

Social Deprivation, Community Cohesion, Denominational Education and Freedom of Choice: A Marxist Perspective on Poverty and Exclusion in the District of Thanet.

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Abstract:

Thanet suffers from severe deprivation, mainly driven by socio-economic factors. Efforts to remediate this through economic regeneration plans have largely been unsuccessful, while a combination of selective and denominational education creates and maintains a gradient of disadvantage that mainly impacts upon already-deprived young people. Some of the problems associated with religious belief, practices and education are discussed, and social statistics are adduced to show that, in Thanet, selection in education, whether by producer power, ability or denominational criteria, relegate the most disadvantaged pupils to the least favoured schools. Efforts to promote community cohesion have been made by some faith groups, but the District's significant problems remain. A Marxist analysis indicates the steps that are required to eliminate the social injustices currently perpetuated by the existing regimes and interests in the District.

Introduction.

This paper is about the social, denominational and educational circumstances found in the District of Thanet. It builds on, and situates, empirical findings on deprivation and school admission by investigating recent social statistics, examining policy and associated legislation, discourses about social inequality, and the political conditions that favour advances in equality. It concludes with a Marxist analysis of the current policy outcomes that are responsible for distinctive neo-liberal social inequalities, and suggests a radical policy agenda to restore equity in the District's education system. The paper focuses on the structural level of social problems, and data are drawn from two longitudinal studies of young people in the District conducted by Canterbury Christ Church University and the Charles de Gaulle University in Lille. These data have been supplemented by statistical information from both Kent County Council and Thanet District Council, and by interviews carried out with religious leaders, and others, in the area.

The District, which is part of the County of Kent, enacts the policies of the Tory-controlled County and District Councils, supported by a New Labour government with Thatcherite tendencies. Thus attempts at remediating deprivation have been driven by a neo-liberal imperium of socio-economic solutions and educational policies, working in conjunction with a slimmed down public sector, which sometimes struggles to deliver short-term projects in conjunction with voluntary agencies.

Social indicators for the District are examined and interpreted, and an uneven pattern of deprivation is revealed. Such deprivation affects particular groups of individuals, some of whom suffer multiple deprivation. The concept of community cohesion is discussed, and

evidence, from the Council and denominational sources, which impacts upon cohesion in Thanet is surveyed. Denominational activity in the District is acknowledged, and the contribution it makes to education- both through church-denominated schools and informal, or private, schools run by a variety of religious orders and foundations – is evaluated. The system of schooling available to the public is described, with particular attention being paid to the diversity and admission requirements of the secondary sector.

The consequences of socio-economic deprivation, diversity of educational provision and denominational influence on community cohesion are delineated, and the paper concludes with a Marxist analysis of the District's social problems, including suggestions for changes that would better deliver social justice and community cohesion. The results of the study relate directly to Thanet, but could also be relevant to other areas that share one or more of the major structural factors – neoconservative local authorities, significant socio-economic deprivation, a multiplicity of faith groups and a diverse secondary school provision, with a complex set of differing admissions criteria - with the District in which this research was conducted.

The Social Context of Thanet.

Thanet is the easternmost District of the County of Kent. It has a population of the order of 127000 people, many of whom live in the three seaside towns of Margate, Broadstairs and Ramsgate. There is also a rural population in the District, some of whom work in agriculture, while others commute to the three towns, or further afield to Canterbury or even London. Thanet suffers badly from deprivation. The Audit Commission, when considering just two of the District's wards, noted that Thanet contains some of the most deprived areas in Kent, including the two most deprived wards in south-east England, both of which are in the top 2% of deprived areas in England (2005).

A wider and more current perspective, using the 2007 Indices of Deprivation (Kent County Council, 2008a), confirms that Thanet is the most deprived District of the 12 Local Authority Districts in Kent:-

Table 1: Comparative Kent local authority district ID rankings.

Local Authority District of Kent	National Rank, based on avg ID score (out of 354 LAs)	South East Rank based on avg ID score (out of 67 LAs)	Kent Rank, based on avg ID score (out of 12 LAs)
Thanet	65	2	1
Swale	116	8	2
Shepway	123	9	3
Gravesham	142	13	4
Dover	153	16	5
Dartford	186	21	6

Canterbury	198	23	7
Ashford	227	27	8
Maidstone	248	28	9
Tunbridge Wells	273	32	10
Tonbridge & Malling	281	34	11
Sevenoaks	295	37	12

Note: A lower score indicates *greater* deprivation. A score of 1 is the most deprived.

Source: Indices of Deprivation, Communities and Local Government (CLG).

Kent has a total of 883 wards within its 12 Districts, and the 2007 Index of *Multiple* Deprivation, which offers a finer-grained analysis of social deprivation in areas smaller than Local Authority Districts, indicates that 6 of the 10 most deprived wards in Kent are found in Thanet:-

Table 2: Ward deprivation in Kent, based on 2007 IMD.

