FORUM

Power, Democracy –
and Democracy in Education

KEN JONES

ABSTRACT This article addresses questions of workplace democracy, particularly in relation to school education. Following Luciano Canfora in treating democracy as 'the rule of the many', it traces the post-1945 rise of workplace democracy, and its post-1979 decline. Analysing the constitution of contemporary schooling in England, the article concludes that it has been de-democratised. It suggests, however, that in the increasingly difficult situation in which the neo-liberal project of education finds itself, the efficacy and legitimacy of this system of governance will be increasingly questioned.

FORUM has tracked on many occasions the restrictions on democracy that have accompanied the development of marketisation. The focus of critique has usually been the local authority, where cabinet government and the transfer of budgets to schools have severed the link between representative democracy and educational decision making. This is a necessary emphasis. In this article I will complement it by discussing democracy at another level, that of relations in the workplace, where the growth of an authoritarian, rather than relatively democratic, form of politics should be more noticed than it usually is.[1]

I shall make use of an understanding of 'democracy' developed by Luciano Canfora in his book *Democracy in Europe*. Canfora argues that democracy is best seen not as a constitutional system but as a project of shifting the balance of political and social power away from the possessing class and towards the demos: he attributes to Aristotle the view that democracy is the rule of the propertyless, in contrast to oligarchy, the rule of the rich (Canfora, 2008). From this point of view, Canfora rewrites the history of democracy, so that it no longer takes the form of a smooth arc of constitutional progress (focusing on suffrage rights, the establishment of elected legislatures, etc.) but rather a jagged series of episodes – the episodes being those brief moments when popular classes in Europe have been able to imprint their purposes upon the political order: 1789, 1848, 1871, 1917, 1945.

Canfora's book is rich in illustration. An account of the drafting of the post-war Italian Constitution, for instance, traces the impact of the anti-fascist resistance – which did not achieve the social transformation for which many of its cadres hoped, but left a mark on Italian politics that no subsequent government, not even Berlusconi's, has been able to efface. Article Three of the Constitution asserts that economic choices are subsidiary to decisions about social need, and that 'It is the duty of the Republic to remove those obstacles of an economic or social nature which constrain the freedom and equality of citizens, thereby impeding the full development of the human person and the effective participation of all workers in the political, economic and social organisation of the country.'[2] Other parts of the Constitution, especially those which uphold academic freedom, still provide a rallying point for movements in education opposed to neo-liberalism (Jones, 2009).

For Canfora, the history of the latter part of the twentieth century consists in large part of a struggle over the fate of these democratic gains, in which an attempt to extend their reach was ultimately defeated by a revived conservatism. At the political level, this led to the establishment of governmental bodies above the nation state, removed from any form of democratic control or pressure, alongside changes in electoral legislation, that exclude smaller parties from legislatures. The overall effect is the growth of what Canfora calls a 'mixed system', in which formal electoral rights are combined in practice with 'a great deal of oligarchy' on the part of a monopolising political class that shares a narrow consensus.

In this piece, I shall take from Canfora a stress on democracy as the attempt to impose the interests of the majority on elite systems of rule. However, I want to broaden the perspective beyond political democracy in a strict sense, to other sites in society – including the workplace –and to other forms of participation in attempts to shape the social order, besides the practices of representative democracy.

Challenges to Capital

Bludgeoned by accounts of the later post-war decades as years of economic stagnation and senseless militancy, few now try to register the scale of the challenge to capital that was attempted at that time. The Canadian political theorist Leo Panitch is an exception. His summary of the struggles of the 1970s prefigures Canfora's, in depicting what happened then as a 'working-class political offensive' in which issues of economic ownership and control were combined with those of popular democracy (Panitch, 1987). The new conservatism of Thatcher and Reagan was a reaction to this offensive, and fought a successful war not only around issues of economic restructuring, but of democratic influence and control.

For both Canfora and for Panitch, democracy is a confrontational and destabilising force: limiting, organising against, critiquing, providing alternatives to, existing forms of power. This is a reading that I agree with, and

I will make use of it both to understand the politics of industrial relations in late twentieth-century Britain, and the connected politics of education.

