

E. Wayne Ross and Rich Gibson eds.(2007) Neoliberalism and education reform. Creskill NJ: Hampton Press

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This collection is a valuable contribution to a growing analysis of the relationship between neoliberal politics and school change. It takes its place alongside, for example, Alan Sears' *Retooling the mind factory* (2003), Stephen Ball's *Education plc* (2007) and *The education debate* (2008), and Bob Lingard and Jenny Ozga's *Routledge Falmer Reader in education policy and politics* (2007).

The book aims to provide 'a critique of educational reforms that result from the rise of neoliberalism', and does this well. At the same time, it also claims to focus on 'practical aspects of pedagogy for social transformation...Each contributor offers critical examinations of the pragmatics of pedagogy and organizing for social transformation.' This is less successful.

Several years ago, I was invited to write a chapter for a book entitled '*Practical critical pedagogy*' edited from Canada by Karyn Cooper and Robert White 2006. Why the title? Because the editors felt that the bulk of North American 'critical pedagogy' in North America had become detached from practice. The best exception I know is the Rethinking Schools network (www.rethinkingschools.org), which at the same time presents a radically political analysis of policy and a body of reflections and plans for classroom activities. My own most recent book *Another school is possible* (2006) sought to emulate this balance. This is not to deny the value of the more intense policy analysis in Ross and Gibson's book, but to express some disappointment that it doesn't contain some chapters which are grounded in the lifeworld of teachers and young people. The examples that do occur are all too brief and scattered.

In Chapter 1, David Hursh concentrates on the accountability and markets regime. With examples from the USA and UK, he shows how the former is used to drive the latter. He demonstrates how they lead to greater inequality in both contexts. This involves competition between schools and increased segregation, but also an internal pressure on teachers to focus mainly on borderline pupils who are currently just below the attainment target. More troubled and bothersome students are excluded or kept away, and already advantaged schools increase their advantages by recruiting those students to whom they can most easily 'add value'.

'Students are treated literally as commodities.' (p31)

The accountability system also has a complex ideological role. It enables a state which treats capitalism as God and facilitates an increasing social division to appear as if it cares for young people and families, whilst blaming schools for lower standards in impoverished neighbourhoods.

Proponents of market reforms assert that schools do not need more money but only need to become more efficient by competing with other public and private schools. (p18)

Hursh also emphasises how current education reforms emphasize curriculum which increases economic productivity. It would have been interesting to consider how this relates to the accountability-driven market system. Nevertheless, the analysis is correct that

schooling is increasingly geared towards economic productivity. Anything which does not contribute to this is regarded as a distraction. Not only does capitalism reach across the globe, as Marx showed already in the Communist Manifesto (p.21 of Ross and Gibson's book), but in our neoliberal age it colonises areas of activity such as education which had previously been partly public space.

Education has, of course, always been contradictory for capitalism. Hursch quotes David Harvey (2000:103):

on the one hand capital requires educated and flexible labourers, but on the other hand it refuses the idea that labourers should think for themselves. While education of the labourer appears important it cannot be the kind of education that permits free thinking.

A similar thought proved seminal to my own book:

Capitalism needs workers who are clever enough to be profitable, but not wise enough to know what's really going on. (p8)

Hursch describes some of the policy consequences of this in our own time, and chiefly the drive to privatize under the pretext of eliminating failure. If there were no low-achieving schools, neoliberal politicians would have to invent them. It was revealing to read that 'Florida's testing requirements have already resulted in labelling 90% of the schools and all of the districts as failing' (p25). Blair and Brown's governments in England are expert at generating convenient moral panics. Several months ago, Gordon Brown's education minister placed a failure label on two-third of schools situated in poor neighbourhoods – candidates for salvation by privatisation.

A heightened sense of failure also serves, at an individual level, to generate the ideology that 'those who do not work hard have only themselves to blame. Inequality is explained as difference in personal effort.' Politics becomes invisible in the 'evaluative state'.

The chapter also captures well the ways in which policy makers dress up accountability in a banner of social justice, but produces data to demonstrate how high-stakes testing increases inequality.

In the following chapter, Pauline Lipman pursues this analysis into the details of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). After summarising diverse features of the Act, including the requirement to give military recruiters access to schools, she relates education reform to neoliberal policy. A prime feature of this is the constant drive to expand profit-making – an important meaning of *globalisation*.