LA District Name	Ward Name	IMD Ranking within KCC Wards
Thanet	W Margate Central	1
Thanet	N Margate Central	2
Thanet	N Cliftonville West	3
Thanet	Cent. Cliftonville W.	4
Thanet	E Cliftonville W.	5
Thanet	Eastcliff	6
Swale	Sheerness East	7
Swale	Leysdown & Warden	8
Shepway	Folkestone Harbour	9
Shepway	F'stone Harvey Cent.	10

Source: Index of Multiple Deprivation, 2007, Communities and Local Government (CLG).

This might represent a worsening situation – that is Thanet could be becoming more deprived – than the situation that obtained in 2000, when it 'only' had 5 in the top 10 most deprived wards in Kent (Parsons and Welsh, 2006). Finally, the pattern of deprivation is not

evenly spread across wards, with some areas of a given ward being more deprived than others. These sub-ward areas, which are known as Lower Super Output Areas (LSOAs), indicate the areas of the wards most affected by deprivation: -

Table 3: Deprivation Rankings for some LSOAs in Thanet (2006).

LSOAs within Thanet wards	Deprivation Ranking (out of 84 Thanet LSOAs)	Deprivation Ranking (out of 883 KCC LSOAs)	Sout East Dep. Ranking (Excluding London), out of 5319 LSOAs.
W. Margate Cent.	1	1	1
N. Cliftonville W.	2	2	2
N. Margate Cent.	3	3	9
Ct. Cliftonville W.	4	5	21
E. Cliftonville W.	5	6	27

Source: Thanet District Council (2006a).

All 5 of these LSOAs adjoin each other, and all fall within the Margate Central and Cliftonville West wards. Thanet Council collectively terms them an 'Area of Severe Deprivation' (Thanet District Council, 2006a, p7), and notes that deprivation in West Margate Central falls within the top 1% of most deprived areas in England.

The patterns of social decline found in the District today can be traced back to the 1970's, when Thanet suffered significant social, environmental and economic setbacks arising from substantial job losses in tourism, coal mining, agriculture and shipping (Thanet District Council, 2006b). The effect of the collapse of English seaside towns as desirable holiday resorts was particularly severe, tipping fragile areas into a socio-economic cycle of decline (P.M.S.U., 2005) in which the in-movement of disadvantaged people exceeds out-movement. The accelerating decline of these areas led to Thanet's redundant hotels being turned into hostels for the homeless, cheap bedsits and care homes, with a resultant concentration of vulnerable and transient residents, many of whom change their addresses each year. This 'has severely strained public services and led to tensions between longstanding residents and the new population' (Thanet District Council, 2006b, p1).

Vulnerable 'looked after' children, and children living in single parent families in which the parent is not working, represent 'a considerable number of children growing up in poverty for at least some periods of their lives' (Wiles and Sexton, 2008, p39). This is a County-wide problem with an uneven distribution, which impacts particularly on Thanet. Thus Thanet, at 7.6%, has the County's highest percentage of lone parent households with dependent children, with a little over half of these parents being unemployed. Thanet also has the highest proportion of children on the Child Protection Register (38.35 per 10000, or 108 0-17 year olds) and the highest number of 'looked after' children (238), as recorded in March 2007 (figures from Wiles and Sexton, *ibid*, pp59 and 61).

It is important to stress that the above figure (238) for 'looked after' children relates to *Kentish* children only, and does not take any account of the large number of children placed

in the County – many of whom are domiciled in Thanet – by other Authorities. These 'imported' children raise the number of 'looked after' children in the District to over 600 (Thanet District Council, 2006b). The number of these vulnerable young people is augmented by a relatively small number of 'unaccompanied' (asylum-seeking) children fostered in the District, who are legally the responsibility of KCC. Many of these young people cluster in the deprived areas of the District, and present a particular challenge for the public services – particularly education, with one primary school in a deprived area reporting an annual turnover of 60% of its pupils (Thanet District Council, 2006b, para 4).

As in other areas, social deprivation in Thanet is not spread evenly across the District. Some wards and areas are relatively affluent, and the District as a whole has benefited from a wide range of different UK and European funding programmes. Thanet Council has also led a major regeneration effort, informed by a Local Regeneration Plan that provides a wide portfolio of business investment sites, greenfield housing opportunities and support for the growth of the airport as an economic catalyst. It has also aimed to improve access to quality public services, and embargoed any 'further proposals to provide single bedroom flatted accommodation, bed-sits and non self-contained accommodation (i.e. houses in multiple occupation)' in the severely deprived areas of the District (Thanet District Council, 2006a, p5).

Despite these neo-liberal efforts at regeneration, many of the causes of deprivation retain their grip on the District. Thus local unemployment is still twice the South-East Regional average, while the latest IMD figures indicate that the pattern of local deprivation remains largely unchanged (Rabindrakumar, 2008). This highlights the significant challenges which still face the area. Tony Blair, addressing the 1999 Labour Party conference, declared 'the class war is over. But the struggle for true equality has only just begun.' Nearly ten years later, and despite Blair's skilful, soaring political sophistry, the disadvantaged residents of Thanet are still waiting for the delivery of New Labour's vision.

