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EDITORIAL

Putting Hands Around the Flame: reclaiming the radical tradition in state education

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Against the Claustrophobia of Contemporary Culture

> The culture in which we live is perhaps the most claustrophobic that has ever existed; in the culture of globalisation … there is no glimpse of an *elsewhere*, of an *otherwise*. … The first step towards building an alternative world has to be a refusal of the world picture implanted in our minds … Another space is vitally necessary. (Berger, 2002, p. 214)

This Special Double Issue of *FORUM* is a collective refusal to accept contemporary educational presumptions as they exist in England in 2005. It takes comfort from John Berger's re-assurance that 'in this resistance is hope. A hope that we are desperately trying to recognise' (Berger, 2002, p. 214) and takes seriously his suggestions that 'the act of resistance means not only refusing to accept the absurdity of the world picture offered us, but denouncing it' (ibid, p. 214). Contributors to this Special Double Issue do, indeed, denounce the absurdities, injustices and daily inhumanity of much that makes up the explicit norms and, more importantly, the underlying assumptions of contemporary state schooling in England. Both their denunciation and their advocacy connect to a further motif of Berger's fine collection of essays, namely the importance of continuities. His remarks on the claustrophobia of contemporary culture which open this Editorial come from that part of his stirring 'Against the Great Defeat of the World' in which he reflects on the work of Hieronymus Bosch. Our capacity to interrogate the present with any degree of wisdom or any likelihood of creating a more fulfilling future rests significantly on our knowledge and

engagement with the past and with the establishment of continuities that contemporary culture denies. These presumptions persist most often as a susurrus beneath the surface of much of what Berger has to say. Occasionally they are more openly articulated, as in his engagement with Bosch. Occasionally, as in his essay on 'Giorgio Morandi', we encounter them as a vibrant sense of grounded hope. 'Traces', says Berger, 'are not only what is left when something has gone, they can also be marks for a project, of something to come.' (ibid, p. 144)

In 'Reclaiming the Radical Tradition in State Education' we are engaging with 'traces' in Berger's double sense. We do so because, as with Russell Jacoby, we fear that our 'society remembers less and less faster and faster. The sign of the times is thought that has succumbed to fashion; it scorns the past as antiquated while touting the present as the best' (Jacoby, 1977, p. 1). This is not just a matter of intellectual regret: it has more far-reaching consequences for, as Russell Jacoby again so eloquently and so terrifyingly reminds us, 'society has lost its memory, and with it, its mind. The inability or refusal to think back takes its toll in the inability to think' (Jacoby, 1997, pp. 3-4). It seems to me that we now need to do two things: firstly, we must reclaim and revoice narratives of our radical past which sustained those who fought for an education worthy of the name; secondly, we must create new spaces and new opportunities where teachers' work can not only connect with their radical heritage, but articulate their own stories and weave their own narratives into the fabric of the future.

With regard to the first of these imperatives – the necessity of reclaiming and revoicing narratives of our radical past – many of the authors of the Special Issue remind us how important this is. Thus, contrary to current government misinformation, Mary Jane Drummond remind us that 'in the years before the Education Reform Act of 1988, by and large, teachers did their own thinking, turning to a variety of sources to enrich their understanding and help them make a case for their principled pedagogical decisions'. Sheila Dainton concurs and exposes the intellectual waywardness of Michael Barber's, now sadly well known, depiction of the 1970s as a period of 'uninformed professionalism', a portrayal that is not only 'deeply hurtful, but much more important, historically inaccurate'.

With regard to the second imperative – the creation of new spaces and opportunities for teachers to review and re-energise the radical state tradition in England – journals like *FORUM*, professional forums like the Socialist Education Association, university units like the Centre for Educational Innovation at the University of Sussex, national networks like Human Scale Education, must find new ways of engaging with school staff who have been robbed of a language capable of voicing their encounter with the world and their desire to change it, a language rendered inarticulate under what Tony Booth later in this Special Issue describes as 'the shadow of managerialist absurdity'.

