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# Whither political education in the face of cultural hegemony?

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As an ex gasfitter and railway worker I have never been an educator in the sense of being part of the formal education system, but education and training in some form has woven its way through my life right up until today, firstly as a school user and parent, then as a worker and trade unionist, as a school governor, as a late HE attender, and now as an occasional political educator with the Independent Working-Class Education Network. The experience has always been challenging and not always rewarding, but it has always helped form not only my politics but also my views on the formal education system and methods of teaching practice. I have recently attended a number of events around the future of political education with other political educators, and it has caused me to reflect on the past, but also to try and locate the position of education in the current political and cultural landscape. Does it offer opportunity to the working class, or has it become another market-focused engine of conformity or, worse, the chains of the dominant ideology? The Jesuits used to say 'Give me a child until he is seven and I will give you the man'. Alternatively today we might say, 'If we send children for a liberal education, should we be surprised when they return as liberals, dominated by the cultural identity of the individual and the economics of the market?' A number of political anniversaries have acted as reference points in my thinking.

In 1971 Jimmy Reid led the workers of the Clyde in a drive to defend their jobs and communities. Reid later went on to be chancellor of Glasgow University, and gave an address on the concept of 'alienation' and the despair of men and women subject 'to blind economic forces' that were directing their lives, but also the alienation of men and women from society and its regimes. The alienation of many working-class children begins with the formal education system, and the current system of testing has extended its reach even into the primary sector. The imposition of SATs on children as an exam, but also on the teaching profession as a measure of success, begins the cementing of a regime designed to begin a rigid system of success and failure, and accentuating the fleeting nature of the chances of education, the end of any

thought of lifelong education. But even here the great liberal lies begin. How I have winced when I have heard a teacher tell small children that 'you can be whatever you want to be'! The evidence of the lack of social mobility makes this a whopper, up there with Santa Claus and fairies at the bottom of the garden. But it is the starting gun in the race of capitalist economic life, the transference of the 'Great American dream', and the beginning for some of the terminology of 'ambition and career progression', 'aspiration', 'getting on', and, by inference, getting away.

Before the testing regimes of Thatcherism, many working-class children's primary school experience was benevolent, and the real alienation began at secondary level, and is well documented. Its current existence has been confirmed by two of our children currently working in schools and FE, with the difficulty of motivation and aspiration not fitting with their lives or cultural position. The annual Radio 4 ritual announcements of GCSE and A-level results and the garnering of As and A\*s for entry to Oxford or redbricks leaves those working hard for Cs and Ds with no doubt about their place in society, and the mantra of 'this will decide the future of their lives' reinforcing the fleeting nature of opportunity of education (and not a mention of the 50 per cent who will never aspire to - or even imagine - university life). There is no doubt that the discussions around children's and students' mental health is nothing if not accentuated by this 'winners and losers' mentality and short-term window of educational opportunity. Recent good reading has come from *Making Workers: Radical Geographies of Education* by Katharyne Mitchell, where she argues that 'as globalization transforms the organization of society, so too is its impact felt in the classroom . . . schools are spaces in which neoliberal practices are brought to bear on the lives of children'. Although it is based on the US and Canadian systems, the UK features also.

The alienation of my secondary education was replaced by a much more rewarding educational experience with the move into the workplace and trade unionism, a cultural rival to the formal education system. Both nationalised industries provided good

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vocational training as well as an opportunity to repair gaps in formal education, alongside trade unions that provided political education as well as formal representational and technical training. More importantly, it introduced me to workers with a culture of learning significantly apart from that directed from either management or government. The battles of workers against management control through dehumanising systems of Taylorist direction, Fordism and other management systems created its own education and culture, perhaps best described as class consciousness. It was the second anniversary that brought this to my mind - the fiftieth anniversary of the publishing of Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and an excellent article by Liza Featherstone on 'Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* at fifty:

The teacher was holding forth. Hired by the Brazilian government to set up a workers' literacy program, he waxed progressive to an audience of fishermen, peasants and urban workers on why, according to the Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget, they should not beat their children. He was pleased with his lecture as he delivered it - a pretty lucid and engaging explication, if he did say so himself. Then a worker raised his hand to ask some questions. 'We have just heard some nice words', the man said, politely but pointedly addressing the teacher as "Doctor". 'Fine words. Well spoken . . . do you know where people live, sir? Have you been in our houses, sir?'