The goal of these processes is to open up new arenas for capital accumulation. This includes new territories (e.g. the Amazon rain forest), new spheres of social life (including education), whole economies (e.g. the former Soviet Bloc), and nature itself (i.e. seeds, native plants, the genome) while degrading labor on a global scale... As a result, the politics of neoliberalism is pushing the logic of the market into every facet of social life. (p38)

Lipman then looks in detail at the false claims made to support NCLB. Its prototype was the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TASS) test. This was claimed to boost achievement, but other measures and indicators show the opposite, including reduced scores in other tests, an increased racial gap, more students classified as 'special education' (to eliminate their scores), and epidemic numbers of dropouts. Nor does it lead to greater cost-effectiveness:

For example, McNeil reports that a low-scoring school serving primarily Mexican-American students had no library, a shortage of texts and little laboratory

equipment, yet administrators spent \$20,000 for commercial test-preparation books. (p43)

She also shows how its debasing of education has its worst impact on low-achieving high-poverty schools. For example, New York commanded all schools to follow their standard test-driven curriculum except for 208 schools (about a sixth) mainly in middle or upper income neighbourhoods. (p44)

Despite the talk of schools being geared up for a 'knowledge economy', Lipman demonstrates that the reductionist learning encouraged by high-stakes testing regimes matches the needs of an economy which demands workers with reliable but low-level skills.

Teaching directed to standardized test preparation promoted an emphasis on one right answer, speed over thoughtfulness, and a standardized definition of what constituted legitimate knowledge. Test preparation countered knowledge as socially constructed, education as dialogue and debate among multiple perspectives, and curriculum that was socially/culturally situated. Yet these are the kinds of educational experiences students need to help them think critically and ethically about the inequalities that structure their life chances. (p46-7)

Lipman goes on to show how the 'failing schools' identified by the NCLB process then become privatisation fodder; to identify the illusion of choice for the poor and the creation of a dual system; its link to the criminalisation of youth; and the loss of schools as a democratic public space.

Chapter 3 by Kevin Vinson and Wayne Ross builds on Foucault's theory that social control has moved from spectacle to surveillance, i.e. from the crowd gazing at the few in royal or religious ceremonial, to efficient supervision of the many by a few. They argue that modern society, aided by electronic technologies, involves both at the same time. For example, tabloid and reality television as examples of spectacle, alongside universal camera surveillance. The chapter then extends this argument to schooling and accountability. Here the test score stands proxy for any real first-hand information or rounded evaluation, serving as both spectacle and surveillance when utilised by the mass media.

The rest of the chapter includes other important issues, though it is sometimes less than coherent with the initial spectacle / surveillance argument. Nevertheless important additional data are provided on high-stakes testing in Texas and Chicago, for example that the school featured by the New York Times as Chicago's "best high school" is also its whitest and only admits students whose standardised tests are in the top 20 percent of the population. (p73) An enticing but underdeveloped discussion of alienation, architecture and resistance concludes the chapter.

In Chapter 4, Gilbert Gonzalez gives us an illuminating insight into the US's imperialist relationship with Mexico, and its impact on education. He illustrates the discursive construction of Mexicans as "Oriental" (sic!) – fatalistic, impractical, superstitious etc. – and subsequently as child-like, lazy, violent, dishonest though artistic, colourful and musical – the whole gamut of colonial stereotypes which carried across into the schooling of Mexican immigrant children in the USA:

The Mexican is naturally indolent, and his tendency to 'never do today what can be put off until some other time' is one of the outstanding problems with which the school is confronted. (cited on p99)

For decades, American professors of education recommended segregating Mexican children because they were "dirty", used IQ tests to assert a genetic inferiority, and channelled them into special and vocational schools – a similar experience to Black Americans. Unfortunately this chapter is sketchy on the current situation.

In chapter 5, Dave Hill presents a useful summary of the main features of neo-liberalism and its impact on education, and the contradictions of the teacher's role – to produce labour power which is not conscious of its own exploitation. One of the most interesting parts of this chapter is a discussion of McMurtry (1991), who argues:

- that appropriation for private profit excludes others, whereas in education we learn so that we can share;
- that the market supplies to satisfy the wants of those who have money, whereas education seeks to develop sound understanding 'whether it is wanted or not', and regardless of purchasing power;
- that high-standard market products are made to be problem-free, whereas excellence in education is about the impartiality of its representations and the depth and breadth of the problems it poses.

These formulations are not unproblematic, but they are thought-provoking. McMurtry continues by arguing that the market and education have different standards of freedom: as opposed to be market freedom to buy with no questions asked and to sell with no requirement to answer to anybody else, educational freedom is 'precisely the freedom to question, and to seek answers, whether it offends people's self-gratification or not' (cited p126). This critical freedom and academic rigour is destroyed when education is commodified.

Hill's chapter ends by highlighting some key features of critical education. Freire says we must be more prepared to engage with the media and permeate policy-making bodies; Giroux and McLaren that we engage in 'both a struggle for meaning and a struggle over power relations', with a 'preferential concern for the suffering and the struggles of the disadvantaged and oppressed'; and Hill himself insists that despite all attempts to censure and limit, we should exploit 'whatever space does exist' for counterhegemonic struggle.