Community Cohesion.

The concept of community cohesion developed from a report by the Independent Community Cohesion Review Team (Home Office, 2001) – subsequently known as the Cattle Report – into the severe racial and social unrest in some Northern conurbations in 2001. It provided a balanced and considered overview based on both areas that had suffered the most unrest, and those that had not experienced any tensions. The report drew attention to the existence of polarised and segmented communities in which people lived parallel lives, and highlighted the need to tackle inequalities through the development of 'a more coherent approach to education, housing, regeneration, employment and other programmes' (Home Office, 2001, p11). It did not, unfortunately, take the opportunity to argue for a model of social equity based on a redistribution of social goods and political power as an integral part of the policy response. Had it done so, communities might have been empowered to take ownership of their circumstances.

Community cohesion remains a contested concept, with no agreed basic unit of 'community' to which the notion of cohesion applies. For the purposes of this paper, the District of Thanet is taken as the 'reference unit', and it is recognised that the District divides into sub-units that could have different 'cohesion' agendas and experiences. Further, practices promoting the cohesion of one sub-unit might be seen as promoting division and challenging multi-culturalism by another sub-unit.

This has given rise to a phenomenon that Miller terms the 'politics of cultural identity' (1998, p4), which has led some groups in contemporary society to call for alterations to social, political and legal institutions in order to legitimate the expression and enactment of the practices and values of the cultures which distinguish them from the majority. Such expectations, which seem particularly to arise in respect of religious beliefs, run counter to the notion that the state should be culturally neutral and that it is individuals, not groups, who are entitled to both equal treatment and rights under the law.

One can also distinguish between cohesion based on shared beliefs or ideology and cohesion based on the experience of socio-economic conditions – such as experience of unemployment, deprivation or engagement with public services. Both types of cohesion are found in Thanet and, in some sub-units of the District, experience of either the ideological or the socio-economic type is positive, contributing to the overall good of the social sub-groups involved. Cohesiveness deriving from shared beliefs often – but not exclusively - relates to a combination of minority ethnicity and religion, both of which factors are found, together and separately, in the District.

Thanet, unlike some other Districts of England, is a largely ethnically homogeneous area – Wiles and Sexton report that 3.6% of Thanet's 0-15 year old young people are of other than white ethnicity (2008, p21). Thus the superordinate driver acting against cohesion is the actuality of the socio-economic conditions prevailing in the deprived wards rather than ideological orientation. These socio-economic conditions affect all residents, whatever their ethnicities, living within the wards, and cause 'some communities to feel particularly disadvantaged [because of] the poverty and deprivation all around them [which causes a sense of] disaffection to grow' (Home Office, 2001, p10).

Social deprivation, in particular, has a disruptive impact on cohesion, with deprived areas being especially vulnerable to crime. Thus people living in areas of deprivation 'are more likely to be victims of crime' [while] the majority of crime in Thanet is committed by people who reside in areas with multiple deprivation'. Further, 'for all main categories of crime ... the main areas of interest have consistently been parts of Margate Central Ward and Cliftonville West Ward, with secondary areas of interest being in other deprived wards' (both Thanet Community Safety Partnership, 2004, pp4&5).

'Looked after' children form a challenging, and challenged, sub-group that is both concentrated in Thanet's deprived areas, and is more likely to exhibit anti-social behaviour. The Thanet Crime and Disorder Audit reported two main areas of concern that were taking a disproportionate level of public resources in dealing with this sub-group - nearly 40% of recorded assaults within residential premises occurred in children's homes, and Thanet has the highest incidence of recorded missing juveniles (85%) in Kent (both figures cited in Thanet, 2006b). This unacceptably large number of missing persons affects policing practice, as missing persons have a greater priority than anti-social behaviour crimes.

Attempts to deliver better community cohesion in Thanet are predicated upon the economic regeneration and greater efficiency in the delivery of quality social services, some of which are offered on a multi-agency basis in cooperation with the voluntary sector (Welsh and Parsons, 2006; Parsons, 2007). This is a classic, market-based 'New Public Management' solution (Clarke *et al*, 2000) to the problem, which 'exercises power by [economic] wealth, not citizenship' (Benn, 2007, p318), and has yet to reduce the stark social inequalities in the District.

Solutions such as this are delivered through local political structures (viz County and District councillors) acting in partnership with the private and voluntary sectors, and it is instructive to consider why this mechanism has been so ineffective in addressing the problem. The

principle of local representation, which underpins the election of the councillors and could promote social change, is clearly not the superordinate consideration in coming to a political decision, perhaps because councillors, once in office, are bound by policies and party loyalties. It might be that this broad, 'top-down' focus prevents them from acting as effective representatives, particularly for the dispossessed and disadvantaged. A 'bottom-up' approach offers a potentially more effective way for councillors to address local problems, but this requires a step-change in political procedures. Such an approach would be helped by 'a significant reduction, if not a prohibition, in the use of whipping in all aspects of local democracy, other than full council' (James and Cox, 2007, p50).