The Institute for Workers' Control (IWC) was set up in 1968, and quickly gained support from the trade union and shop stewards' movement. At its height, in 1969, its conference attracted 1200 delegates, most of them from the big, well-organised workplaces of industrialised Britain. The IWC produced a series of pamphlets, the first of which was written by Hugh Scanlon, General Secretary of the Amalgamated Engineering Union and a leader of the trade union Left. Scanlon set the contemporary movement for workers' control in the perspective of post-war history:

> Never has the Labour Movement in this country been stronger, more confident and more experienced – largely as a result, not only of technological change, and the integration of white collar 'specialists' within the Labour Movement, but because of relatively full employment. Trade Union membership has doubled since the 1930s and the increased confidence of workers has reflected itself in the development of strong shop floor organisations, which have been able not only to bargain very effectively for increased earnings at a local level, but also question the 'prerogative of management'.
> (Scanlon, 1968, p. 2)

Most industrial disputes, Scanlon pointed out, were no longer about wages, but 'working arrangements, rules and discipline' (1968, p. 3). In these areas, working-class organisation had developed to the point where there existed 'effective control by organised workers over the arbitrary powers of management.' This amounted to 'workers' control', the 'seeds of the new society inside the old' (1968, p. 2). Scanlon may be reading a desired future too readily into the struggles of the present, but the general point is clear: the collective power of workers exercised some control over the operation of Capital.

Democracy was also a preoccupation of movements outside industrial trade unionism. Summarising the commitments of the student and youth movements of the late sixties, Hilary Wainwright writes of '[a] strong sense of power from below … [a] creative combination of personal and collective change, and the bringing together of resistance with experiments in creating alternatives here and now … a spurning of hierarchies and the creation of organisations that are today described as "horizontal" or "networked".' These impulses, she notes, took concrete form in new institutions outside existing systems (free schools, for instance) and in new forms of practice in the public sector, in which many of those involved in the movements of '1968' found jobs (Wainwright, 2012).

And in Education

The impact on education (formal and informal) of the movements celebrated by Wainwright has been fairly extensively discussed (Wright, 1989; Jones, 2003).

Here, I do not want to recapitulate this history, but rather to stress one aspect of it. The cohorts who entered teaching post-1968 were motivated not just by ideas of radical pedagogy, but of institutional democratisation. The idea of 'Democracy in Schools' underpinned the Rank and File Teacher movement which was for a time a strong force among them (Rank and File Teacher, 1969). 'Democracy' was a combative slogan aimed against what was seen as the repressive power of the head teacher, the main obstacle to classroom radicalism and trade union militancy. The slogan's positive content was the idea that the work of the school could be something that was collectively determined by educational workers and students, at the same time as the school became more strongly linked to its communities.

These ideas were not idiosyncratic. They grew from the experience of thousands of teachers whose aspiration for an emancipatory education had collided with school structures that were orientated differently. In other parts of Europe – Italy again, through the *Decreti Delegati* of 1974 – and Finland – they were to some extent realised in legislation (Kärenlampi, 1999; Jones, 2009). In England, though their explicit presence was not as lasting, their aspiration to exert some collective influence on the workplace was translated into other forms. During the 1970s and 1980s, the main teachers' union, the NUT, took more 'industrial' action than at any other point in its history. The action took many forms: strikes, a refusal to cover the classes of absent teachers, a refusal to supervise pupils at lunchtime, the cancellation of after-school planning meetings (Pietrasik, 1987). The reasons for these actions were tactical rather than principled. They were adopted in pursuit of particular objectives (e.g. pay increases) rather than as part of a strategy of challenging management prerogatives in the school. In practice, however, they had this latter effect: they strengthened teachers' capacity to control the extent and intensity of the working day, imposing a collective constraint upon the decisions of school management.

Syndicalism Plus

What is there to learn from this experience? For more than a hundred years, this politics of workplace control has had a name: syndicalism. It has also been subject to sustained critique as an 'economist' phenomenon, incapable of addressing broad political issues and unable to develop alliances with those outside the workplace or a particular sector of employment. There were certainly tendencies of this sort within the militancy of teacher trade unions, but taken as a whole, it is difficult to see the movement in these terms only. Though it never developed an all-round politics of education, capable of winning broad support for a definite programme of educational change, the culture of militancy did produce a collective effort to address issues of teaching and learning, from the point of view of a commitment to equality and cultural recognition (Jones, 2009). Magazines like *Teaching London Kids, Schooling & Culture, The English Magazine, Blackbored, Radical Education, Clio, Contemporary Issues in Geography and*

Education all bear witness to this. Work by writers such as Andrew Dewdney & Martin Lister (1988), Christopher Small (1977) and Judith Williamson (1981) reinforce the point: the educational spaces of the pre-1988 period were places of experiment, radical achievement, and critical reflection. The necessary condition of such practice was a degree of teacher autonomy, certainly; but the autonomy would have been unproductive if it had not been accompanied by an ethos in which the aspiration to create emancipatory kinds of teaching and learning was important. To this extent, accounts that depict these years as a 'golden age' of professionalism and teacher control (Le Grand, 1997), without attending to the radical dimensions of educational practice in this period, are misleading.

