

Dialectical again

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Encyclopaedia of Marxism and Education

Alpesh Maisuria (editor), Leiden, Brill Academic Publishers, 2022.

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In early-2020, as a realisation about the seriousness of the Covid pandemic started to kick in, I lost count of the number of commentators citing Lenin's 'there are decades where nothing happens, and there are weeks where decades happen'. The quip certainly captured what felt like a seminal and jarring moment in many citizens' reorientation to labour, the state and technology.

It seems to me that the combination of huge amounts of monetary and fiscal support during the pandemic, the high levels of Western sovereign debt and an exponential trend in new technologies, have baked in enough economic and social volatility and 'awakened consciousness' for the TINA ('there is no alternative') doctrine that has dominated the world for the past few decades to appear to be now about as fragile as it has ever been. Such a doctrine has been characterised, amongst other things, by the offshoring of labour in Western countries, which has weakened the power of labour in these countries, the complexification of international supply chains that had suppressed volatility and inflation, and ultimately the formation of large monopolistic companies that have compromised regulators and nation states. Now there are whispers of 'de-globalisation' and attempts by some nations to accelerate 'reshoring' and 'friend-shoring' programmes. It has been labour not capital over the past couple of years which has been making more demands, with mixed results and a still very uncertain future.

Many of the authors of entries in the *Encyclopaedia of Marxism and Education* (EME) will have noted this backdrop whilst writing. Reviewing this book in April 2023 provides a good setting to assess how Marxist thought offers substantive critique, explanation and answers in our period of flux. The times seem 'dialectical' once again. But to what extent can Marxist thinking help explain our current situation? And importantly, what does it have to say about education?

Encyclopaedia of Marxism and Education, edited by Alpesh Maisuria, brings together a substantial 39 entries on a wide range of critical educational perspectives. It is one of several books in the series *Critical Understanding in Education*, that seeks to present readers with 'comprehensive and accurate portraits of the various disciplines'.¹ In this spirit, the editor of EME notes that the book is 'a collective endeavour of 51 authors, spanning 14 countries and five continents' (pxi). The introduction outlines five styles of

entry. First, attempting to negate the trope that Marxism is 'out of date', several chapters consider the role Marxism can play in grappling with current salient issues such as 'climate catastrophe' or 'technological developments' (p6). A second type focuses more specifically on the method and methodology for applying Marxism and education to a broad range of fields, such as disasters, human rights or the Middle East (p7). A third more 'definitional' set of entries looks to update and clarify 'perennial issues' within the Marxist tradition, such as historical materialism synthesised in the discussion of formal educational institutions, whereas a fourth set captures important canonical thinkers by explicating their 'legacy' and contributions to education (p7). Finally, a separate set of entries are connected through their 'discussion of class and its interaction with identity and politics' (p7).

Beyond the editor's description of five types of entries, I felt that some chapters are more distinguishably 'encyclopaedic', in that they set out thought-provoking but definitional discussions, such as that of poverty (Wrigley) or dialectical materialism (Skordoulis), whilst others are more wide-ranging, speculative and conversational. The book considers varied changes across a whole range of topics including the '4th Industrial Revolution', colonialisms and class, critical realism, poverty, liberation theology, green Marxism, public pedagogy and disaster education, as well as entries on seminal Marxist thinkers, including Rosa Luxemburg, Antonio Gramsci and Paulo Freire. The book provides the reader with a valuable starting reference point for those without a deep context in Marxist thought, but the entries are rich enough that those more versed will benefit from exploring how Marxism has things to say across so many fields and domains within education.

The rest of this review highlights two representative elements that I found valuable throughout the book: its role in highlighting the importance of Marxist thought in providing analytical clarity about concepts such as 'working class', and in accurately *naming* the 'by-products' of capitalist systems (such as poverty or exploitation, though there are many more); and how Marxist thought still plays a role in helping us to better understand rapid technological and societal and economic change.

On the first point, Terry Wrigley's² chapter 'Poverty: class, poverty and neoliberalism' reminds us that the Marxist understanding of class is that of an economic relationship, not the sociological one that attempts to tie in tastes, lifestyle and attitudes (p570). He uses Marxist theory to help examine the concept and significance of the 'working class' (p568), as well as show how many neoliberal policymakers and commentators have cynically reconstituted it away from its economic foundations. Class captures the position one has concerning the process of production, as well as the social and political consequences. It has little to do with one's occupation. It catches the inherent precarity of such an economic relationship, which builds in certain conditions: the 'potential for poverty and precarity is endemic to capitalism's working class' (p577). De-anchoring

class from its economic determinant also allows for uncomfortable consequences of the capitalist system to be explained away through trivial and individualised explanations. For example, a concept such as ‘poverty’ has been co-opted by recent UK chancellors like George Osborne, who referred to it as a ‘lifestyle choice’ (p578).