Cantle called for the development of 'a local community cohesion plan ... to include the promotion of cross-cultural contact [between different sub-groups in society]' (Home Office, *op cit*, p11). The sclerotic nature of Thanet's response to community cohesion is illustrated by Googling the search term {Thanet District Council "community cohesion plan"} (searched 28 May 2008) which, when limited to a UK search, brings up just one result – a report written by the South East Museums, Libraries and Archives Centre on the policy implications of the Cantle Report for the Library Service...

Some religious leaders in Thanet have joined together to form an inter-faith group, one focus of which is to improve sub-group understanding and community cohesion. The group, which has representatives from the Bah'ai, Buddhist, Christian, Islamic and Jewish faiths, represents an example of ideologically-based cohesion. Not all denominations of each of these faiths in the District are represented on this group. When interviewed, a local Imam – whose mosque (The District Mosque and Community Centre) was the only religious building to overtly declaim a community connection – although the nature and boundaries of the community were not defined – was extremely supportive of community cohesion, saying that he would actively welcome social or sporting opportunities that would enable Muslim young people in the District to interact with young people from other faiths. Other religious leaders in the District shared this aim – but with varying enthusiasm. The Imam and the local Reform Rabbi also advised their congregations not to withdraw their children who attended state schools from RE lessons, arguing it was important that they learned about other faiths. This position was not shared by all of the Christian denominations, and it did not apply to the Orthodox Rabbi, who said that he had no school children in his ageing congregation.

The Imam, however, did express one reservation – that such cross-community contacts should be arranged at 'neutral' venues, as he felt his congregation would be 'uncomfortable' at the thought of Muslims meeting on the premises of other denominations. This reservation neatly exposes some of the tensions underpinning the ideological model of community cohesion; is an individual's primary allegiance to a faith (or some belief) group or to the secular community? If there is conflict between the two, which takes preference, and why?

Thanet Churches and Schools.

This section of the paper divides into two sub-sections, the first of which deals with church organisations, while the second deals with state schools. There is a shared interest between the two in that some denominations provide religious education for their membership, while schools – particularly denominational schools – also provide religious education. The issue explored in this paper is concerned with whether this type of education contributes to community cohesion, especially given the fact that some denominational schools are majority-funded by the state.

1. Thanet Church Organisations.

The Visitor Information Service of Thanet District Council lists thirty-six different places of worship. These range from 'mainstream' denominations (such as Roman Catholic, Church of England, Islamism, Reform Judaism, etc) through 'minority' expressions of religion (Messianic, Evangelical, Pentecostal, Rehoboth Strict Baptist, etc) to small, and sometimes secretive, sects such as the Brethren, Exclusive Brethren, and others.

Many of these organisations can be located along a continuum, on which one pole represents a relatively open orientation with respect to engagement with wider society, while the opposite pole represents a relatively closed system in which church members look inwards, shunning social engagement. There is also a further group at the 'closed' end of the continuum that is populated by an indeterminate number of children who effectively disappear from the general educational milieu. This group, which is not well monitored by the LEA, contains children who, for a variety of reasons, including possibly religious reasons, are 'home educated'.

Roman Catholic and Church of England religious beliefs are openly taught to children attending voluntary aided schools of those denominations, while children attending other state schools are taught a multi-faith, but mainly Christian, religious education based on a Kent LEA-approved syllabus known as the Kent SACRE (Standing Advisory Committee on Religious Education) Syllabus. This state-provided religious education is supplemented by a variety of denominationally-specific education provided by individual church organisations.

There is thus a Koranic and Arabic School, which caters for about 60 children, aged 6-16, which meets for five hours (two 2.5 hour sessions) each week. Within the school, genders are mixed up to the age of 12, but thereafter the boys and girls are separated. These young people are taught to *read* Arabic in order to be able to recite the Koran; they are not taught to *understand* Arabic – the paedagogic goal is not exegetical, but requires that they should be able to read the text (i.e. make the correct sounds) out loud. They are also taught the particular ritual performances required to accompany Islamic prayer. Such prayers can only be recited in Arabic, and the supplicants must learn how to pronounce the words exactly in a classical Arabic accent in order to perform the required daily Muslim programme of worship.

The Reform Synagogue also runs a religious school, which, at the time of writing, meets on a fortnightly basis. The group is of mixed gender and ability, and the pupils are taught the Hebrew reading skills necessary for prayer, the Torah, the cycle of the Jewish year, and Jewish history and stories. Separately, the Orthodox Lay Reader (the Orthodox congregation being too small to have its own Rabbi) – who is an enthusiastic supporter of Kent SACRE – is proud of hosting school visits to the Orthodox Synagogue. There, pupils are given an Orthodox Jewish experience, whereby boys are separated from girls, the service is entirely in Hebrew, and the officiants are all male. A number of Christian churches also provide separate, denomination-specific education. Thus one of the Evangelical churches in Thanet runs a Sunday morning club whose object is to deliver a religiously-based JaM (Jesus and Me) session. Similar Sunday organisations are available at other Christian denominations in the District.