In sum, we need to develop counter-narratives that reconnect to our radical heritage. We need to retell narratives that transcend what Shelia Dainton so beautifully calls 'the wearisome appeal to Middle England'. We need to name different realities. We need, with the narrator of William Morris's *Dream of John Ball*, to reflect on

> How men fight and lose the battle, and the thing that they fought for comes about in spite of their defeat, and when it comes turns out not to be what they meant, and other men have to fight for what they meant under another name. (Morris, 1968 [1886/87], p. 53)

We need, in the spirit of John Berger, to put our hands around the flames of our own stories to protect them (Berger, 2005), to help us see the presence of possibility in the gloom of troubled times.

Imagination, Freedom and the Necessity of Respect

In addition to the tributes to **Annabelle Dixon**'s life and work we open our Special Issue by republishing her **Space, Schools and the Younger Child** in which she asks some searching questions about whether we give enough consideration to the actual nature of the different kinds of 'spaces' that children need, inhabit and experience in their school lives. While these include physical, geographical and interpersonal spaces, they are also include inner spaces in which we can nurture and extend their imaginations. Echoing concerns taken up later in this Special Issue by her friend Mary Jane Drummond, Annabelle warns us that too often what should be expressive, exploratory and evanescent in young children is rendered mute, myopic and moribund by a curriculum that is 'flawed, shallow and deeply unserious'.

The power and importance of the imagination is exemplified in all its subtlety and beauty by **Michael Armstrong**'s ***Teaching Imagination***. Michael is one of the most profound and eloquent advocates of the radical progressive tradition in this country. Here he brings us back to fundamentals: to the transformative power of imagination that all young people exercise; to the necessity of acknowledging the respect it invites and the attentiveness it demands of us. In a sensitive and highly-attuned response to the moving work of a 14 year old boy Michael exemplifies all that his advocacy names: imaginative entry into the work of the child; response to that work with critical sympathy; and suggested lines of future enquiry and imaginative engagement.

Mary Jane Drummond's ***Professional Amnesia: a suitable case for treatment*** testifies, again with great beauty and power, not just to the necessities, but to the joys of imagination, respect and attentiveness in the substance and the manner of what she has to say. She reminds us through the work of Edmund Holmes, Susan Isaacs, Ruth Griffiths and others that, in Ruth Griffiths' words, children's 'most urgent need is freedom to grow and think'. This is in large part also true of adults who teach them and they are ill-served by contemporary policy assumptions that teachers know nothing and thus need to be told. In

Mary Jane's view, we did and do know something, indeed some very important things, and 'we did not and do not need so much telling. The time is ripe for some critical remembering.'

Radical Approaches to 21st Century Primary and Secondary Schooling

Two of our next three contributions come from serving headteachers. The first, ***Raising Standards: what do we really want?*** by **Alison Peacock**, headteacher of the Wroxham School, a one-form entry primary school in Hertfordshire, suggests that 'schools have become so busy trying to do as they are told by a range of masters that they have forgotten to respond from the heart'. Inspired in part by the life and work of Annabelle Dixon whom we honour in this Special Issue, Alison argues that 'we need to rekindle joy amongst teachers in order that we can nurture and enhance the natural love of life and learning of our children'. The results speak for themselves.

Mike Davies is Principal of Bishops Park College, Clacton, arguably the most radical secondary school in England at the present time. In his ***Less is More: the move to person-centred, human scale education*** he reminds us of the legacy of the 1970s and 1980s that laid the spiritual and practical foundations of the work of the college before describing how the principles and precepts of the radical tradition in state education can not only be continued into the 21st century, but grounded in new ways which express 'a move to educate on a human scale, to end the isolation of the teacher and the taught, and bring a sense of community and belonging as the foundation for dignity, challenge and excellence'.

