**'Yes, but how do we get there?' Alternative visions and the problem of strategy**

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> "These gentlemen don't fear ideas that float in the air, that are written on paper, or that appear in printed or spoken form. What they fear is organization - organized action, organized attempts to bring these ideas to fruition." (Ernest Mandel)[1]

The motivation to write this paper arises from a recognition that in England a new phase in neo-liberal education is emerging whose apparent attractions may encourage illusions and disarm opposition, that responding to it from a socialist and/or Marxist perspective requires, as always, not just an alternative vision but a strategic conception, and that little has been written which articulates the strategy which informs the activity of many activists in education. This is an initial attempt to make it more explicit. I hope it will be seen as a contribution to a collective discussion.

The Labour government's compulsion to transform the school system to align it with its economic objectives has led it to develop a powerful repertoire of strategies for change. The combination of government regulation, market relationships, financial incentives, technologies of school leadership and management generated by the school improvement industry, and the use of the private sector as an agent of change, has proved to be an effective policy toolkit for engineering neo-liberal educational reform.

This strategic offensive has of course provoked widespread criticism from teachers and their unions and from academic critics: opposition which derives from alternative conceptions, more or less defensive, more or less formulated, more or less radical, of what school should be like. But alternative visions imply strategies to achieve them, and while policy critiques are plentiful, the problem of strategy in relation to alternatives is much less discussed in academic contexts.

The most obvious strategy available to teachers, of course, is to pragmatically take advantage of whatever spaces are available within the neo-liberal policy context. Many writers have stressed how the performativity agenda has constrained and

distorted the professional ideologies, identities and practices of teachers. However, even in England today, as Terry Wrigley says in his book *Another School is Possible*: 'The picture is not all negative. We all know of innovative and experimental practice that is taking place in schools. There is scope for creativity and fun despite the unwarranted level of prescription.' (2006, p113)

There are now clear indications of a significant change in the dominant discourse which is widening the opportunities for progressive practice. The cause is the recognition by government and by the educationists who exercise most influence over government policy (Michael Fullan, David Hargreaves, David Hopkins etc) that the initial phase of Labour education policy, based on a prescriptive 'standards agenda', has run out of steam. The rise in SATs and GCSE scores has plateaued, equality gaps remain large, and creativity in teaching and learning has been sacrificed. These writers may differ about whether the 'standards agenda' was a necessary shock tactic in order to root out the old culture and impose the new, but there is general agreement about the new approach which is needed. It represents a new phase and model of neo-liberal education. It can be summed up schematically as follows:

| Neo-liberal education Mk 1 | Neo-liberal education Mk 2 |
| --- | --- |
| Government leads reform | Schools lead reform |
| Competition | Collaboration |
| Top-down hierarchy | Lateral networks |
| Standardisation | Personalisation |
| Prescriptive teaching | Creative teaching for creative learning |
| 'Traditional academic' curriculum | QCA Secondary Curriculum Review; vocational pathways |
| Bureaucratic accountability | 'Intelligent accountability' |

The centrepiece of the new model is the QCA's Secondary Curriculum Review, due to be implemented in 2008. Its aims are to enable greater flexibility, more creativity, and more cross-curricular coherence (Education Guardian 2007). There are clearly elements of this new model which are more hospitable to progressive teaching, and many teachers, and whole schools, are already beginning to take advantage of a regime which is more relaxed in some respects. Any moves away from the restrictions

of the prescriptive 'standards agenda' towards teaching and learning which is more innovative and creative are clearly to be welcomed. (Much of the work schools are doing with Creative Partnerships is a good example.) [2]

But it is important to resist illusions that these curriculum reforms and the other associated changes can be the basis of a new and unambiguously progressive policy consensus. These reforms do not contradict the neo-liberal function of the school system. The underpinning rationale remains the production of an economically competitive workforce, given added urgency by the warning of the Leitch report (2006) that Britain's economic competitiveness will suffer by 2020 unless the workforce is better trained. The purpose therefore of the Mk 2 model is not to depart from the neo-liberal project but, on the contrary, to take it forward more effectively by ameliorating the abrasiveness and counter-productive effects of the Mk 1 model. These reforms do not replace the 'performativity' agenda of targets, SATs, GCSE scores, league tables, Ofsted, and performance management of teachers, they sit within it and are steered and evaluated by it. Creativity can be harnessed to business entrepreneurialism. Elements of the Mk 2 model such as personalisation and vocationalism contribute to the perpetuation of patterns of social inequality. And of course privatisation remains as a policy lever. As Wrigley acknowledges, progressive teaching can actually satisfy the performance agenda better: 'Ironically, in those places where teachers have taken liberties, the only impact on test results has been beneficial.' (2006, p113)

**Socially critical teaching and learning**

For many teachers and educationists their alternative vision goes beyond more creative teaching and learning. It seeks to develop learning which is socially critical. Wrigley has argued (2006, p99) that 'we can make spaces for socially critical learning' in the existing curriculum, and some teachers do. The Mark 2 model offers greater opportunities for this, and even contains elements which positively encourage it. For example, the QCA Secondary Curriculum Review says:

The school's curriculum should enable young people to:

- investigate and reflect on the social, moral and political problems and ethical issues they encounter in life, the media and through learning
- explore and debate ethical issues to try to make sense of real situations and develop their own sense of moral judgement in dealing with them
- engage with those in authority, challenge injustice and make a difference to things they feel strongly about
- discuss where values and rights conflict and compete and the need to balance rights with responsibilities in their lives
- develop an ethical vocabulary, which they can use to reflect on their own behaviour and the behaviour of others. (QCA 2007)

This raises three interrelated questions. First, how 'critical' is socially critical pedagogy? How does it conceptualise the object of its critique? To what extent does it go beyond developing a critical understanding of specific issues and enable pupils and students to develop a critical understanding of capitalist society itself?

Second, to what extent will teachers take advantage of the opportunities to develop a socially critical pedagogy? While some do and will continue to do so, there are two powerful factors which will constrain many others. One is that the professional philosophy of many teachers excludes the socially critical, either because it is not reflective of their own personal political stance or because, whatever their personal views, they do not think it appropriate to 'politicise' their teaching. (A problem acknowledged in a seminal article by Quintin Hoare in 1965.) The second factor is fear of risking negative repercussions, whether in the form of disapproval by school management, criticism by Ofsted, or a fall in measured pupil performance as a result of departing from the apparent safety of prescriptive teaching.

