
The Political Economies of Radical Education

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ABSTRACT The aftermath of the Global Financial Crisis of 2008 has created space for discussion for alternative arrangements of economy and society. In education terms, there has been a flowering of texts which propose radical changes in educational systems. This article briefly discusses three examples (Fielding & Moss, *Radical Education and the Common School*; Facer, *Learning Futures*; and Woods, *Transforming Education Policy*). Based on a reading of Dale's (1979) discussion of how 1960s and 1970s 'progressive education' were limited by wider political economic structures, the article suggests that, at the present time, the 'new spirit of capitalism' allows for and even welcomes particular forms of progressive and even 'radical' change, based on ideas around participation, innovation, and flexibility. The article concludes with a set of questions to ask of schools which seek to engage in 'really radical practice'.

Any contemporary struggle to envision a reconstruction of the social process has to confront the problem of how to overthrow the structures (both physical and institutional) that the free market has itself produced as relatively permanent features of our world. Though daunting, that task is not impossible. The revolutionary agenda of neoliberalism has accomplished a lot in the way of physical and institutional change these last twenty years. So why, then, can we not envision equally dramatic changes (though pointing in a different direction) as we seek for alternatives?
(David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope*, 2000, p. 179)

David Harvey's comment reminds us that the social processes that shape physical and institutional structures have to be constructed in the imagination before they can take concrete form. The last three decades have seen the development of 'free-market utopianism' which has set the scene for the transformation of schooling. As a number of writers have demonstrated, the neoliberal order had to be created and made by powerful interest groups

(Cockett, 1995; Miller & Dinan, 2008; Peck, 2010). The think-tanks associated with the new right set out to create a new commonsense or particular construction of neoliberal reason which replaced an older consensus about the role of schooling in promoting social harmony and narrowing inequalities with a new agenda based on competition, individualised schooling and the belief in enterprise and efficiency (see Benn, 2011, for a recent overview). This was to be implemented by a new cadre of school leaders equipped with the skills and 'vision' to ensure that every child matters and that 'every school is a great school' (Hopkins, 2007). There has been imagined a utopian space – the flat world of neoliberal economies – where enduring social inequalities are seen as 'obstacles' to be overcome through a judicious mix of technical solutions and passion. The dominant paradigms of school effectiveness and school improvement that most educational 'experts' (some of whom work in university departments of education) partake in are part of this utopian vision of educational change.

If ever there was a moment in which the shibboleths of this 'free-market educational utopia' could be exposed it is surely now. The equation between 'learning and earning' has been shattered, and we see the emergence of what some call 'the lost generation' who are over-qualified and under-educated in terms of the challenges of life in the twenty-first century (see Ainley & Allen, 2010; Brown et al, 2011; Foster, 2011). Just as it has now become acceptable to use the term 'capitalism' in public discourse, there are signs of a re-emergence of the apparently discredited project of 'radical education'. It is not the intention to provide, in this paper, a detailed mapping of the 'Educational Left'. Instead, the starting point for my discussion is a series of books, published in the last two years, which, together, have sought to put the question of radical change in educational provision back on the agenda: Michael Fielding & Peter Moss's (2011) *Radical Education and the Common School*, Keri Facer's (2011) *Learning Futures* and Phil Wood's (2011) *Transforming Education Policy*.

Each of these books is deserving of a detailed treatment in its own right, and I hope that this essay will serve to encourage such discussion. Each offers important ideas and insights about the desired and possible futures for educational systems. In the next section, I briefly introduce these books and suggest that what is striking about these three texts is how far their analysis tends to be relatively silent about questions of political economy. This is something that needs to be attended to in any attempt to take their ideas further. Then, I want to focus on the argument of an important paper by Roger Dale, written at the end of the 1970s, which sought to explore the paths taken by progressive education in Britain in the 1960s and 1970s. Dale argued that the extent and form of progressivism was limited by the nature of the educational 'settlement' which existed at that time. Using Dale's insight, I situate these recent radical education texts within current trends within capitalist schooling. The article concludes with some final comments about the 'spaces of hope' for radical education. I hope it is taken as read that this paper, whilst

critical, is sympathetic to the broad political project of these writers. My aim is to contribute to the discussions about what is possible in these 'mean times'.