In his ***Alex Bloom, Pioneer of Radical State Education*** **Michael Fielding** argues that in this once internationally renowned headteacher of a secondary modern school in the East End of London we have someone whose work in the first decade after the Second World war anticipates and still outreaches even the most creative periods of the comprehensive movement that were to follow. Here is someone whose understanding and practice of 'personalised learning' was immensely more profound and more inspiring than anything to emerge thus far from the DfES. Here is someone whose commitment to 'student voice' is a humbling reminder of how far we have yet to go in even approximating to what he achieved. We have much to learn from him.

Taking Inclusion Seriously: consequences for setting, subjects and values in action

The three articles by Jo Boaler, Ivor Goodson and Tony Booth explore three aspects of the radical state tradition that are fundamental to the integrity of the movement. These have to do with our commitment to a pedagogy that is not only creative and engaging, but also socially just; a commitment to a curriculum framework and subject content that rejects the elitism of the 1904 Curriculum

Regulations which still shape what we are required to do in 2005; and a commitment to a form of inclusive education which is essentially about, in Tony Booth's words, 'new ways of living together'.

Jo Boaler's ***The 'Psychological Prisons' From Which They Never Escaped: the role of ability grouping in reproducing social class inequalities*** is in many respects a landmark article. Her research suggests that setting significantly depressed and obstructed the life chances of students in her study, thereby creating the 'psychological prisons' of her title. Conversely, students taught in mixed ability arrangements in a progressive school in one of the poorest areas of the country helped those young people to become upwardly mobile. She concludes her article with the devastating question:

> If the Labour Party really cares about promoting 'social justice' then an important part of their agenda for the future must be to learn about equitable and effective grouping policies that promote high achievement for all and reduce rather than reproduce social inequalities.

Issues of social equality lie at the heart of **Ivor Goodson**'s ***The Exclusive Pursuit of Social Inclusion*** which opens with a reminder that 'New Labour policies have in fact worked not to broaden social inclusion, but deepen social exclusion'. Part of the reason why this is so has to do with the fact that 'many of the traditional building blocks of schooling are themselves devices for social exclusion, not inclusion', in particular the dominance of the curriculum by traditional school subjects which are 'exclusionary devices', as he compellingly illustrates with reference to the history of science as a school subject.

Tony Booth's ***Keeping the Future Alive: putting inclusive values into action*** is a passionate affirmation of his own commitments to and experience of inclusion 'as a principled approach to education and society, as a task of putting particular values into action'. The article explores some of the difficulties and joys of working in this way and ends with an acknowledgement that despite the obstacles and absurdities of managerialism that frustrate our work, 'principled action is its own reward. The painstaking task of linking inclusive values to action, keeps alive a resource for acting otherwise'.

Reclaiming Teacher Professionalism

The next four articles explore different aspects of contemporary teacher professionalism in its struggles to retain its collective memory, its voice and, consequently, its educational integrity as we move into the 21st century. **Sheila Dainton** opens her ***Reclaiming Teacher Voices*** with the observation that 'there is surely something deeply and profoundly worrying about a profession that could well be in danger of forgetting its collective history and, perhaps worse still, of losing its collective voice – and the voices of individual teachers'. Her devastating demolition of Michael Barber's four-fold matrix of late 20th century professionalism is one of the many joys of this Special Issue of *FORUM*. Having

offered a quite different version of recent history the article concludes with three tentative suggestions of ways in which the teaching profession might begin to reclaim its voice.

As a very gifted, utterly committed teacher of many years experience in secondary comprehensive schools **Patrick Yarker**'s ***On Not Being a Teacher: the professional and personal costs of Workforce Remodelling*** makes compelling and disturbing reading. This is a article of great significance and sadness. In it we confront the dilemmas of all those who try to live out the unity of values and action Tony Booth advocated earlier. 'How far', asks Patrick Yarker, 'is it proper for a teacher to stay silent, or be silenced and to disregard their personal views, in the implementation of education policy?' Finally, the tensions generated in teachers by having to implement in the classroom what they cannot agree with – the cumulative deluge of 'delivery', SATs, 'levels', 'gifted and talented', and the effective abandonment of QTS – takes its toll.