As one moves towards the 'closed' end of the religious continuum, the separation of the believers from mainstream society becomes more pronounced. Thus a retired secondary school teacher in the District describes how Christian Brethren children – thought to be from

an 'Open Brethren' branch of this sect – were collected from school by adult Brethren every lunchtime because their particular religious belief forbade them from eating or socializing with non-believers. Members of the Taylorite branch of the Brethren are still more separated from society. Their leader, who determines the sect's biblically based ethical and spiritual beliefs, is known as 'The Elect Vessel of God', and they follow a strict doctrine of 'separation from iniquity'. This requires them 'to keep away from any person that does not follow Exclusive Brethren teaching – including other Christians' (BBC, 2003, p4). Hence they seek to educate their children separately, using a network of private denominational schools provided by a charitable foundation called the Focus Learning Trust.

Children are bussed to the Focus schools, by Brethren members, from a wide geographical area; the Focus secondary school serving the south-east area being based in the outskirts of Maidstone. Such schools are run strictly in accordance with the Brethren's interpretation of biblical values. Each school has a Brethren-appointed Trustee who has 'absolute discretion in determining what conduct or activity is in accord with the Bible'. Thus textbooks are censored, 'the theory of evolution is regarded as a falsehood', 'only literature approved by the Trustees may be brought onto the school premises, [and] radios, television, movies, computers, mobile telephones and the like are not permitted in any form whatsoever'. Further, 'any activity that would promote interest by students in higher education would be viewed very unfavourably' (all four quotes from page entitled 'Ethos and Guiding Principles of the Focus Learning Trust School Community', in Parent and Student Handbook, 2005/6, p4).

Relatively few Thanet children attend FLT, or similar, schools. Those who do are exposed to an education system that is ideologically oriented against social or community cohesion on religious grounds. However, this has not deterred the Focus Learning Trust from trying to access state funding available to faith schools. In so doing, it faces a number of consequent dilemmas, including – but not limited to – an expectation to admit pupils of other, or no, faith; a concept that is fundamentally counter to their belief system.

2. Thanet Schools.

There are 31 primary (infant and/or junior) and 11 secondary schools in the maintained (state) sector in Thanet. Schools in each of these sectors can be grouped into three categories, two of which – voluntary controlled and voluntary aided – define and reflect their religious affiliation. Schools in the third category can loosely be considered to be 'community' schools, although this broad classification needs further refinement, particularly in the secondary sector.

Of the 31 primaries in Thanet, there are

6 aided (3 Roman Catholic & 3 Church of England),

7 controlled (all Church of England), and

18 community schools (Kent, 2008b), while in the secondary sector there is one voluntary aided (R.C.) and one church foundation (C. of E.) school, which enjoys the same privileges as a voluntary aided school (Kent, 2008c).

The crucial distinction between controlled, and aided or church foundation, schools is that, for a controlled school, a religious denomination has influence and input – but the Local

Education Authority runs the school. For an aided or religious foundation school, the religious denomination is the senior partner, with the LEA being the junior partner. Aided and church foundation schools are thus able to teach and celebrate the practice and rituals of their particular religious denomination in preference to any agreed multi-faith syllabus. In this respect, it is pertinent to note that there are only Roman Catholic aided (i.e. no controlled) primary schools in Thanet. Aided and church foundation schools have the legal right to require denominational membership as a condition for admission to the school. This right immediately allows such schools to select pupils – even at the primary level. However, it plays a much more significant role at the secondary level, where it can be deployed as an effective exclusion mechanism.

The eleven secondary schools in Thanet are a complex and diverse collection of different types of institution, with widely varying admissions criteria. Three are grammar schools, whose basic entrance criterion is a 'pass' in the Kent (11+) Test. However, two of the three are also 'foundation' schools, which gives them the right to be their own 'Admissions Authorities', and hence their governors can admit pupils in reference to criteria – perhaps a particular talent for sport – that are not tested by the Kent Test. These powers enable them always to fill their places.

A further three secondary (viz. non-grammar) schools are also 'foundation schools', two of which are the R.C. voluntary aided school and the C. of E. foundation school mentioned earlier in this section. All of these schools are their own admissions authorities, and admit pupils in relation to their own admissions criteria. The secular foundation school claims a music specialism, and can select pupils with this particular talent. The Catholic voluntary aided school has 18 categories and sub-categories for selecting among its oversubscription, thirteen of which refer to various aspects of religion. With one exception (which refers to Christians of other denominations), the religious criteria take precedence over the secular criteria for the purpose of offering a place at the school. There is also an interesting addendum that gives members of an Eastern Christian Church [there is a Coptic Church in Thanet] priority, after baptised Catholics, in each of the criteria (Kent, 2008c). The Church of England foundation secondary school lists eight admissions criteria for determining among oversubscription, five of which relate to religious criteria (Kent, *ibid.*). Both of these schools reserve the right to require written confirmation of denominational practice from a minister of religion.