Three Radical Approaches to Education

Radical Education and the Common School is an important book, attempting nothing less than to offer concrete examples of the types of practices that might challenge the narrow view of human relations that underpin schooling in neoliberal capitalism. And it is clear that neoliberalism is the villain of the piece in Fielding & Moss's account. The economy figures as the backdrop to what is described as the common school. There is an excoriating critique of how neoliberalism has corrupted the aims, purposes and values of education in the name of short-term and narrowly defined interests. There is a narrow, dehumanised and market-led set of terms used to describe educational processes. But this 'economism' must be seen as part of a subset of a broader technical rationality that is concerned with management and bureaucracy. This is important, since it seems to imply that what is at stake is the types of organizational goals and structures which shape schooling. Neoliberalism is one part of it; but not all of it. This is crucial because it allows the rest of the analysis to bracket out the whole question of work, employment and the conditions of economic provision.

One of the sources of inspiration for *Radical Education and the Common School* is Erik Olin Wright's Real Utopias Project which is summarised in his recent book, *Envisioning Real Utopias*. Indeed, Wright's notion of a revitalised emancipatory social science -with its three moments of diagnosis or critique of what is wrong with schooling, the imagining of real, viable alternatives, and a theory of social transformation – provides a structure for the book as a whole.

Fielding & Moss present their work as a contribution to debates about democratic alternatives, and are careful to recognise that such alternatives are unlikely to materialise in a society marked by continuing and increasing inequality. One of the most interesting questions raised by Fielding & Moss's work is the way in which they draw upon different times and spaces of post-war capitalism. Whilst the neoliberal period they set out to deconstruct is that of the free-market utopia of the last 30 years, it is not clear where the social democratic settlement of the 1960s, which broke down in the 1970s before being replaced by 'the right turn' figures in all this? The two examples that figure strongly in their book are St-Georges-in-the-East which thrived in the early post-war period at a time of a strong re-evaluation of the experiences of working-class children, and the Reggio Emilia schools that originated in the wealthy northern Italian city. There is also reference to Swedish schools within schools movements which again have their roots in rather different traditions of national-welfare and conceptions of the child. The important question here is what types of political economic organisation provide a fertile ground for what types of democratic practices within schools.

The second text I want to briefly focus on here is Keri Facer's *Learning Futures: education, technology and social change*, which rests on an explicit rejection of the educational imaginary the past thirty years, one that has 'been dominated by one particular vision of the future, a vision of a global knowledge economy fuelled by international competition and sustained by digital networks' (p. 1). For Facer, this vision of the future is neither robust nor desirable enough to act as 'a reliable guide to education'. Facer's study is best situated in the field of 'educational futures' which has enjoyed something of a renaissance in recent years, and which is more important than ever now that the social imaginary of neoliberalism is open to challenge. The shape of the political economy that underpins *Learning Futures* can be discerned from the eleven assumptions that underpin the analysis. These focus on the ubiquity of computer power, the merging of digital and physical artefacts, the rise of informational communications networks and more generally a whole set of shifts that challenge traditional notions of what it means to be 'human', all underpinned by the 'long emergency' of the decline of petroleum-based economies, climate change and an unequal world. It is heady stuff. After reading Facer's book, it is certainly not easy to think of schools in the same light again. In some ways *Learning Futures* describes the flip-side of the digital utopias of 'networked capitalism', and is usefully read alongside the work of Jeremy Rifkin who, in his books *The Age of Access* and *The Empathetic Civilization*, describes the types of evolutionary consciousness that accompanies the 'network age'.

The final example I want to discuss here is Phillip Woods' *Transforming Education Policy* which sets out to explore the proposition that:

the 'tectonic plates' that constitute the underlying structure of society are moving in the direction of democratic relationships which are the nurturing ground for the exploration and generation of enduring meaning; and that education is at the heart of this opportunity. (p. 1)

Woods suggests that we are currently approaching new democratic times. This is part of an earlier identification by Rothschild & Whitt (1986) that there is a long-term shift towards self-determination and use value. Two factors underpinning this shift are the recognition that markets do not provide the best answer to providing social goods and the intense growth in recent years in questions of democratisation and meaning in organisations. Though Woods states from the start that he favours the transformation of capitalism, in practice the rest of the book is more concerned with notions of democracy associated with holism and the emergent practices around meaning in organisations, soft governance and social entrepreneurialism. Woods makes much of a supposed shift from 'new public management' to 'new public governance' which is concerned with new forms of hybrid space where there is a focus on values, relationships and meaning.

Woods is optimistic about the direction of these changes in 'governance', based around 'networks' and a 'relational' view of the state, and his account might be read alongside other, less hopeful accounts of these developments (e.g.