The third question is how can teachers best respond to and counter the constraints imposed on socially critical pedagogy by the continuing existence of the regulatory framework of the Mark 2 model: the national curriculum, SATs, GCSE and Diploma scores, Ofsted, and school managerialism?

A strategy for an alternative vision of education in schools has to be able to provide an answer to these three issues: content, consciousness and control.

## 'Revolutionary critical pedagogy'

Let me begin with the first issue: the content of socially critical pedagogy. I am going to approach this through a discussion of some of the ideas of a group of marxist educationists: the American writer Peter McLaren and two British co-thinkers, Paula Allman and Glenn Rikowski. I am taking this approach not because they are particularly influential among teachers in Britain - McLaren for example is scarcely known in this country, though, with Giroux and Apple, he is probably the best known current radical critic in the field of education in the USA - but because they represent in some respects an extreme position which in my view does not provide an answer to the three questions for strategy which I have posed above, but which a discussion of will allow me to develop, from a Marxist perspective, a different strategic conception.

Much of their work is taken up with elaborating a Marxist critique of neo-liberal education policy and of capitalism itself. McLaren in particular is a relentless and savage critic of American government policy. In education they criticise the 'domestication' of the 'critical pedagogy' tradition.

> Today critical pedagogy is no longer the dangerous critic of free market liberal education that it once was. Rather, it has become so absorbed by the cosmopolitanized liberalism of the post-modernized left that it no longer serves as a trenchant challenge to capital and U.S. economic and military hegemony. (McLaren and Jaramillo 2007, p34)

They counterpose to it what they call 'revolutionary critical pedagogy'.

> The key to resistance, in our view, is to develop a revolutionary critical pedagogy that will enable the working class to discover not only how the use-value of their labour-power is being exploited by capital but also how working-class initiative and power can destroy this type of determination and force a recomposition of class relations by directly confronting capital in all of its multi-faceted dimensions. (Allman, McLaren and Rikowski 2003, p176; see also Allman, McLaren and Rikowski 2005, p163)

> Critical educators have always attacked standardized testing for reducing knowledge to its numerically determinable value. They have attacked pedagogical authoritarianism and rote learning and the silencing of student

voices. They have celebrated diversity and creativity and fought against racial segregation and racism, sexism and homophobia and they have done much more. Despite this, they have not challenged the formal structure of the capitalist system and the ownership of the means of production. (McLaren and Jaramillo 2007, p34)

I want to consider the 'revolutionary critical pedagogy' approach (henceforth RCP) from the point of view of its consequences for strategy.

First, RCP tends to see the class struggle in education as primarily a battle of ideas. School is an 'ideological state apparatus' and the task is to challenge capitalist ideology with anti-capitalist ideas. For McLaren, for example,

> My goal is simply to educate teachers and teacher educators about Marx's ideas and the Marxist tradition, and dispel the lies and distortions that have crusted over Marx's legacy since the United States emerged victorious from the Cold War. (McLaren 2003)

This is a vital task which McLaren and his co-thinkers have systematically pursued in numerous publications. But it tends to result in an overly 'ideational' perspective on how school works for capital which has decisive implications for strategy.

I would want to stress, following Althusser, that 'ideological state apparatuses', of which the school is a prime example, work primarily by inscribing individuals in material practices [3]. This Gramscian conception of hegemony has been usefully restated by Stuart Hall:

> The superstructures, in which this essential work is undertaken, work especially through ensuring consent - through ideology. Marx called them, in fact the 'ideological forms'. But it is quite incorrect to regard the superstructures as achieving their effects *solely* by means of the 'battle for ideas' - that is, through ideology or cultural (in the narrow sense) nomination exclusively. The structures of the political system, religious institutions, the state, education and the media are structures in their own right. They are distinct apparatuses, and sustain their own practices. They do not operate simply by winning control over the ideas in the heads of the subordinate classes. They 'work' because they insert classes of men into specific practices and relationships, and 'conform', constrain and develop their behaviour so as to secure that the subordinate classes act 'in conformity' with the new types of civilisation required of them.
>
> The winning of consent and the work of conformity in the superstructure cannot, therefore, be reduced to the play of ideology or what is sometimes called 'cultural domination' (if, by culture, we mean principally the realm of ideas). The

> subordinate classes are 'ethically developed' in a subordinate direction, not because they are made to hold confused ideas about what their position or their destiny in the system really is, but because this subordination is constantly and effectively *realized* in the real structures and relationships in which they are obliged to live out their relations to the requirements of the whole system. (Hall 1977, p55)

Of particular importance in the school system are the ideational consequences of regulatory and structural practices. To give just one example: the ways in which the SATs testing regime can powerfully and negatively shape children's identities (Reay 2003). This is not to say that the 'battle of ideas', in terms of curriculum content, is unimportant: on the contrary, it remains crucial for any critical pedagogy. But RCP's focus on the ideational struggle tends to neglect the *material* ways in which capitalist ideology works, and consequently tends to under-estimate the significance of resistance to them, a point I will return to when I look at campaigns against SATs and Academies.

I turn now to the second and third criteria for strategy: the interrelated issues of the changing of teachers' consciousness and the resistance to state repression.

A striking feature of the writing of RCP advocates is the almost total absence of examples of RCP in practice in schools. This is true of Allman and Rikowski but most evident in McLaren because of the volume of his publications. To give just one example: in McLaren's latest book *Pedagogy and Praxis in the Age of Empire* (McLaren and Jaramillo 2007) I can only find a single reference to an actual case. It is in a section headed 'Toward a grassroots education', it comprises only one paragraph, and, significantly, it is not about anti-capitalist curricula but about a coalition of parents, teachers, students, and other activists opposing 'high stakes testing that would limit access by seniors to high school diplomas when they have not had sufficient opportunity to learn' (McLaren and Jaramillo 2007, p81). Yet examples do exist in the US, not least the well-known work of the *Rethinking Schools* collective.

