educational Leadership and Management*. Edited by Davies, B., West-Burnham, J. London, UK: Pearson Education.
- UNESCO Institute for Statistics. 2011. *Out- of- School Children: New Data Reveal Persistent Challenges*. Quebec: UNESCO Institute of Statistics. Retrieved on July 28, 2011. (http://www.uis.unesco.org/FactSheets/Documents/FS12_2011_OOSC_EN.pdf)
- United Nations. (2009). *The Millennium Development Goals Report*. New York: United Nations.