Within the domain of education, Wrigley also picks up how recent UK policy discourse changed the conversation from ‘social class’ to ‘disadvantaged pupils’, with the ‘dominant explanation’ for why these children fall behind now being because of their low aspirations. This framing removes much of the conversation around the fallout from deindustrialisation and poverty that still blights the lives of many children. Quoting Lauren Berlant, Wrigley notes the ‘cruel optimism’ embedded in the logic of expecting young people to buy into demands to raise their performance levels whilst opportunities for progress are so limited or stacked against them (p583).

Whereas Wrigley’s chapter helps provide analytical clarity about contested concepts through Marxist thought, several entries attempt to speak to the more unpredictable conditions and speculative futures that have emerged because of current technological changes. Dealing with the second point, Marxism is positioned by the book’s editor as a ‘live historical guide to thread education with the world for changing the status quo with the goal of emancipation’ (p7). Both the second chapter, James Avis’s ‘4th Industrial Revolution, post-capitalism, waged labour and vocational education’ and Peter Jendric’s ‘Postdigital Marxism’ provide the reader with some ways to think through some of the rapid changes occurring at this moment and their implications for education.

The 4th Industrial Revolution captures the integration of advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence, robotics and the Internet of Things into society, thereby fundamentally transforming the nature of work and the economy. James Avis’s chapter offers a valuable perspective on these themes, highlighting how Marxist theory can help us think through the implications of waged labour and vocational education (p8). One of the tensions at the heart of the 4th Industrial Revolution is how different commentators point to the ever-increasing concentration of capital and power being consolidated by certain companies rolling it out, versus the promise of abundance that such a technological revolution might bring. Avis *reimagines* vocational education in a world where uncertainty, precarity or mass unemployment dominate the labour market. Even if we are confronted by no large-scale unemployment, Avis quotes Autor and Saloman’s view that ‘technological progress does not lead to higher levels of unemployment but does result in a reduction in Labour’s share of value’ (p17). Undoubtedly, the 4th Industrial Revolution will form new markets, but it is not clear how many people will be needed to work in these markets. In the same vein, Jandrić’s chapter sets out that any post-digital Marxist education should start from a critique of capitalism, but it is now no longer possible to clearly distinguish between the technology and the system:

‘today’s technology is everywhere, and capitalism is built into today’s technology’ (citing another work by Jandrić and McLauren, 2020).

What does all this mean for education and educators? Above all other forms of education, vocational education is most explicitly understood as providing ‘a clear line of sight to waged labour’ (Commission on Adult Vocational Teaching and Learning quoted by Avis, p21), but where such employment is threatened, what role might it play? For Avis, vocational education may instead become a ‘type of public pedagogy’ focused on ‘really useful labour’ and a space ‘freed from its association with capitalism’ (p22). Such a thing would have to be won through ‘an anti-capitalist struggle seeking to transform the social formation’ (p22). For Jandrić, such a condition needs critical educators to use ‘Marxism, critical pedagogy, philosophy of technology media studies and various other fields’ to work through the myriad of philosophical, ethical, and methodological issues that are associated with all this coming together. For Wrigley, the message is even simpler: a recognition of shared interests between teachers and children – ‘solidarity, not charity’ (p578).

Several entries helpfully build in a view of the world ‘post-Covid’, including how precarity now extends across all social classes worldwide (such as in Therborn’s ‘Middle classes of the world’). Domestically (writing from the UK), we are confronted by a disjuncture of now very public mind-bending leaps in genetic research (such as CRISPR DNA sequencing and gene editing) or the potential of artificial intelligence (most recently typified through the launch of large language models such as ChatGPT), but not enough public sector staff or well-maintained buildings to get the basics right. Tying together his introduction, Maisuria points to Marxism’s longevity because it provides both a necessary intellectual resource to the ongoing historical development of the world as well as its ability to keep recalibrating itself through dialogue.

In the past few months, new technology and its rapid deployment have made making future predictions almost futile. I certainly feel it personally, in my work advising students or as a parent trying to formulate sound advice that might last long enough to be useful. The speed of change we currently experience is disorienting and its impact on labour relations (though uncertain) will be highly dislocating. Capitalism is once again reinventing itself. It necessitates careful thought and critical analysis. If we take at face value that Marxism recalibrates itself through dialogue with the world, it will not be long before a second edition of this Encyclopaedia is needed.

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Notes

1. See the full series Critical Understanding in Education (Reynolds and Porfilio) Critical Understanding in Education, <https://brill.com/display/serial/CUE>
2. The book is dedicated to Terry Wrigley who sadly died during the final stages of the production of the volume.