The sustained attack over many years on teacher professionalism which contributed to Patrick Yarker's resignation is clearly mapped out in **Derek Gillard**'s ***Rescuing Teacher Professionalism***. Like Shelia Dainton, he too makes a number of suggestions for change and ends his article with the salutary reminder to governments offered by Lester Smith nearly 50 years ago: 'You cannot have it both ways – the right to interfere and the right to expect initiative and imaginative leadership'.

The question of leadership and its relation to the independence of thought and judgement that lies at the heart of any legitimate notion of professionalism is explored in a variety of ways in **Helen Gunter**'s ***Putting Education Back into Leadership***. What comes through particularly strongly is the notion that educational leadership must be concerned, not just with efficiency and effectiveness and with 'measurable productivity', but also with 'challenging the power structures and cultures that are inherited and can act as barriers to democratic development', or, as she puts it in her concluding sentence, 'the processes of learning within the public domain'.

Schools, Community and Democracy

The next two articles explore different aspects of schools and their relations with their communities. In the first of these, ***Illuminating Schools and Communities,*** **David Limond** warns us against what for many seems a positive development in recentring the wholeness and integrity of the child as a person in the ECM (Every Child Matters) legislation. Drawing on recent Scottish research and the history of the English community college tradition, David Limond argues, firstly, that what seems to be benign more often than not turns out to be an instrument of control. Secondly, he suggests that in their failure to understand the richness and importance of their own distinctive traditions and histories those who framed the legislation have by-passed alternative models and practices that hold out more hope of a democratic commitment to authentic learning.

David Limond's warning against a 'medicalised surveillance' model of community engagement is echoed in **Pat Thomson**'s ***Who's Afraid of Saul Alinsky? Radical Traditions in Community Organising***. The work of Saul Alinsky, often described as the 'father' of community organising, still has much to teach us. Those North American colleagues inspired by his work argue that 'educational schemes must shift away from patronising and paternalistic notions of needy communities that require co-ordinated services – as in the case of the Comer full service schools model – designed and delivered by professionals'. We need to reclaim our own radical traditions, resist the Blairite manufacture of civil society and remember, in Alinsky's words, that 'The central principle of all our organisational efforts is self-determination … We're not there to lead, but to help and teach'.

Contemporary Policies, Radical Critiques

The next three articles explore in very different ways how we might understand and respond to current government policies from the standpoint of the radical state tradition. **Clyde Chitty**'s ***The Challenges Facing Comprehensive Schools*** honours the work of one of the early comprehensive pioneers before taking a close look at some more recent developments, such as Tim Brighouse's advocacy of a collegiate framework now apparently championed by central government, and returns to some of the residual topics of debate such as the neighbourhood comprehensive principle and curriculum reform. What comes over particularly from the article is, firstly, the truth of Roy Hattersley's withering remark that 'the government has no philosophic compass with which to guide its policies' and, secondly, Clyde Chitty's own rich sense of what some of the magnetic orientations of that compass should be.

For **Francis Beckett**, the magnetic poles of New Labour's third term education team confirm earlier apprehensions about an apparent co-incidence with the guiding principles of neo-liberalism. In his ***On the Comfort of the Wilderness: the significance of Lord Andrew Adonis, de facto Secretary of State for Education*** Tony Blair's strategic appointment of Lord Andrew Adonis in Education prompts a retreat to the wilderness. In any event, it seems likely that campaign groups, such as 'Comprehensive Futures' to which Francis Becket belongs, will make the difficult and depressing decision to uncouple themselves from what, as he ironically reminds us is, 'the only major political party that believes (in comprehensive education)'.