Ball & Junemann, 2012). Rather than seeing an end to capitalist social relations, Woods places his faith in capitalism's ability to modify itself so as to adopt more soulful aspects of the self, or Heelas (2008) calls 'spiritualities of life'. Woods imagines the emergence of a 'Third Way' capitalism that has recognised that its long-term survival relies more on co-operation than competition, and has successfully harnessed the need of human beings for affective bonds and spiritual (in the widest sense). It is a form of 'decent capitalism' which is based on hybrid forms of private, state and 'third sector' modes, all of which are imbued with social enterprise.

These books offer a number of important points about radical educational change:

1. They incorporate a variety of real alternatives in education today – real practices and institutions and real ideals – into the project of radical education. These are important, since they mean that we can point to actual developments and experiments in schools.
2. These writers present the idea that society is a loosely coupled system instead of a strictly determined structural whole.
3. All three writers see the future as open and capable of being re-made. There are no guarantees in the struggle to realise radical educational ideals.

Taken together, these three books set an important agenda for the discussion of radical educational change. However, it may be argued that there is a need to discuss the political economic structures that ultimately shape the possibilities for radical education. This is discussed in the next section.

The Limits to Radical Education

In the rest of this article, I want to point to the importance of understanding the political economic forces that invariably shape any moves to develop radical or transformative education. In order to develop this argument, I take as a starting point a paper published in 1979 by Roger Dale entitled 'From Endorsement to Disintegration: progressive education from the Golden Age to the Green Paper'. In that paper, Dale offered some perspectives on the contexts in which progressive education in Britain took root. Whilst progressivism has a long history, Dale considers that, 'After 1945, the climate for progressive education began gradually to improve'. The period from the early 1960s was characterised by quantitative expansion of education which made possible an improvement to the teacher-pupil ratio and which was favourable to the implementation of progressive methods. This was complemented by the 'licensed autonomy' of teachers from political control, which gave them some control over curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. However, this autonomy was limited by the social democratic alliance which framed educational thinking in the 1960s and 1970s, which was dominated by professional bodies, the reformism of the Labour party, and had limited links to a wider working class social movement. This meant that, in Britain, progressive education was

essentially a grassroots movement, appealing to and propelled by the new middle class.

Dale argues that the kinds of progressive education that gained purchase in the post-war period were those most compatible with (or those least incompatible with) the prevailing economic, political and economic climate. The dominant view, which tightened its grip as the rate of economic growth declined through the 1960s and into the early 1970s, was that of education as an effective means of providing manpower or human capital for an expanding economy. Faced with this, progressive educators had limited scope for changing the contents of schooling so focused their efforts on changing the process of schooling. At the same time, the dominance within educational thought of a Fabian strand of equal opportunities led to a focus on stressing the individual rather than the class or group benefits of schooling. Though never outlawed, progressive education was never legislated for, which meant that invariably the focus was on interstitial rather than system-wide changes. As Dale argued:

The forms of progressive education favoured in the climate of the Golden Age, then, were likely to be those directed at individuals rather than collectivities, emphasizing changes in process rather than changes in content, changes in practice rather than structure, school-based rather than system-wide, reformist rather than radical, and having a broad popular appeal rather than serving the needs of particular sections of the community. (p. 201)

The limited parameters of the post-war settlement:

1. Ruled out the possibilities for those strands of progressive education which relied on extra-systemic means for their achievement. The education system remained unchanged, and this stifled change. Dale speculates that this might explain the popularity of the 'de-schooling movement' amongst professional educators, which operated as a 'slogan system' rather than as a genuine force for change.
2. Meant that there was an absence of any coherent and effective organisation and support for progressive education.
3. Ensured a hostile press reaction, particularly in the case of the educational 'experiments' of the 1970s such as the William Tyndale School in Islington.
4. Led to a focus on the importance of the role of individual teachers in bringing about progressive educational change which ensured that the focus was on a form of child-centred progressivism, rather than collective, systemic change.

It is important to note that Dale's paper was published in the context of important debates within the sociology of education about the issue of economic determinism. He was keen to argue that the political economic context did not determine the fate of progressivism but that it set limits to what it could do and shaped the forms it took. A subtext in Dale's paper was that of the relationship between radicals working in the public sector (education,

health, social work etc.) and the capitalist state. And, coming back to the three texts discussed earlier, it is interesting to reflect on how the state appears in this work on radical education. For Fielding & Moss the role of the state is muted. It is clear that the 'common school' will be supported and sponsored by the state, but at the same time they make it clear that this is different from an earlier form of state schooling- the 'comprehensive school'. The state is an 'absent presence' in Facer's account, and the significant sources of 'agential change' operate at a more fine-grained scale. Woods says more about the state, suggesting that there is a fundamental shift from a paternal state (one which does things to or for people) to a 'relational state' (one which does things 'with' or 'alongside' people).