How can this extraordinary discrepancy between the strength of advocacy of RCP and the inability to produce examples of it in practice (which would be the strongest evidence of its viability as a strategy) be explained? I think it is the product of two factors. One is that the vast majority of teachers in the US and the UK do not share their revolutionary Marxist politics and therefore will not adopt an RCP approach.

The other is that anti-capitalist teaching is subject to state repression and this is an effective deterrent. In my view RCP does not have a credible answer in terms of strategy to address these two problems.

Let me begin with the problem of state repression. In his book *Another School is Possible* Terry Wrigley says 'We need to realise, of course, that there are limits to what a capitalist ruling class will tolerate in educational reform' (Wrigley 2007, p99). The advocates of RCP offer several different views of what those limits are. According to Dave Hill, a co-writer of McLaren and Rikowski,

> ... the capitalist State will seek to destroy any forms of pedagogy *that attempt to educate students regarding their real predicament - to create an awareness of themselves as future labour-powers and to underpin this awareness with critical insight that seeks to undermine the smooth running of the social production of labour-power.* (Greaves, Hill and Maisuria 2007) (Italics in original)

This leaves little or no space for anti-capitalist teaching. However, for Allman, small-scale prefigurative pedagogic projects are possible:

> ... .it seems to me that prior to revolution our project is an oppositional one - that is, a critique of existing conditions, a counter-hegemonic project, based on small-scale projects that offer the experience of transformed relations ... ' (1999, pp119-120).

In reality this is a leftist version of the progressive curriculum reformers' problematic, using whatever spaces are available. In contrast, for Rikowski,

> What is being advanced here is that an anti-capitalist education needs to drive out the state in contemporary education and banish it to fulfil useful functions such as generating finance for education, setting qualifications and inspections. All this should be done in line with those that should really run the schools: teachers, students, other school workers, parents and workers and others in local communities. If this was attained, the problems with the state clamping down on radical educational experiments [ ... ] would start to ease. (2004, p565)

The idea that 'an anti-capitalist education' can 'drive out the state in contemporary education' is both utopian and reformist. Rikowski's view is idiosyncratic within the field of education but it reflects the position on revolutionary strategy and the state argued by John Holloway's (2002) book *Change the World Without Taking Power, The Meaning of Revolution Today*. As the title indicates, the target of Holloway's polemic is the Marxist position on the state. He argues that social relations can be

directly transformed simply by the social practices of the oppressed.[4] Holloway is cited approvingly by Rikowski and by McLaren (e.g. Rikowski 2006; McLaren and Farahmandpur 2005b). In a reply to Holloway, Daniel Bensaid (2007) argues that Holloway's position was the product of the post-Seattle period when neo-libertarian utopias, in which the world can be changed without taking state power, were prominent within the 'anti-globalisation' movement. The defeat of social movement campaigns in Europe (with the partial exception of the campaign against the First Employment Contract in France) coupled with victories in Latin America in which the state is central (Venezuela, Bolivia) have opened up a new debate on strategy. In his most recent publication McLaren, referring to this debate (McLaren and Jaramillo 2007, pp43-6), adopts a changed position, rejecting Holloway and apparently affirming (his formulations are not without some ambiguity) the traditional Marxist position on the state.

## What space is there for socially critical teaching?

What space then is there for socially critical, even explicitly anti-capitalist, teaching and learning in the state school system? First, my starting point is a recognition that there is no simple mapping of the 'needs of capital' onto government policy which would draw fixed boundaries of what is acceptable and what is not. While the state is inextricably tied to capital and acts to ensure the reproduction of the conditions of capital accumulation, the government also has its own interests, above all its electoral interests as a party to stay in office. Following Bob Jessop (2002), the state is not a simple functional mechanism for reproducing capitalist relations of production. The institutional separation of the state from the market economy results in different and even potentially contradictory institutional logics.

> Accordingly, one must pay careful attention to the structurally inscribed strategic selectivity of the specific state forms and political regimes; and move away from abstract, often essentialist theorization towards more detailed accounts of the complex interplay of social struggles and institutions. (Jessop 2002, p41)

A case in point in education in England today is the debate around the government's policy for 14-19 education. Are the new vocational pathways and diplomas best explained in terms of meeting the needs of employers for future workers with these qualifications, or is the government's real motivation best understood, as Allen and

Ainley (2007) argue, in terms of social control, creating curricula and qualifications the purpose of which is not to meet actual labour market needs but to provide a more effective route to keep 'non-academic' young people within the education system?

Secondly, as Raymond Williams points out, hegemony does not require the immediate suppression of all opposition (especially in a liberal democracy):

> Thus we have to recognise the alternative meanings and values, the alternative opinions and attitudes, even some alternative senses of the world, which can be accommodated and tolerated within a particular effective and dominant culture. This has been much under-emphasized in our notions of a superstructure, and even in some notions of hegemony. (Williams 1976, pp206-7)

A case in point in the school system is the feasibility of headteachers, by virtue of the degree of autonomy in their role as mediator between government and classroom, tolerating or even encouraging socially critical teaching.

Consequently, to answer Wrigley's point, the limits to what a capitalist ruling class will tolerate in educational reform are conjuncturally and situationally specific. The boundaries are drawn by the political balance of forces and by conjunctural mediating factors in specific social contexts, and only become definitively visible through the acts of either challenging or imposing them.

Up till now left critics of neo-liberal education policy (and I include myself) have tended to see what I have called the Mk 1 model as the ideal version, realised most fully in England under New Labour, towards which all other countries are converging because it corresponds most effectively to the economic requirements of capitalism. I think we have to reconsider this analysis, at least in the advanced capitalist countries, for two reasons. First, because the majority of the advanced capitalist countries, many of them with economies which are at least as successful as Britain's (Germany, France, the Scandinavian countries, for example; we can also add the case of Scotland within the UK) have not adopted the Blairite model. It can be argued that it is only a matter of time, that England was first because Thatcher removed the political obstacles which other governments are still struggling with. But they have also had the advantage - and this is my second reason - of seeing how the Mk 1 model has worked in practice in England, and the extent to which it is dysfunctional for capital in a number of ways, economically, socially, and politically, which is why it is being

replaced by the Mk 2 model. The conclusions I draw are the following. First, that the contribution of education to economic competitiveness is quite problematic, as against the simple equation that the Labour government promulgates. Second, that because national contexts are deep-rootedly specific, there is no single 'best buy' education system for capitalism: many different variants, resulting from local historical determinants and political compromises, can serve the purpose adequately. This is not to deny that there is a process of convergence driven by the Lisbon strategy's economic objectives (explicitly promoted by the EU's Open Method of Coordination), but to recognise that a wide repertoire of progressive and socially critical teaching methods and content can be harnessed to those objectives in a system of semi-autonomous schools steered and regulated by rigorous evaluation systems. That does not necessarily mean that they have been domesticated or eviscerated of any radical significance, as some of the examples Terry Wrigley gives from England, Scotland, Norway, Germany and Spain illustrate (2006, pp85, 98-9, 101, 107, 108-9, and 117-127). (The limitation of Wrigley's examples, and especially his extended case studies of two schools in Germany and Spain is that they lack a socially critical cutting edge.)