There is also a 'community' (viz. LEA controlled) technology college – which can admit up to 10% of its intake in reference to technology aptitude – and a newly established Academy which currently admits in reference to LEA admissions criteria although, unlike all other of the District's schools, it can refuse admission even if it has not reached its Planned Admissions Number. The remaining three secondary schools in Thanet are 'community' schools, and all admit pupils in accordance with the LEA's admissions criteria.

Overall, the system can be conceptualised as one in which popular schools are protected by barriers to admission that place parents and pupils 'in a supplicant position with respect to a group of institutions that appear to be looking for reasons to decline entry to the public service that they provide' (Welsh and Parsons, 2006, p53). Structurally, the system also effectively reduces the neo-liberal notion of individual consumer choice in two ways:

- 1) parents are differentially enabled with respect to their ability to make choices that require a sophisticated understanding of admissions criteria and the importance of the order of preference of their choices, while
- 2) given that there is a finite number of school places, a successful choice by one family necessarily means a reduction in the choices available to subsequent families.

Hence much of the power to determine admissions, particularly to the more popular schools, lies with the producers, not the consumers, of education, with the result that 'some families choose [while] the rest accept what is left. And the rest are always the disadvantaged and dispossessed' (Hattersley, quoted in le Grand, 2005, p201.) The social consequences of this are starkly illustrated in Table 4, which lists type of school by the IMD ranking of its pupil intake:

Table 4: IMD Scores and Rank for Thanet Secondary Schools, Autumn 2007.

School	Type	IMD Score of Pupil Community	IMD Rank (10 = least deprived; 1= most deprived)
A	Grammar; foundation; mixed	22.5	10
B	Grammar; foundation; boys	22.7	9
C	Grammar; community; girls	23.4	8
D	Academy	No figs. available	No figs available
E	Foundation	24.2	7
F	Vol Aided; foundation	25.7	6
G	C of E; foundation	29.5	5
H	Community; mixed	29.6	4
I	Community, girls	33.3	3
J	Community, boys	34.1	2
K	Community, tech	34.7	1

Source: KCC Management Information

It is important to realise that this table contains *social* statistics, not statistics relating to academic ability. It clearly shows how social deprivation correlates with school placement, and that selection, combined with producer power, perpetuates social stratification and deprivation, and does little to promote community cohesion. The 2006 Education and Inspections Act urges that (community) schools should become Trust Schools, which would give them 'access to the freedoms enjoyed by foundation schools', including 'the power of setting their [own] admissions arrangements' (both DfES, 2006, p1). Further, although selection is banned, the Act 'gives religious organisations more influence over admission arrangements of schools of their own faith' (*ibid*, p7). These are three of the very factors,

which in Thanet, militate *against* social justice, community cohesion and equal access to education for the disadvantaged and deprived in society.

Section 33 of the 2006 Act also places a duty upon the governing bodies of maintained schools 'to advance education and, in doing so, promote community cohesion' (DfES, 2006, p5) through their ethos and curriculum. Thus schools are required to promote 'a common sense of identity and [to] support diversity, showing pupils how different communities can be united by shared values' (Guidance issued by DCSF & DCLG, 2007, p1). The Guidance also requires the main focus of cohesion to be 'across different cultures, ethnicities, religious and socio-economic groups' (*ibid*, p5) which, if implemented by Thanet schools, will require a fundamental rearrangement of admissions criteria and procedures that currently exclude the socio-economically disadvantaged. Vincent, when writing about the role of faith schools in promoting community cohesion, called for church and faith leaders to 'take advantage of their special arrangements [i.e. control over admissions] to voluntarily limit faith intake [and offer] at least 25% of places to other faiths or denominations... which would be consistent with the desire of church leaders to promote religious tolerance and understanding' (2005, p126).

Conclusions.

Cantle, when proposing measures to promote community cohesion, called for 'a new citizenship [that] should be used to develop a more coherent approach to education, housing, regeneration, employment and other programmes' (Home Office, 2001, p11). This approach is conspicuously absent in Thanet, and it is arguable that the enacted market approach to education, housing and other components identified by Cantle has had the opposite effect of maintaining the privileges of the middle classes. These include the 'hierarchical differentiation between education institutions on the basis of social class' (Hill, 2006a, p9), together with the hegemonic use of religion as a proxy measure of social class, both of which operate at the expense of keeping the disadvantaged in poverty.

Thanet is one local feature of a larger capitalist state. Its District Council does not appear to have an effective and coherent plan to promote community cohesion or to address deprivation. Over the last decade, the market reforms deployed have failed to remediate the socio-economic circumstances of the disadvantaged poor in the District, while the political structures, at both the local and national levels, have been quite ineffective at addressing socio-economic deprivation. The Indices of Deprivation show that, at best, the social circumstances of the poorest in the District have remained unchanged, and there is some indication that they may have worsened slightly. Regeneration driven by airport expansion has not materialised and public money, in the form of Kent County Council subsidies, has been lost when the budget airline based at the airport collapsed into administration. Further, despite the District's economic regeneration plans, many wards, particularly in town centre areas, stand as monuments to the 'institutionalised abandonment of the poor' (McLaren, 2008, p x), and are still characterised by poverty and deprivation.