The analytical point I want to take from Dale's richly textured paper is that it is important to think about the limits to radical education that might be set by the existing and emerging 'settlement' around schooling, and the types of practices that will or not be sponsored or encouraged. This is surely still the case today, so we need to examine the limits of progressive or radical education in the light of the educational settlement that emerged in the post-1988 era and which is in 'crisis' today.

The Post-1988 Educational Settlement

The previous section focused on Dale's argument that the limits of progressive education were set by the wider characteristics of the post-war educational settlement. In this section I want to develop this point to suggest ways in which current 'progressive' developments in schooling are also being constructed within the limits of a 'new spirit of capitalism'.

Educational policy since 1988 has been marked by the commonsensical view that the purpose of schooling is to produce citizens suited to taking their place in the emerging 'new work order'. Of course, the establishment of this common-sense was not achieved without significant struggle, and required important changes in the nature of teachers' work, which was framed in a shift from licensed autonomy to constrained professionalism. The common sense was that education was about preparation for the world of work, and teachers work needed to be more closely monitored and measured. In line with this a 'managerial culture' developed which sought to devolve power away from local authorities and into the hands of head teachers and leadership teams. This was accompanied by a focus on school effectiveness and 'what works', reflected in the drive to improve 'standards' and ensure that 'every school is a great school'.

Whilst these development may have contributed to a 'de-professionalised' role for teachers, it has been accompanied by new forms of professional identity. Thus, through the 1990s and 2000s, a more optimistic aspect of the settlement evolved, one in which teachers were, to a certain extent, invited to contribute to the broad project of 'Third Way' modernization. At the heart of this project was a new capitalist imaginary, one which was less stuffy, more responsive, more fun, and ultimately, 'neat' or 'cool' (Rojek, 2007; McGuigan 2009). The old

image of the teacher in their battered jacket with chalky fingers and patches on their elbows is replaced by a cooler, more relaxed professional, at ease with the latest technology and 'down with the kids', an extended professional in flattened hierarchies and 'neat' organisations or 'knowledge producing schools'.

The development of these different 'arms' of schooling means that there is a uneasy tension in teachers' work. On one hand teachers' work is controlled, monitored and accounted for by new modes of performativity, whilst, on the other hand teachers are encouraged to develop new form of professional identity which contribute to broader projects of creativity, innovation and enterprise. These new opportunities are in line, I want to argue, with what the French sociologists Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello call 'the new spirit of capitalism'.

In recent years, a number of commentators have pointed to some important shifts in cultural production in advanced capitalism (e.g. Frank, 1997; Klein, 2000; Gilbert, 2008). They argue that capitalism has moved into a new stage of cultural development in which branding, advertising and marketing link consumption with popular empowerment. In effect, they argue that capitalism has learned from and appropriated powerful critiques about conformity, the counter-culture and environmental movement. For instance, in *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, Boltanski & Chiapello (1994) detect an important shift in the nature of capitalism in the 1980s and 1990s, which had incorporated critiques from the 1960s about social conformity, the bureaucratic nature of work, and lack of opportunity for creative expression. As a result, the management texts of the 1990s were characterised by a focus on individuality, creative expression and innovation. As a result, contemporary organisations are characterised by an emphasis on informality, the collapsing of unnecessary social distinctions, the expression of individuality and the flexibility of self. Boltanski & Chiapello provide a list of 'qualities that are guarantees of success in this new spirit':

autonomy, spontaneity, rhizomorphous capacity, multitasking,
conviviality, openness to others and novelty, availability, creativity,
visionary intuition, sensitivity to different, listening to lived
experience and receptiveness to a whole range of experiences.
(p. 97)

One of the interesting features of the new spirit of capitalism is the way it strives to be radical, to break down older traditional ways of doing things, requiring that new thinking is needed for new times. The corporations, organisations and individuals which thrive in the new capitalism are innovative, flexible and radical (in terms of corporations think Virgin, Apple, The Body Shop, for individuals think Bill Gates, Steve Jobs).