## How can socially critical teaching develop?

In that context, how do teachers' ideas change and how can socially critical teaching develop? First, a reliance primarily on the exposition of Marxist ideas is not a strategy for changing the consciousness of the mass of teachers. It is a basic tenet of Marxism that it is through the experience of struggle that ideas change.

> Elementary class struggle, elementary class organization and elementary class consciousness are born, then, *directly out of* action, and only the experience arising out of that action is able to develop and accelerate consciousness. It is a general law of history that only through action are *broad masses* able to elevate their consciousness. (Mandel 1971, p4)

It is in the context of *action* that socialist and Marxist ideas have the greatest purchase, not just on a small minority of individuals but on a whole culture. What sorts of actions are teachers, or can teachers be, engaged in? Here we can distinguish between action inside the classroom and outside.

Many teachers want to introduce some elements of socially critical teaching into their classrooms. Only a minority of them will do so in the form of a fully-rounded socialist

or Marxist world view. For most it is an uneven process of partial reforms, because it is particular social issues rather than a holistic critique which teachers will bring into their teaching: climate change, war, racism, gender relations, and so on. In many cases these represent the importation into the school of mass campaigning issues in the wider society. It is a process over time of trying things out, evaluating the responses of pupils and students, making changes, gradually pushing the boundaries further. Pursuing all of these issues in a critical perspective has the potential to lead to a fundamental questioning of capitalist society.

This strategy can be pursued on an individual level, but it is much more powerful if it is organised collectively, within and across schools. The teachers unions and subject associations like NATE (the National Association for the Teaching of English) can provide hospitable networks, and current developments around whole-school change and networking across schools may provide favourable opportunities. Perhaps the most widespread recent examples in the UK of such collective mobilisations of professional opinion on curriculum issues (though they had little success in influencing government policy at the time) took place around the introduction of the national curriculum in the late 1990s, in particular challenging the proposals for English and history.

Outside the classroom teachers have been involved in organised collective action on a number of issues in the last few years: over SATs, Academies, and privatisation, and over teachers' pay and conditions.[5] Notably these have not been over curriculum content, though, as I have argued earlier, the testing regime and structural issues such as Academies are material forms in which capitalist educational ideology is embodied and secreted, shaping and naturalising patterns of social differentiation. In that sense campaigns against them have decisive implications for the curriculum: for who gets taught what where, and the meaning it has for them. As for struggles over pay and conditions, they do not necessarily have any impact in the classroom in terms of socially critical teaching: they can represent simply a militant form of sectoral professionalism. But they can also create a climate of confidence among teachers which can spill over into the classroom, encouraging a challenge there too to the dominant order, and they can provide methods of struggle on which curriculum campaigns can draw as they come up against the limits of negotiable reform.

If organised collective action is the most effective way of changing teachers' consciousness, not just radicalising individuals but having an impact on a whole culture, it is equally the most effective way of resisting attempted state repression of socially critical education. In fact it is inconceivable that the boundaries of what is acceptable in the school system to the dominant class can be challenged and significantly extended except on the basis of a powerful organised movement. Furthermore, teachers cannot achieve radical change on their own. Just as the imposition of the neo-liberal project in education could not have been achieved without the relatively successful mobilisation of popular support, a counter-hegemonic project is equally dependent on building popular support for alternatives. The strategy of collective action therefore has to encompass constructing broader alliances for change, involving parents, school students, local communities, and the whole constituency of working people and oppressed groups who have a common class interest in an emancipatory education.

The form such organised collective action tends to take is that of alliances, coalitions, united fronts, which can bring together a range of political-educational positions on the basis of common campaigning objectives. I will illustrate this by examining some examples in education in England, but before I do I want to comment on how the united front strategy relates to RCP's conceptions.

On a number of occasions McLaren explicitly advocates a united front strategy. For example:

> ... we need to create a united front, which means winning the working-class base of the electorate over to the struggle for a socialist alternative to capitalism. We need to build our struggle around demands and through organizational forms that can be shared by diverse political forces. This means increasing efforts at radicalizing the labor movement, which works overwhelmingly within a reformist logic. Struggles along this line have never been easy in the United States . Since the Battle of Seattle, there have, however, been promising signs. The anti-war movement, especially the ANSWER (Act Now to Stop War and End Racism) coalition, was able to bring together divergent groups that took a strong stand against the war, and against US imperialism, ... (McLaren 2003).

And again:

> ' ... the idea of reform and revolutionary transformation has often been erroneously contraposed in critical pedagogy. We do not crudely juxtapose these terms as much as we "mediate" them -- pushing reform further and further to the edges of bourgeois social and economic relations. We do not consider reform efforts incompatible with the larger anticapitalist struggle. (McLaren and Farahmandpur 2005a, p246)

But in terms of education in the US it remains an abstract and undeveloped theme in McLaren's writing because he makes virtually no reference to actual struggles and campaigning organisations, even though there are numerous examples such as those reported in Jean Anyon's (2005) book *Radical Possibilities.* How can this absence be explained? I would suggest that it is the product of an unacknowledged tension in McLaren's work between a recognition at a formal level of the need for a united front strategy and the desire to draw a sharp distinction between RCP and what he regards as domesticated and embourgeoisified critical pedagogy. It is the latter impulse which carries the greater weight in his thinking, and the outcome is a failure in his writing to engage positively with both progressive campaigning and progressive pedagogic initiatives which are not explicitly revolutionary (which of course means the vast majority), even though, as I have argued, they provide the most favourable contexts in which, through united activity, more radical ideas can have a purchase. What I think is missing is an understanding of the development of political consciousness by teachers as a *learning process* which takes them through zones of proximal development from progressive to socially critical to, with the right support, socialist and Marxist perspectives.