The semiotics of socio-economic attempts at regeneration in Thanet – signboards proclaiming EU investment for development; the policy prohibiting certain types of development in the area of severe deprivation; the liberalisation of already popular schools; the establishment of a part-privately funded and managed academy school, etc – create a false sense that the ruling elite is 'doing something' to remediate poverty, and suggests that if some citizens remain in poverty it must, somehow, be their own fault. This completely masks the actuality that poverty in the District has remained unchanged for at least a decade, and that many of the enacted socio-economic measures actually require the

structural maintenance of a deprived social group in order that the elite group can continue to benefit from neoliberal changes. Thus the currently popular schools can only maintain their privileged positions because of their ability to keep out less 'acceptable' pupils, and because there are community schools available that will take these disadvantaged future citizens.

The national, as well as local, neo-liberal educational and socio-economic policies enacted in Thanet are underpinned by the ideological objective of 'not only transforming the economic and political landscape, but also effecting an upheaval in ideological values' (Eagleton, 2007, p33), in which the notion of unfettered individual freedom of choice is a compelling constituent of the espoused capitalist mythology. The market-based solutions consequent upon this constrain individuals to act in individual consumerist, rather than collective, roles. The resultant 'liberalisation' of Thanet's education system has allowed 'successful' education capitalists to accrue social capital, thereby creating a 'halo' effect that encourages consumers to perceive them as good schools. The resultant oversubscription of potential pupils helps to enhance the schools' producer control over consumers, making 'the provision of education services more unequal and selective, rather than universal.' This, in turn, has resulted in 'good quality schooling for the middle classes and poor quality schooling for the poor' (both Hill, 2006b, p45).

Althusser provides a key analytical frame for understanding the circumstances in Thanet, identifying religion and education as important ideological apparatuses of the state that 'function massively and predominately by ideology ... and repression'. Thus 'schools and churches use suitable methods of punishment, expulsion and selection' (both 1971, pp12 & 13) to discipline their membership and to ensure the continuation of the status quo. Denominational education is grounded in the uncompromising insistence that religion should occupy a central position in the delivery of education policy. However, it needs to be interpreted and understood in terms of the role that it plays in the retention and enhancement of the neo-liberal, capitalist education system. The mainstream churches have been complicit in the social re-ordering of Thanet's education provision by acquiescing to the admissions policies for voluntary aided and foundation church schools. These reinforce social inequities and impact negatively on efforts to promote cohesion (Osler, 2007).

State sponsored religious education and denominationally-linked schools have thus resulted in a hegemonic power coalition between the state and established churches which, in Thanet, forms one of the dominant drivers that directly complements the interests of some of the education producers. The resulting power of the established churches is iniquitous and socially divisive, as it supports and connects with the neo-liberal mode of education production by providing text, symbol and control, rather than focusing on the actual socio-economic determinants of lives lived in a choice-espousing, neo-liberal society.

The producer power accruing to such schools in consequence of their denominational and foundation characters ensures that they are able to choose from among their oversubscribed applicants and, having chosen, they are then able to proselytise, as 'truths', the particular values of their denominations. In this respect, they are as dirigiste and illiberal as the other mainstream religious orthodoxies in Thanet that teach their particular received religions privately, or the minority Christian sects, such as the Taylorites, that openly seek separation, rather than cohesion, from secular society – even though they hope to receive state funding for their faith schools.

A further problem with religion – particularly for religions of an absolutist persuasion – is that they are convinced that their faith is *the* true one which then, for them, means that they should proselytise their beliefs and reserve a 'right' to convert others. But, logically, the different faiths can't all be 'the one true faith' and, as J. S. Mill has observed, 'it never

troubles the [believer] that mere accident [of birth] has decided which of these [religions] is the object of his reliance, and that the same cause which makes him a Churchman in London, would have made him a Buddhist or Confucian in Peking' (1991, p23).

A number of problems particular to children flow from the notion of the 'true faith'. To define a child as a Catholic child or a Muslim child – before the child is able to make up his or her own mind – is a violation of the autonomy of the child. Dawkins has cogently argued that, at best, such children could be described as children of Catholic or Muslim parents, since it is 'a form of child abuse to label children as possessors of beliefs that they are too young to have thought about' (2007, p354). Some children 'of faith' are subject to indoctrination or rituals – circumcision, veiling, separation of the sexes, social subordination of females, denial of blood transfusion and thought control based on particular biblical interpretations – which, if practised in a purely secular context, could constitute discrimination or even child abuse. These types of behaviour manipulation and control, many of which are enacted through denominational schooling, all promote 'in-group' mores at the expense of the wider social out-group, and hence cannot claim to promote community, as opposed to sectarian, cohesion.

Denominational schools thus form an elite sub-section of society that actively militates against cohesion, poverty and social inclusion. Restructuring them into the mainstream secular provision of education would remove one of the structural factors presently militating against overall cohesion in the District.