A short chapter by Glenn Rikowski follows, which points out the links between privatisation of aspects of the education system and the GATS agreement. The more it can be claimed that a section of education is permeated by market forces, the easier it becomes to argue that the whole of that section must be opened up to competitive bidding and provision. Many of the agencies that pave the way for this do so unknowingly:

The Office for Standards in Education is transfigured into a GATS-facilitator every time it locates a "weak" school ripe for business takeover. (p157)

Chapter 7 by Patrick Shannon presents an interesting critique of scripted reading programmes as reified and fetishistic. The relationship of teacher and pupil around a text is distorted by the belief that the text and scripted programme themselves produce the learning. 'When teachers and administrators reify reading instruction, they lose sight of the fact that reading instruction is a human process.' (p166) The process of learning to read is stripped of emotional, cultural and social attachments. Learner's ideas and voices are rendered insignificant when all that matters is what is to be tested. For all the claims to be 'scientific' and 'rigorously tested', highly scripted programmes seriously misunderstand what learning to read is about.

In chapter 8, Rich Gibson provides a subtle discussion of Paulo Freire's politics. While admiring Freire methodologically, he focuses on contradictions in Freire's political stance, for example in Grenada. Beyond this critique, Gibson's chapter concludes with a powerful argument for critical education as praxis which changes consciousness.

John Welsh, in chapter 9, provides a critique of much research on Higher Education. Moving beyond positivistic and hermeneutic modes of research, he argues for 'immanent critique' which:

attacks social reality from its own standpoint, but at the same time criticizes the standpoint from the perspective of historical context. (p225)

Welsh claims that Hegel has been much misunderstood as a political conservative who deified the Prussian state, and that his great achievement was to move beyond Kant's division between pure and practical reason. Unfortunately, the chapter lacks any reference to real research which the author feels is a valuable model.

In a wide-ranging chapter, Les Levidow continues the discussion of Higher Education, examining its commodification in the different contexts of Africa, Europe and North America. He focuses particularly on the position of ICT in this reform agenda, and the fetishism of treating it as self-referential:

If you believe that information technology as such inevitably brings markets, or hierarchies, or freedom, or modularity, or conflict, or God-like control over human affairs, then you may not even recognize that you have choices. (Agre, cited p240)

We must always ask 'efficiency for what kind of society?' and 'information for whose interests and control?'. Welsh brings out the extent to which students are being distanced from higher education, whether in Africa where it's thought to be too expensive to provide for the poor or in the UK where competitive research assessment and tendering leads academics to reduce time for their students. Yet the official rhetoric speaks of widening access, within a business model:

The ordinary citizen can have access to "public services" on an individual basis, and these will be invoiced on the basis of the use made of them. (Delors' 1993 paper for the European Commission, cited p247)

The author highlights as counterstrategies:

- demonstrating links among various measures
- linking resistances across constituencies and places
- de-reifying ICT.

The final chapter by Peter McLaren is both stimulating and frustrating: stimulating because of the forcefulness and perspicacity of its critical analysis, but frustrating because there is so little positive that educators can use as a tool for moving forward.

McLaren's heightened language is no mere rhetoric: it serves both to shine an analytical light and to carry a justified anger, for example:

Capital has produced some world-historical excretory excesses, turning the world into a global toilet of toxic waste while adding legions to Marx's reserve army of labor. (p258)

He highlights the hypocrisy of neo-liberalism's gurus, who claimed to liberate the market from state control whilst favouring the state's military involvement in Vietnam, Chile, Iran, and so on.

He critiques versions of critical pedagogy which dilute its radical potential; it has become domesticated into celebrating "ethnic" holidays and "respecting difference" during black history month. He lists ways in which critical pedagogy has :

collapsed into left liberal attempts by progressive educators to remediate the educational enterprise. This has resulted in a long list of reform initiatives that include creating communities of learners in classrooms; bridging the gap between student culture and the culture of the school; engaging in cross-cultural

understandings; integrating multicultural content and teaching across the curriculum; ... improving academic achievement in culturally diverse schools. (p268)

It is not altogether clear, however, why and under which conditions these practices constitute a dilution as opposed to a part of resistance, nor what alternative the author believes should be put to items on the list. (Surely he would not wish to increase the gap or remove multicultural content.) It is certainly the case that class analysis has been lost in favour of a 'postmodernist concern with a politics of difference and inclusion' but that does not mean that a Marxist can disengage from gender and 'race'. Perhaps he is referring to currents in the US, but it is difficult to identify with the view that educators concerned with gender and 'race' have 'severely compromise[d] an earlier, more radical commitment to anti-imperialist struggle'.

In attempting to outline a strategy, general points are not followed through well into the field of education. For example, a thoughtful section on organisation and parties is not linked into building resistance in and through schools and colleges, beyond broad references to 'direct democracy' and 'revolutionary council democracy from below'. (p285)

Nevertheless, in the final words of his chapter and of the book, McLaren pinpoints the most urgent problem to be discussed and solved:

Although critical pedagogy may seem driven by lofty, high-rise aspirations that spike an otherwise desolate landscape of despair, where pock-marked dreams bob through the sewers of contemporary cosmopolitan life, they anchor our hope in the dreams of the present. Here the social revolution is not reborn in the foam of avant-garde antifoundationalism, which only stokes the forces of despair, but emerges from the everyday struggle to release us from the burdens of political détente and democratic disengagement. It is anchored, in other words, in class struggle. (p287)

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