What is a tension in McLaren's work between RCP and the united front is resolved by Rikowski in terms of the former, with an argument that takes him beyond the terrain of Marxism. His thesis begins from the correct premise that labour power is capitalism's 'weakest link' but draws the erroneous conclusion that because labour power is produced by education therefore education is the strategically most important terrain of class struggle.

> This politics of human resistance does not really exist in any explicit form today. At its heart is opposition (human resistance) to the reduction of education and training to labour power production. This entails a relentless focus on this form of resistance as the most significant anti-capitalist strategy. It has the potential to be the most effective anti-capitalist strategy as it drives at capital's *weakest link*: labour power. (Rikowski 2006)

This is a fundamental misunderstanding of the significance of education as a field of class struggle. Not only is this mechanical economism not shared by any current on the Left today, it cannot be found in the works of Marx himself or in the historical experience of the Marxist movement. (In fact it echoes the classic reformist position that education is the key to resolving social inequality.) The strategic conclusion Rikowski draws actually cuts off and isolates education from the struggles against the capitalist state which provide a basis for the sorts of united front's McLaren advocates and which, in the curriculum, provide the bridge for both teachers and students to move towards a critical understanding of capitalist society.

On this analysis, existing Left groups and parties tend to merely react to events (wars, atrocities, government and ministerial corruption, atrocious business behaviour and so on), bolster opportunism and seek to "engage the masses" on the politically hot but adventitious topic of the day. Thus: they tend to act in an unprincipled manner through ignoring the *raison d'être* of Marxism: i.e. providing the analytic tools to locate capital's fragility, and especially its weakest link - and then use these insights to keep hammering away at this particular weakness as a priority. (Rikowski 2006)

**Education struggles in England**

I want to test the 'collective action strategy' hypothesis by examining three of the most significant struggles which have taken place in education in England since the introduction of comprehensive education in the 1960s. What they have in common is that they are based on a strategy of collective campaigning by broad alliances of teachers, parents, students, and labour movement and community organisations, and that politically they are united front's encompassing a range of political positions from what might be called liberal-democratic to Marxist.

Collective struggles in education in England (and I am referring here particularly to the past four decades) represent a hidden history which has largely been neglected by academics, even those on the left. Ken Jones has noted that

> ... there is a tendency to overlook forms of social practice that are central to education but not easy to assimilate within the frame of policy-focused work. This tendency is especially marked when it comes to recognition of those collective social actors which policy has sought to render subordinate - trade

unions, social movements, oppositional fragments. Such agents thus find themselves doubly marginalised - by a policy regime which both aims at and proclaims their subordination, and by a research paradigm in which they figure mostly as defeated or historically exhausted forces. (Jones 2005, p228)

A case in point is Stephen Ball's recent book on privatisation in education (Ball 2007), which makes no mention of campaigns of resistance until the penultimate paragraph, even though there have been vigorous national and local campaigns against, for example, Academies, and Building Schools for the Future as a vehicle for the outsourcing of council services. Another recent example is Helen Gunter's (2007) critique of the remodelling of the workforce, which only makes passing reference to the NUT's (National Union of Teachers) refusal to take part in the government's Rewards and Incentives Group and no mention at all of the resistance which the NUT and the NASUWT (National Association of Teachers Union of Women Teachers) have led in a number of schools around the country, including industrial action in some cases, which has resulted in management withdrawing its proposals.

Disinterring this hidden history is a vital task because it puts into question the current dominant discourse of educational change, promoted by government and 'school improvement' theorists, that educational change is a top-down process whereby progressive reforms are introduced by government and implemented by visionary headteachers. A recognition of the role of collective struggle in education validates the agency of teachers and communities: their ability to make policy themselves, and to construct new collective agents of change.

## 1. 1970s-80s gender and race

The 1970s and the first half of the 1980s, between the introduction of comprehensive education and the defeat of the teachers' strike, followed by the 1988 Act, were a period of radical curriculum innovation by teachers. As the authors of *Unpopular Education* (Education Group 1981) noted,

> ' ... another response is to push the autonomy of the classroom to its limits, a strategy associated historically, first with various kinds of progressivism, latterly with a more specifically socialist or feminist conception of educational content or pedagogy. The history of this practical radicalism within teaching is largely hidden, though well-known through the personal experiences of many teachers. This allowed a space for the development of non-capitalist element in the

> curricular and some limited transformations of the authority-relations of teachers and taught. Less commonly, an alternative or oppositional conception of the content and modes of education came to be linked with an alternative social goal, or a view of what it was actually like to be working-class in a capitalist society, or oppressed as a woman or a black person.' (p92)

At the cutting edge of this movement were the issues of gender and racial equality. Madeleine Arnot (1991) has provided one of the few analyses of what she too notes is a hidden history:

> ... in recent reassessments of the New Right and conservative educational reforms it is rare to find anything other than lip service to the significance of feminist and black struggles in education. (p461)

It was a grassroots movement by teachers to make their own curriculum reforms, influenced by the wider women's movement and Black and antiracist movement, and supported by their unions, in particular by the NUT. There were

> ' ... multitudinous small scale initiatives set up by teachers and schools under the umbrella of equal opportunities, and what came to be called multicultural education. Such initiatives relied more often upon teachers' voluntary effort and commitment than upon government funding. They drew attention to the need to challenge conventional attitudes and expectations about gender roles, and to overcome the levels of ignorance of other cultures, found even in multicultural schools. (p452)

Initiatives on gender and race equality have largely grown out of teachers' and grass-roots community struggles to reform education. They represent, therefore, an attempt at promoting change from 'within' schools, through 'bottom up' strategies rather than the 'top down' approach normally associated with social engineering. (p460)

Within the broad movement there developed a complex debate between its more moderate and radical wings which distinguished multicultural from anti-racist education, and 'girl-friendly' from anti-sexist education. The more radical currents recognised the limits of consensual change and saw the need for a strategy of collective campaigning based on strategic alliances between teachers and wider forces. On gender, anti-sexist education was a dimension of the women's movement. On racial equality, a strategic alliance was constructed between teachers (in their large majority, white) and organisations of the Black community.