'What there is to learn', thus, relates to a mutually reinforcing link between the practice of democracy within institutions, and their capacity to address public issues of social and political change. This is a link that continues to be made: in Egyptian universities, the academics who have committed themselves to the Arab Spring call also for the election of the management of universities by those who work there. (Soueif, 2012).

Reversal

To utilise Canfora's terms, then, there existed in the educational workplace between the early 1970s and the later 1980s, a situation in which the 'many' imposed their will on the 'few'. In terms of trade union activity, this took the form of a kind of veto on habitual practices of management. In the classroom, democratisation rested on an attempt to include greater numbers of pupils in the educational community.

This was a situation that did not last. The Teachers' Pay and Conditions Act implemented in 1987 by Thatcher's Government, made cover and attendance at meetings obligatory. The Education Reform Act of the following year replaced local curricular initiative with national regulation, and set school leaders free to manage their budgets and their staff. From this point onwards, management authority in the school has been progressively strengthened.

These shifts are best understood in a wider context of reversal. Panitch notes that the eighties saw the development of 'a restructured state and civil society' (1987, p. 136), corresponding to a new economic order in which the strength and influence of working-class movements were very much attenuated. For him, this attenuation was the essence of neo-liberalism: its various economic innovations – financialisation, just-in-time production, a scaled-down public sector operating according to the rules of new public management, a state watchful and repressive towards its own people – all depended on, and further consolidated, a change in the balance of power between classes. In education, neo-liberal restructuring took several forms, and in all of them the reshaping of power relations was an important element: it was not that legislation and regulation often took such reshaping as their explicit aim; rather that the 'logic of action' embedded in new systems of practice favoured the emergence of new

kinds of social actor and social relationship, while constraining and marginalising others. In this way, it prevented political conflict in schools, even while they experienced constant change.

At the institutional level, Canfora's thesis of de-democratisation has been borne out. Elected local authorities have lost most of their power over education. The power to make system-shaping educational decisions has moved upwards, as in the case of the National Curriculum, or downwards, to agents whose actions are constrained by the markets in which they are located. On the one hand it is possible to speak of a tightening of 'the couplings between the national level and the local and school level in terms of standards and accountability' – couplings brought about through state action (Moos, 2009, p. 403). On the other, as Thomson analyses (2009), it is demanded of head teachers that they become successful initiators of change, in locally marketised conditions. At the same time, new networks of agency have emerged, whose powers owe nothing to democratic authority: academy chains, and those charities, companies and trusts, based in the finance sector, which have driven the shift to academisation and much else besides (Ball & Jünemann, 2011).

Similar processes have emerged to shape educational practice, in the process reversing previous circuits of change. The decentralised, uneven, experimental pattern of pedagogic and curricular change that was typical of earlier periods was replaced by a model that was not dependent on local energies. Moss & Huxford (2007) sketch the new system well, writing of 'those within the policy-making community who are involved in policy design and in steering the policy's on-going development through adoption to implementation from the vantage point of a devolved government agency.' In England, they note, 'the number of such agencies has proliferated in the last decade' and conclude that 'the emergence and proliferation of agencies and actors working at this policy level in part accounts for the dynamic quality of the current policy-making environment in England, and indeed is one of its defining characteristics.' The proliferation of dynamic and devolved agencies has as its counterpart an *a priori* lack of interest in any other source of change, including change that might be instigated associationally through teacher inititiative.

The strengthening of such agencies has been accompanied by the subjection of the teacher to new forms of discipline. Mahony & Hextall (2000) have shown how the setting of pay levels through the school-based threshold system has served to individualise workplace relationships, creating dependency and stress in the workforce. As in the Ofsted inspections, which have become such significant markers in the 'biography' of schools, teachers are judged according to criteria which are non-negotiable, in an inspection process that Barzanò nicely describes as 'an intense circulation of unbalanced power' (2009, p. 205). This in turn creates new constructions of what it means to be a professional – constructions in which the capacity to exercise informed and independent judgement tends to be replaced by competence in delivering accurately an externally-specified programme (Gewirtz et al, 2009).