Stephen Ball's ***Radical Policies, Progressive Modernisation and Deepening Democracy: the Academies programme in action*** engages with one of the most contentious of New Labour's third term dynamics, namely the Academies programme. Locating the programme within the wider context of 'progressive modernisation', Stephen Ball raises important issues, not just about the Academies and their very serious dangers and shortcomings, but also about 'the new localism' which turns out to be neither local nor empowering of those who

can legitimately claim to be local. Instead we have the glitz of 'fast policy' imposing 'elite solutions' on local communities.

Learning from Europe

We end our Special Issue by looking outward, not across the Atlantic, but to radical traditions in mainland Europe which seem to retain greater proximity to contemporary governments than we have thus far managed to achieve in England. **Terry Wrigley**'s ***Another School is Possible: learning from Europe*** offers inspiration and hope from Scandinavia and particularly from the Laboratory School in Bielefeld, Germany. It is interesting and helpful to note that the 'common feature of these approaches are that they provide a secure but flexible structure for teachers and learners, alongside scope and encouragement for choice and initiative within a common theme and activity,' something that, for instance, Alex Bloom (the subject of Michael Fielding's article) would have recognised fifty years ago and Mike Davies in his ***Less is More*** would recognise and applaud today.

The Urgent Solidarities of Humankind

We are living at a significant moment, not just in the history of education in England, but in the wider context of western culture and its engagement with other nations and traditions across the world. For the two authors whose work inspires and speaks through this prefatory contribution to this Special Issue of *FORUM* this evinces a sense of profound apprehension and insistent hope.

For John Berger, who underscores what he sees as the urgency of his book, *The Shape of a Pocket*, from which these extracts are taken, the apprehension is palpable. 'There are,' he says, 'historical periods when madness appears to be what it is: a rare and abnormal affliction. There are other periods – like the one we have just entered – when madness appears to be typical' (Berger, 2002, p. 177). For Russell Jacoby, writing the revised introduction to his book, *Social Amnesia*, originally published twenty years earlier, the observation that 'the wholesale rejection of the past as past bespeaks the marketing mentality, the assumption that today is necessarily better than yesterday' (Jacoby, 1997, p. 58) leads him to suggest that 'Even if newer cars, telephones, and x-ray machines are superior to older ones, new philosophers, psychologists, or literary critics may not be' (ibid). Indeed, it may well be that 'intelligence is dwindling in advanced industrial society. Undoubtedly we have more information and data but we may understand less and less' (ibid).

Whilst Berger and Jacoby articulate deep disquiet with disturbing eloquence they match their unease with an equally articulate hope. Thus, for Russell Jacoby his book remains 'less about political than intellectual resistance, thinking against the grain – an endeavour that remains as urgent as ever' (Jacoby, 1997, p. 50). John Berger's book is itself an act of resistance, rejecting the madness he exposes with such delicate and terrifying insight; it is a

magnificent denunciation and 'when hell is denounced from within it ceases to be hell' (Berger, 2002, p. 215).

I end with an extract from the Argentinean poet Juan Gelman's Selected Poems *Unthinkable Tenderness,* cited more than once in Berger's book. Here are the last two stanzas of the poem *'They Wait'*:

> death itself has come with its documentation /
> we're going to take up again
> the struggle / again we're going to begin
> again we're going to begin all of us
>
> against the great defeat of the world /
> little compañeros who never end / or
> who burn like fire in the memory
> again / and again / and again
> (Gelman, 1997, p. 45)

Those of us in the radical tradition of state education are 'little compañeros … who burn like fire'. Others will see our fire, others will warm themselves by it as we warm each other, and together we will light beacons of hope again in England. We will see other fires in Wales, in Scotland, in Ireland, in Europe, in North America, in Australasia, and in other places and countries across our small planet: a radical tradition worthy of its name invites and offers the urgent solidarities of humankind.

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