Another element in the emerging system of alliances was local left Labour councillors, among whom were a new minority of Black councillors. Local education authorities, particularly in London with the Inner London Education Authority, and many local councils under left Labour control, were seen as vehicles for change.

> Those committed to anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-heterosexist education or, indeed, socialist education increasingly saw the need for stronger state intervention and to move beyond consensual change as the principle governing reform. The struggle for reform shifted attention to the powers of the local authorities to promote equal opportunities. Community and feminist campaigning groups exploited the possibilities of local democratic structures, sometimes with great success. Radical feminist, socialist and black teachers campaigned for sex and race equality politics, along with black community groups and teacher unions.
>
> Egalitarian policies, therefore, became associated with a particular and forceful brand of municipal socialism. (Arnot 1991, pp455-6)

In the case of anti-racist education we can track in detail a series of events which comprised the campaign. Perhaps the most important starting point was Bernard Coard's pamphlet *How the West Indian child is made educationally subnormal in the British school system* (1971/2006). This was not intended as an academic publication but as a popular pamphlet around which numerous public meetings took place in the black community. It was followed in the 1970s by threats of boycotts by the Black Parents Movement, by action by black school students (e.g. the strike at Tulse Hill school), and by alliances between black and white activists. The pressure was stepped up in the late 1970s by the rise of the National Front (accompanied by a number of racist murders) and the successful mass popular opposition to it by the Anti-Nazi League, Rock Against Racism and similar organisations. In education, the response was the formation of the influential campaigning organisation ALTARF (All-London Teachers Against Racism and Fascism). The 1980s began with riots involving black youth in Bristol, Brixton and elsewhere, which led to further steps by local authorities to develop policies on racial equality, amid a succession of local struggles. For example, the Campaign Against Racism's campaign for reforms at Daneford School in east London in 1985, where after 11 people were arrested on a picket of the education offices, over 70 schools took unofficial strike action and over 2000 teachers demonstrated in protest. At William Patten Infant School in north London the staff closed the school for a day to take part with parents in a deputation to the Home

Office to protest against the threatened deportation of two Turkish pupils, and later produced a book and a video about the campaign. (Troyna 1993, Hatcher 1997).

## 2. The anti-SATs movement

In 1993 a campaign began against the new SATs tests. According to Bernard Regan, a participant in the campaign:

> ... the campaign was largely begun by a group of teachers belonging to the London Association for the Teaching of English (LATE) and activists from the STA [*Socialist Teachers Alliance - the main left current within the NUT*] working together. They developed a thorough critique of the impact of the SATs on the teaching and learning of English within schools taking this through to their national organisation the National Association for the Teaching of English and importantly into the National Union of Teachers to which the majority, though not all, belonged. (Regan 2007)

LATE organised a ballot of teachers of English which revealed 90% support for a campaign of action against the tests. This groundswell of opposition led to the annual Easter conference of the NUT agreeing to call for a boycott of the tests. The boycott never took place for reasons too complicated to explain here. But despite the fact that the SATs had become embedded, opposition to them continued, leading once again in 2003 to calls for the implementation of a boycott. Following a conference in June 2003 attended by teachers and parents, the Anti-SATs Alliance was established to pursue the campaign. It produced leaflets for parents in English and a variety of other languages. Postcards for MPs were prepared, speaker's notes for parents, and model letters to school governors calling on them to back their teachers in the boycott. The campaign was supported by a number of leading children's authors. A survey of teachers carried out for the NUT found that opposition to the tests was overwhelming. In November 2003 the NUT launched a ballot for a boycott of SATs at Key Stages 1 and 2 and conducted a survey of its secondary members on their willingness to take action, but this division resulted in the necessary majority for action not being reached and the boycott never took place (Regan 2007, Wrigley 2006).

Ken Jones (1993) has pointed out the educational significance and originality of the campaign, notwithstanding its ultimate failure. At stake in the boycott were basic questions of educational purpose and pedagogy.

> In the area of English, for instance, it engaged teachers in a struggle over the centrality or marginality of contending literary and cultural traditions. More generally, it pointed towards a redefinition of the relationship between teachers, parents and the state: in its refusal to implement what was regarded as educationally invalid, the boycott supported a claim to professional expertise with new forms of militancy - the first coordinated, national, "industrial" action over a curriculum issue; at the same time, in the keenness with which it sought the support of parents, it involved an attempt to articulate in new contexts professional understandings of issues of teaching and learning. (p84)

> In an unplanned and - at least in the first instance - uncoordinated way, teachers set out to win support for their action from wider constituencies. Beginning, usually, with headteachers and governing bodies, they leafleted, lobbied, wrote letters and organised exhibitions to such effect that parental criticism of their action was ultimately negligible. In doing so, they established a point of contact between professional commitment and parental concern of a novel and unexpected kind. They discovered elements of a new educational politics. (p92)

Regan (2007) comments on the limits of these attempts to reach out to parents to explain the full impact of the testing regime. Whilst the parents of younger children were more hostile to the tests, parents of older secondary age children were not won to the campaign. The alliance between teachers and parents was evident from time to time but, apart from a few local important exceptions, never achieved a fully-fledged united front across the whole of the country.

## 3. The campaign against Academies

The announcement of the Academies policy in 2000 immediately provoked opposition, most notably by the NUT. Since then many of the proposed Academies have met with resistance from local campaigns (around 30 at the time of writing). They represent the highest level of popular involvement in education policy for many years.

Ken Jones and I have written about our research into local campaigns against Academies (Hatcher and Jones 2006). While each campaign has its own specific character, they have tended to follow a common strategic pattern, familiar from the two previous campaigns I have described: the construction of a broad alliance of teachers and parents, together with other labour movement and community forces, and the use of a rich range of tactics to mobilise support.

The local campaigns are linked by the formation of a national umbrella body, the Anti-Academies Alliance, which has the support of a number of national media, academic and political figures and several education unions. Its actions include establishing a website for sharing information and campaign materials and holding a Committee of Enquiry into Academies at the House of Commons in June 2007.