Religions claim a particular right to respect, despite the fact that the teachings they promote are irrationally based on unproven metaphysical or messianic belief systems, whose authority is invoked to determine their doctrines, and to legitimate their practices. However, religious belief is a historically constructed social formation, and religions, at root, are social organisations that function as interest groups in society, in a similar manner to trades unions or political parties. It is hence difficult to see why they should have any call on the public purse in order to promote their positions.

The move from primary to secondary school in Thanet is underpinned by the notion of 'free choice' for parents. The reality, however, is that parents can only express a preference, with much of the power to choose being vested in the producers. Further, the practice of choice is predicated on an unequal empowering of citizens who exercise choice in a system of diminishing marginal returns which puts 'individual self interest before the collective interest' (McLaren, 2008, p xiii), and in so doing, hastens the deconstruction of the notion of local collective responsibility.

Pen (cited in Wolff, 1996, pp149-151) conceptualises the unequal distribution of wealth as an 'income parade', in which people are marshalled by income, with the lowest earners leading the parade, and the wealthiest at the rear. The curious thing about the parade is that wealth is reflected in height, so the parade is led by the poorest, who are mini-figures of matchstick height. As the parade progresses, we see those of average wealth and average height, followed by some strangely tall businessmen and city traders, until eventually the parade concludes with a few enormously high people of great wealth.

One can argue, by analogy, that neo-liberal educational choice could be represented in the same way. Those least able to make effective educational choices would lead the parade, followed by those of 'average' understanding and ability to manipulate the system, while the rear would be brought up by privileged, articulate middle class parents, with a keen understanding of the complexities of the system and connections to 'good' schools, the churches and admissions authorities. Such a 'choice' parade could also be interpreted as a parade of the needy, because the smallest, who are leading it, represent the most

disadvantaged, whose children need the most help in order to succeed. Perhaps social justice requires that these 'small' people should be given the choice of the best schools, such that opportunity becomes more equally distributed. However, it is unthinkable that a neo-liberal society would support such a change, since 'the history of society has consisted in the development of class antagonisms ... [with] one fact common to all past ages, viz the exploitation of one part of society by another' (Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, cited in Singer, 1994, p43).

The ideology that supports the enacted concept of choice – whether it is Nozick's (1974) extreme individualist minimalism or Rawls' (1999) 'socially ignorant' individual choosing for others – is based upon the supremacy of individual neo-liberal choice. In order to function in the context of Thanet's education system, that choice requires the disadvantaged working class to submit to the 'dull compulsion of economic relations' (Marx, cited in Cole, 2008, p61) between themselves and the education producers by annually participating in the absurd, Sisyphean task of listing their preferences in order to be relegated to one of the three or four most deprived schools in the District. This has the *appearance* of a free exchange between the consumer and producer. The appearance, however, is illusory, as the transaction is skewed by the unequal distribution of forces that favour the producer or the advantaged, middle class chooser. It therefore results in a system that is directly unjust, and the predictable outcome (viz. a place at one of the more disadvantaged secondary schools, irrespective of expressed preference) of so choosing could encourage feelings of alienation, separation and isolation among the working class.

The futility of the requirement to choose may have the subsequent benefit of enabling the disadvantaged to see the alleged 'universal' neo-liberal rights and freedoms as limitations that help to maintain them in their social circumstances, but, as presently structured, acquiescence to the annual repetition of the process is more likely to be an example of Marxist-Leninist false consciousness.

Marx draws an important theoretical distinction between 'political emancipation' and 'human emancipation' (McLellan, 1977), arguing that a politically emancipated state is one whose laws contain no religious barriers or privileges. He recognised, however, that discrimination can exist at another, personal, level – since even when the laws of the state are entirely secular, individuals can still remain full of religious indoctrination. This can lead, as in Thanet, to some individuals suffering discrimination in education, even in a secular state. Religion, or at least denominational religious education, is a barrier to emancipation and community cohesion at both the level of the District and the citizen, and should not be allowed to continue. Schools whose popularity position is currently buttressed by religious barriers should lose their ability to discriminate among applicants on the basis of religion.

The two Conservative Local Authorities (Kent County Council and Thanet District Council) that presently oversee the District of Thanet both offer New Labour approved, market based neo-liberal policies as a response to the District's deprivation. To date, these policies have conspicuously failed to remediate the problems. Further, the market-orientated, state supported religious and selective schools currently operating in Thanet are not equally available to citizens, but 'act, to varying degrees, and with some disarticulation, in the interests of capitalism. For this reason, the creation of true social justice is not viable. The capitalist state must, therefore, be replaced rather than reformed' (Cole, 2008, p62). Selective schooling, which potentially drains talent from the working class, should cease, and admissions criteria and procedures must be brought into common ownership and administration, such that all schools are made equally accessible to pupils, irrespective of religious affiliation, ability or social class. Thanet might then be in a position to deliver the new, cohesive citizenry that Cattle (*op. cit.*, 2001, p11) considered necessary for social justice.

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