The impact of transnational corporations on educational and cultural processes: an African perspective

Ali Mazrui

Ali A. Mazrui (Kenya), Political scientist with teaching experience in Uganda, the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada and the United States. Currently with the Department of Political Science, University of Michigan, United States. Author of Towards a Pax Africana, Violence and Thought, Cultural Engineering, Nation Building in East Africa.

Every society has both formal and informal processes of education. In literate societies the formal aspects are pre-eminently realized in schools and colleges and in formal private lessons. But the informal processes of education are broader, sometimes omnipresent. They range from special educational programmes on television and other media to the instructive experiences of life itself.

In preliterate societies the distinction between formal and informal processes of education is less sharp, though it still exists. The ritual aspects of an initiation ceremony, for example, are clearly formal. But children are socialized and trained in informal ways as well, ranging from listening to the conversations of adults to observing the behaviour of cattle when a tropical storm includes thunder and lightning.

When we examine the impact of multinational corporations on educational processes, we should be careful not to limit ourselves to the effects on formal schooling and curriculum building. There are wider ramifications for society which should also be borne in mind.

Another major point which needs to be made is that commercial firms are only one kind of multinational corporation. Some educational institutions are themselves multinational corporations. These latter are cultural rather than commercial or industrial corporations.

Many of the characteristics that have been attributed to commercial multinational corporations in Africa may apply also to cultural multinational corporations, of which university institutions are pre-eminent examples. Almost all African universities in the ex-colonies started as overseas ‘subsidiaries’ of metropolitan institutions in Europe. Decisions on priorities for development had to respond to the orientations of the parent cultural corporations in the United Kingdom, France or Belgium. The cultural goods sold to a new
African clientele did not necessarily bear relevance to the real needs of the African market. Skills were transferred without adequate consideration for their value in Africa; other skills were withheld because they did not conform to world criteria of ‘excellence’ as defined by the parent body.¹

In the cultural domain, the pinnacle of the structure of dependency was the university, that institution which produced overwhelmingly the first generation of bureaucratic and political élites of post-colonial Africa, whose impact on the fortunes and destinies of their countries seemed at the time to be potentially incalculable. The university, like the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), was a cultural corporation with political and economic consequences. The multinational commercial company was an economic corporation with political and cultural consequences. There was a process of mutual reinforcement in the functions served by these corporate entities. What should be emphasized is simply that the university lay at the pinnacle of the structure of cultural dependency, and the multinational commercial enterprise at the pinnacle of the structure of economic dependency.

But just as the African university has its genesis in European imperialism, so does the commercial multinational corporation. Some of the recent literature on such corporations seems to assume that such international entities are a new thing. But the East India Company was established in the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, and for many decades effectively ruled a substantial part of India before the crown took over directly.²

Elsewhere in the empire, companies in search of natural resources and raw materials, were created early.

From about 1860 onwards manufacturing companies began to establish production facilities outside their own countries, and by 1914 many of today’s giants were already operating in several countries. . . . International companies are certainly not a new phenomenon. . . . In the past the main impact of international companies, except in banking, insurance and finance, was felt in the colonial and semi-colonial territories. The companies themselves were generally involved in trade, the running of

¹. I have discussed this theme more comprehensively in my article: ‘The African University as a Multinational Corporation: Problems of Penetration and Dependency’, Harvard Educational Review, Vol. 45, No. 2, May 1975, p. 191–210. The following few pages have been borrowed from that article.

². Jonathan David Aronson of the Department of Political Science, Stanford University, has compiled a useful bibliography on multinationals in historical and comparative perspective. J. D. Aronson, ‘The Multinational Corporation, the Nation-State and the International System: a Bibliography’. (Mimeo.)