Our analysis of local campaigns against Academies, drawing on social movement theory, can I think be applied more generally to campaigns in education. It is organised around five analytical themes - cognition, actors, structures, actions and social sites - which we see as mutually constituting aspects of campaigns. I have given some examples of the rich and creative repertoire of actions which campaigns have undertaken, ranging from leaflets to parents to boycotts and demonstrations; the social sites they have taken place in, ranging from classrooms to public meetings; and the structural forms which they took, ranging from loose alliances to organised campaign bodies. Here I want to develop the other two themes of our analysis - cognitive practice and actors - and add a further theme, that of context, in order to illuminate the united front strategy.

A campaign is a collective actor made up of individuals who share common objectives. This does not imply consensus about the over-arching educational-political perspectives in which objectives can be situated, or the analysis and values on which they are based. On the contrary, the essence of united front campaigns is that they bring together people in united action who may have different perspectives. This entails a process of policy framing and reframing which is the cognitive heart of campaigns.

> Redefining situations, opening up new conceptual spaces and framing new issues in political terms - this is politics in its primary form and is the core around which the cognitive practice of social movements revolves (Eyerman and Jamison 1991, pp149-50).

It is this process of contested policy framing in which dominant discourses and policies are challenged and reframed, perhaps in purely defensive terms, perhaps posing an alternative vision or policy, which gives a campaign its ideational coherence. Barker, Johnson and Lavalette (2001) refer to two other types of tasks or levels of cognitive practice: the technical and the organisational. The 'technical'

involves 'strategising' - the formulation of intermediate objectives and of the actions needed to attain them. The campaign must analyse the strategies of its opponents, the wider environment in which the campaign is waged, to take account of public attitudes and the role of the media, and the opportunities afforded to the campaign by normal institutional channels as well as the options of extra-institutional actions. The organisational aspect of cognitive practice refers to processes of knowledge transfer, persuasion, collective learning, support mobilisation and identity formation.

The point I want to draw out here is that campaigns are collective *pedagogic* experiences: they are places where learning takes place, where educational-political consciousness changes and develops. It is here that socialist ideas can find an audience. And because campaigns are intimately geared to action, one powerful lesson they can reinforce is that change is possible, that even if a particular campaign does not succeed it demonstrates the potential power of the strategy of collective action.

The key actors in campaigns are those who play leadership roles, which may be more or less fluid and distributed. Barker, Johnson and Lavalette (2001) define leadership in social movements as both a purposive activity, comprising analysing, envisioning, strategising and organising, and a dialogical relationship with campaign members and supporters. They see leaders as political entrepreneurs, articulating a collective project comprising a public narrative and a pedagogic process of the sharing of knowledge and the gaining of support for an oppositional framing, with the aim of achieving the maximum unity conducive to effective action.

Of course a key factor in the success or otherwise of campaigns in education is the wider political context and the balance of forces within society. One major factor in the success of the campaigns on gender and race in education in the 1970s and early 80s was the existence of the women's movement and the Black and antiracist movement, together with a generation of young teachers who had come out of the radicalised student movement (Education Group 1981, p189). Conversely, the failure to achieve a boycott of tests in 1993 and 2003 was in part the product of a defeated trade union movement unwilling to challenge the Conservative and New Labour governments respectively.

What do these campaigns tell us about the space for radical reforms and its boundaries? The campaigns on gender and race, strenuously opposed by the Conservative government of the time, achieved significant success: while their goals are far from being fully met they transformed the discourse of education in ways which have now become widely accepted. SATs and academies are clearly key elements of the neo-liberal project, representing the requirements respectively of evaluation of performance and semi-autonomous schools with, in many cases, strong business involvement. As I have argued, the campaigns against them are challenging fundamental sites of capitalist practice and ideology production. The SATs campaigns failed at the time, but were important in changing and focusing the climate of opinion, one belated outcome of which is the recent relaxation of SATs at Key Stage 1 and the recent call by the General Teaching Council to abandon SATs altogether.

I have argued that we need to unpack the portmanteau concept of the 'needs of capital' and distinguish between what the economic requirements are of the school system in terms of the future labour force and what are the political issues in play. This approach enables us to explain why the campaigns for racial and gender equality were so vigorously resisted by the Conservative government at the time. Capital has no fundamental economic interest in patterns of gender or ethnic discrimination in the education system, only in processes of stratification and selection. But for the social base of the Conservative party the campaigns challenged fundamental belief systems concerning gender roles and British national identity, vigorously asserted by the right-wing press. Other similar examples are the peculiar importance given to religion in education by Tony Blair, and the retention of a small number of grammar schools (which even the Conservative leadership now acknowledges are an anachronism).

However, we also have to recognise the limitations of the collective action strategy as it exists in the present period, limitations which are exemplified by the three campaigns I have described.

First, they are single-issue and temporary, in contrast to the comprehensive, long-term and relentless neo-liberal programme of transformation being propelled by all the powers of the state. Struggles on education alone can only achieve limited gains. They cannot substitute for an equally programmatically all-encompassing and permanent opponent. If one rejects the Holloway argument that social movements are sufficient

then the critical strategic absence in the advanced industrial countries is political parties with mass support for a counter-hegemonic programme, including for education, or even one which stands for significant reforms in the way that the Labour Party in Britain and social-democratic and Communist Parties elsewhere in western Europe advocated the expansion of educational opportunities in the 1960s and 70s (in the UK, the introduction of comprehensive education). Today it is social-democratic parties which are among the most committed advocates of neo-liberal education (not just Blair and Brown in Britain but Prodi in Italy and Zapatero in Spain ). In the absence of mass parties in Western Europe (not to mention the US) with at least a progressive programme for education the role of the Chávez government and newly formed party in Venezuela serves as an exceptional and key point of reference.