If we accept that there is a relationship between the wider economy and the content and process of schooling, then it is possible to see how schools themselves take on aspects of the 'new spirit of capitalism'. Thus, schools are increasingly urged to model themselves on the values of enlightened

corporations. Schools as bureaucratic organisations become learning organisations, there is talk of holistic leadership, democracy, customer (student) voice, and so on. Boltanski & Chiapello's argument that there is a new spirit of capitalism which is based around a new type of experience is paralleled in the moves for schools to re-imagine themselves as contributing to progressive or radical learning 'innovation'. Thus in many schools there is a positive focus on creativity, experimentation, re-designing learning, and new kinds of space and organisation, and the erosion of the boundaries between school and community. In the types of schooling associated with the new spirit of capitalism, those types of innovations that seem to challenge hierarchies, dispose of outmoded traditions, and cross boundaries will all be encouraged, since these are in line with how capital imagines itself. To make this point, I offer the following list of current developments in schools which, I suggest, are in line with 'the new spirit of capitalism':

- *Systems thinking and leadership.* There is a distinctive emphasis on 'systems thinking' which opposes the technocratic linear models of schooling;
- *Co-construction of knowledge.* The shift to a new form of knowledge economy or society entails major changes in how knowledge is conceptualised. There is a move away from the 'banking' metaphor to that of shared or collaborative learning. As David Hartley (2012) has it, rather than 'learning to labour', students in the new capitalism are expected to 'learn to co-labour';
- *Creativity.* The new capitalism is marked by a focus on play and creativity. Schools are increasingly urged to produce creativity within their students and to teach for 'the creative age';
- *Focus on community and new spaces of learning.* Schools are increasingly urged to forge new links with their communities, operate without walls, re-design learning spaces and experiment with age-grouping and inter-generational learning;
- *Student voice and social enterprise.* Schools are encouraged to be responsive to their 'customers' and to be 'entrepreneurial' in their operations, albeit in ways that enhance the social good;
- *Spiritualism and vitalism.* Many of these developments are underpinned by a broadly 'new age' philosophy which focuses on the importance of 'feeling' and 'passion' as well as 'thinking'. For instance the National College is sponsoring ideas about 'spiritual leadership'.

All of these developments or innovations are in line with the 'new spirit of capitalism'. These changes in the nature of capitalism as a system will necessarily set limits on the types of radical action that can develop around schooling. Thus it is no surprise that social enterprise becomes an important part of capital's response to the crisis along with moves to recognise student voice and co-constructive approaches to learning. New forms of teacher identity will be encouraged, not least those that stress the skills of networking and having a passion for learning.

Really Radical Schools?

The three books discussed earlier in this article are important contributions to the question of whether there are alternatives to capitalist schooling. The discussion of Dale's paper is important because it reminds us of the importance of seeing how educational ideals are shaped by, and to a large extent limited by political economic developments. Many of the things that seem different or innovative in contemporary schooling today can be understood as a response to the new requirements of capitalism for flexibility and motility. The freeing up of capital requires new types of schools and people, and desire and incentive for schools to become 'innovation hubs' should remind us of the need to critically assess these developments.

Since 2008, the shine has gone off this 'new economy', and this raises important questions about the future of capitalist schooling. The uncertainty that surrounds the future of schooling creates opportunities to develop forms of education that challenge the market-led models of the 1990s and 2000s. This will necessarily involve alternative conceptions of 'school improvement'. In his recent book *Visible Learning for Teachers*, school improvement 'guru' John Hattie (2012) set out a series of questions that could help identify a 'good school'. Against this, I think we could ask some questions that might identify how far schools are working to develop alternatives to the neo-liberal agenda:

1. To what extent do schools avoid the discourse of 'leadership'?
2. How do schools resist the urge to measure 'success'? Where they do measure, how do they strive to contextualise those measures and offer alternative views of success?
3. How do schools encourage teachers and students to pursue 'alternative hedonism'? Fast capitalism encourages us to think that every minute of every school day should be geared to improving learning power. But is this what is needed to live a good life?
4. How far do schools devise admissions policies that discourage the 'journey to work'? There are social justice and environmental goals at stake here.
5. Does the curriculum focus on 'really useful knowledge' that is geared to life in the present and future or generic skills of 'learning how to learn'?
6. To what extent are schools prepared to recognise that 85 percent of 'school effect' is accounted for by the social mix of their intake? How far do they refuse to enter into competition for students and avoid the temptation to claim 'success' as the outcome of the school's efforts to improve quality?

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