The possibilities of challenging such a regime are limited by several factors. One is the strength of the leadership cadre that has been developed in schools – a leadership capable of motivating and directing the work of teachers, as much through the use of soft powers of problem-defining, advice and persuasion as through any harsher methods (Moos, 2009). A second factor is the naturalisation of reform: once test results are established as the key performance indicator of school and system, teachers are enclosed in what is literally a compelling narrative, which organises the priorities and justifications of their daily work. The situation has been brought to life in a recent article by 'Phillip Easton', a teacher writing pseudonymously in *The Guardian*:

> … a teacher's worth is questioned in line with results. Lazy pupils? That'll be your fault for allowing that culture in your classroom. Lack of homework or revision? Why didn't you call parents in to make them understand the importance of the revision sessions after class? (Easton, 2012)

Recent research on 'policy actors' in schools has noted the absence in this situation of any 'micropolitics of resistance' (Ball et al, 2011, p. 632). Gemma Edwards' study of teacher union organisation draws out the implication for collective organisation of these many-stranded constraints. Her survey of local union activists in the north-west of England related high workload and a lack of time to a decline in members' participation in union meetings, in particular. One Division Secretary put a 'decline in attendance at union meetings since the 1980s' down to the fact that, "as you get more and more initiatives, membership attendance at meetings drops away". Further support came from [her] survey data, where over three times more members stated "too many work commitments" as their "most important" reason for non-attendance at union meetings, compared to "not interested in union affairs"' (Edwards, 2008).

On the basis of the experience of the last 25 years, then, it seems right to draw some stark conclusions: in the pre-1988 period, democratisation and a radical educational politics were mutually reinforcing; the dominant model of educational change that has emerged since then has depended on the enlisting, and disciplining, of teacher energies in a strongly regulated programme of reform, which is intrinsically hostile to collective organisation.

Limits

Such a reading is consistent with wider narratives of the change that neo-liberalism has brought about – a change that may be summed up in two contrasting quotations. Karl Polanyi, in *The Great Transformation,* suggested that the populations of the mid-twentieth century were 'witnessing a development under which the economic system ceases to lay down the law to society and the primacy of society over that system is secured' (2001 [1944], p. 251). Polanyi's expectation, one shared by the drafters of the Italian constitution, was that economic decisions would be to some extent collectivised and market

mechanisms placed under democratic control. Thirty-five years later, in his lectures on neo-liberalism at the Collège de France, Foucault arrived at an opposite conclusion: the market now acted as a kind of 'permanent economic tribunal' on and over society: all other sectors have to justify themselves before it, and human actions shape themselves to its requirements, while its own logic would not be open to question (Lemke, 2001, p. 195).

Foucault's lectures capture very well the subtle force of neo-liberalism – the way it works on individual consciousnesses and conduct so as to induce new ways of thinking and behaving. The difficulty with his insights is that they tend to suggest a permanent fix, so that the possibilities of change cannot easily be thought. After the crash of 2008, his theses seem less tenable: it is true that neo-liberalism is not something that societies have broken free of, but its assumptions about the primacy of the market, and the necessity of shaping society and the self in the market's image, have less purchase on everyday life and enjoy much less legitimacy.

Reflecting on the current crisis in a piece published by the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, Mario Candeias pays homage to the initial strengths of neo-liberalism, the better to point out its current difficulties. Neoliberal rule 'pushed forward the globalisation and internationalisation of production, culture and consumption'. It weakened the power of wage-dependent sectors, the unions, the social movements and social democracy (2009, p. 2). At the same time, it offered such sectors, through the politics of the 'Third Way', a promise that they could benefit from the growth that neo-liberalism could deliver, and even play a part in the realisation of reform. For Candeias, these possibilities are now closed: 'more and more social needs remain unfulfilled, and people have lost their faith in individual and social progress'; government has taken an 'authoritarian turn'; the 'consensus has faded away' (2009, p. 2).

It is worth considering how these general tendencies of post-2008 society might be working out at the level of the school. The collapse of the youth labour market and the threat of a long period of precarity for large sections of young people create serious long-term problems of legitimacy for education, raising for many the question of the very point of schooling (Jones, 2011). At the same time, the intensifying pressures on the educational workforce, from the demands of competitiveness, and the intrusions of Ofsted, are making a misery of working lives. One immediate solution to some of the problems would be an assertion by those who work in schools of their collective power to shape the circumstances in which they work – an assertion which would entail reviving a tradition of workplace democracy. Canfora's insistence that democracy is not just a deliberative process but a militant claim to rights holds many lessons for a workforce whose current quietude is doing little to improve its well-being.

Notes

[1] This article is based on my contribution to the seminar 'Democracy, governance and local school systems: experiences, critiques, alternatives' organised through

the BERA Special Interest Group on Social Justice (Birmingham City University, April 2012).

[2] Senato della Repubblica (2011) [1947] *Constitution of the Italian Republic* Rome, Publications Office of the Senate, p. 5.
http://www.senato.it/documenti/repository/istituzione/costituzione_inglese.pdf

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KEN JONES is Professor of Education and Head of the Department of Educational Studies, Goldsmiths, University of London, Lewisham Way, London SE14 6NW, United Kingdom. *Correspondence*: ken.jones@gold.ac.uk