Also vital is the role of the teachers unions. They are largely ignored in mainstream academic literature in education, and frequently presented by government as obstacles to change, so it is important to put the record straight. Campaigns in education tend to have limited time spans, as political circumstances change. The educational-political consciousness of the mass of teachers, and therefore their willingness to act in counter-hegemonic ways inside and outside the classroom, fluctuates as campaigns arise and subside back into routine. However, there remains a minority of teachers who remain committed and active during periods of quiescence. Prominent among them in England and Wales are socialist activists in the National Union of Teachers, whose principal organisation since its founding in 1976 has been the Socialist Teachers Alliance. It has played a leading role - not exclusive, of course - in the three campaigns I have described - on 'race' and gender issues, against SATs, and against Academies - and many others.

The Socialist Teachers Alliance is, as the name suggests, an alliance of those who define themselves as socialist. What defines its strategic orientation is the notion of class struggle, as against perspectives based on the possibility of strategic cross-class consensus or 'social partnership'.[6] Within that framework the STA encompasses both reformist and revolutionary stances. However, there is no doubt that the majority of the leadership of the STA, and many of its supporters, would define themselves as Marxists. Though its critique of neo-liberal education politics may be similar to that of the advocates of RCP, its social base is different: not academia but trade union

activism, and its strategic orientation is different: oriented to creating broad alliances for active campaigning around specific issues, while pursuing the longer term aim of transforming the NUT into a union which will pursue consistent class struggle policies.[7]

This strategy is also, as I have argued, a pedagogic one. The involvement of teachers, parents, students and wider labour movement and community organisations in struggles around education is the most effective way of changing consciousness. It provides the most favourable conditions for promoting an anti-capitalist critique and for fostering the confidence that through collective organisation and struggle alternatives are possible. This does not happen automatically: it requires the intervention of socialist ideas through, in the case of the STA, its resolutions to local NUT meetings and annual conference, which in recent years have provided much of the union's policy positions, its website (www.socialist-teacher.org), its *Socialist Education Journal*, events such as the Education for Liberation conference it organised in June this year, and its operation of local branches of the union as centres of a collective critique of government education policy and motors of local campaigns of opposition.

The second limitation of the three struggles I have cited lies in their ability to connect the struggle for an alternative outside the classroom to that inside. The most successful in integrating the two were the movements around gender and 'race', both of which had strong and lasting pedagogic impacts. The Anti-SATs campaign had some success in bringing them together in terms of the case made for alternative forms of assessment and accountability (Anti-SATs Alliance 2005). The campaign against Academies has raised the pedagogic dimension only peripherally, in terms of the implications for the curriculum of vocational Academies (Hatcher 2006).

There are important implications here for the strategy of the STA. As a tendency within a teachers union it is inevitable that issues of teachers' pay and conditions are prominent concerns, and rightly so. But class struggle unionism entails having a programme to address the educational interests of the working class as a whole, in which teachers' pay and conditions are only a sub-set. While the STA has shown itself capable of developing a defensive programme in these wider terms it, along with the left in general, has made much less progress in developing a convincing full-spectrum

radical alternative informed by educational theory, research and practice. This is not an optional extra: when for example the government claims that vocational curricula are the solution for the relative lack of success of working class pupils in the 'academic' curriculum they throw down a challenge to its critics to come up with an alternative capable of mobilising popular support. This is particularly important at a time when neo-liberal governments are developing new visions of education, often under the rubric of 'the school for the 21$^{st}$ century', which are not necessarily self-evidently seen as against the interests of working class pupils - vocational education is an example, the other elements in what I have referred to as the Mk 2 model are others - and may well be seen as positive improvements over what currently exists, in the absence of a credible radical alternative.

I began with a quote from Ernest Mandel and I will end by returning to it. The sense that 'another school is possible' is growing but it needs to be accompanied by a debate about strategies to work towards them. If we are to take full advantage of existing spaces and use them to challenge their boundaries we need to organise to act collectively on a united front basis both within the school and outside it. Without a political-educational organisational project visions of alternatives remain just visions.

An earlier version of this article was given as a paper at the British Education Studies Association Annual Conference on 'Alternative Visions of Education', Bath Spa University, 6-7 July 2007.

**Notes**

1. Ernest Mandel was one of the most significant Marxist thinkers and activists of the second half of the twentieth century. This quote comes from a film "Ernest Mandel - A life for the revolution" by Chris Den Hond, published in 2007 on DVD by the IIRE, Amsterdam. Details at www.iire.org.

2. Creative Partnerships is a government-funded programme for collaboration between schools and artists, musicians, drama workers etc.

3. 'Ideas have disappeared as such (insofar as they are endowed with an ideal or spiritual existence), to the precise extent that it has emerged that their

existence is inscribed in the actions of practices governed by rituals defined in the last instance by an ideological apparatus. It therefore appears that the subject acts insofar as he is acted by the following system (set out in the order of its real determination): ideology existing in a material ideological apparatus, describing material practices governed by a material ritual, which practices exist in the material actions of a subject acting in all consciousness according to his belief.' (Althusser 1971, pp169-70)

4. For responses to Holloway see Phil Hearse (ed) (2007) *Take the Power to Change the World: Globalisation and the debate on power.* London: IIRE Resistance, and the debate on the Marxsite website at http://www.marxsite.com/TheDebate%20on%20Power.htm.

5. SATs are Standard Assessment Tasks, i.e. national written tests taken at ages 7, 11 and 14. Academies are state schools run by private organizations or individuals on a non-profit basis.

6. The STA's strategic perspective is not unique in Western Europe. It is shared by a number of teachers' unions, such as STEs-intersindical in Spain and Cobas in Italy , and tendencies within mass teachers unions, such as Ecole Emancipée in the FSU in France .

7. A further debilitating factor here is the gulf between left academics and - classroom and union - activists. Many academics are critical of neo-liberal education. Very few of them have any organic connection with campaigns against it. In the case of Marxists in the academy, it exemplifies the academicisation of western Marxism. One consequence of this gulf is a social division of labour whereby academics have a virtual monopoly of publications in education, in contrast to activists who have less time and less access. Books and academic articles allow the extended development of arguments, while the texts of activists tend to be shorter, conjunctural and restricted in circulation (union resolutions, agitational material etc). The result is a distortion of the field in favour of academics. One consequence is, as we have noted, the neglect by them of collective resistance. What the left needs in particular is well-theorised and research-based contributions to the development of an

alternative programme for an education in the interests of the working class and the oppressed. That requires in return that left activists can convince left academics that they can offer a credible strategy to advance such a programme.

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