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From the education of elites to education for all: How a *logic of utilization* transforms tertiary education

Reports of international organizations discuss qualifications to be key to secure employability in knowledge societies since the 1990s. The current discourse about the labor market effects of digitalization follows up on this line of argument and perceives higher education and lifelong learning, especially in natural and technical sciences, as the most effective policy tool to counteract the distributional consequences of technological change. Tertiary education has thus been expanding around the globe and particularly in the industrialized nations of Europe, America and Pacific-Asia.

The massification of higher education systems has entailed a fundamental transformation of the individual and societal role of education. Its individual worth depends on the degree to which it can be directly applied on the labor market while its societal worth depends on its contribution to economic growth. Thus, a *logic of utilization* penetrates higher education.

This article traces the roots of the *logic of utilization* in tertiary education in the neoliberal transformation which is ongoing since the 1970s. I follow a socio-historical approach and focus on the interaction of theoretical developments in the economics discipline – from the institutionalization of a market society to endogenous growth theory – with broader societal processes and the role of relevant actors. Thereafter, I apply a feminist-economic sectoral approach to economy to analyze changes in social and economic relations as private-sector rationalities enter tertiary education. Doing so enables to reveal the mechanisms which create social inequalities in access to higher education as well as in the living and working conditions of graduates; and leave those people behind who are not able to keep up with the requirements to become educated.