The worker described his own living conditions: his kids were 'dirty, crying, making a noise . . . And people have to get up at four in the morning the next day and start all over again . . . If people hit their kids, sir, it's because life is so hard they don't have much choice'. The teacher, of course, was Freire, and 'it stood out as the cathartic moment shaping Freire's thinking about progressive education: even when one must speak to people, one must convert the "to" into a "with" the people.' The moment captured something vital about knowledge: it comes from lived experience - the teacher cannot just dictate from on high. In that moment, Freire realised that, although his intentions in giving his Piaget lecture had been progressive, his pedagogy was not: he had treated his students as empty vessels - or, as he would later write, vaults in a bank - waiting to be filled, not as interlocutors or partners in the learning process. He had not understood that he and his students were 'co-creators of knowledge'; in dialogue they would learn from one another.

How fortunate we are that Freire not only captured that moment but recorded it and acted on it, rather than producing his badge as a 'professional' and deriding the experience of the man! I contrast Freire's light-bulb moment with the Brexit debate, and the derision and ridicule of the lived experiences of those

in the 'Red Wall' seats. Living in a staunch Remain seat but campaigning in those old industrial seats, it was the dogma of the Remain meetings, particularly the acceptance of market economics, that shocked me more than the bleak experiences in the Leave camp. For me it was always a marginal political and economic decision, but for many Remainers there was no doubt of their 'rightness' and the flourishing of educational achievements and 'experts' to prove it. James Meek, in his *Dreams of Leaving and Remaining*, captures some of this cultural difference, as does Eurosceptic economist Wolfgang Streeck in his *Critical Encounters: Capitalism, Democracy, Ideas*, when he comments:

It also overlooked the emotional wreckage caused by the attacks of a new left denouncing those who wanted Brexit to help them protect their accustomed way of life as xenophobic, homophobic, misogynistic, racist 'Little Englanders'. A party whose cultural elites consider its traditional supporters down-in-their-hearts fascists cannot hope to retain their confidence. As in so many other countries, replacing class in political discourse with identity caused an identitarian backlash from those for whom the national state has remained a principal focus of collective identification.

The hypocrisy of many of those condemning the failure of class loyalty in the 2019 election while forgetting their own marching with the ragtag army of the liberal People's Vote campaign is maybe the ultimate Freire-and-the-peasant experience of UK politics, that will take much to recover from.

The Thatcher revolution attacked both the class consciousness and the organisation of workers, but also Freire's ideas. Firstly, through trade union education and the 'new realism' and 'partnership' introduced as a result of the defeat of miners, printers and steel workers, narrowing shop steward training to representation and health and safety. Secondly, the quality of vocational training diminished, partly due to the sidelining of union involvement, with attitudinal and behavioural competences introduced into NVQs, apprenticeships, and management regimes of Kaizen, Quality Circles and Team Briefings - all practices designed to cement the authority of management and attempt to convince workers of joint enterprise and to view other workers as competitors. As a gas worker travelling through privatisation I experienced all these initiatives before seeing them in action in manufacturing as a Union Learning Fund project worker. Much of the early battles over their introduction at the Nissan plant in Sunderland is documented in *Driven by Nissan?: Critical Guide to New Management Techniques* by David Beale. The modern Human Resource Management (HRM) language of 'colleagues' and 'partners' disguises the exploitative nature of the modern workplace. Even initiatives such as the Union Learning Fund under New Labour were eventually stripped of

any of Freire's pedagogy, and bent to the will of employers. The insistence on accreditation and assessment, along with the prioritisation of 'employability skills', immediately reintroduced the alienation of early school experience for many workers. (Under new government proposals even this remit of the Fund is to be abolished.)

The third anniversary is the 150th of the birth of Robert Noonan, better known as Robert Tressell, and author of *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*. Reputably the book that created a million socialists, this was part of the introductory pack given out as initial shop steward training in the late 1970s and, for me, it was an uplifting book, and a reinforcement of class consciousness and life experiences. Yet it has often been met with mixed responses from those to whom I have loaned a copy, or who have sought it out. From those who have progressed through formal education and into accepted careers, the response has often been one of literary criticism - that it is polemical, too long, simplistic and nothing special. But for workers with different life experiences it has been transformational, with its narrative powerful enough to overcome any literary criticism. I recently loaned a copy to a young woman working around the country as a contract electrician on construction sites, who returned it with the comment: 'It is so like today; nothing has changed'.

Later in life I dipped a toe into higher education and attended university with the help of a trade union grant, to study Industrial Relations, hoping to understand the theory behind the practice of my life. I was fortunate to attend one of the last schools run on a class-based curriculum, but was soon left with the knowledge that universities are now 'places of earning rather than places of learning', with all the problems I had witnessed in school, training and the workplace. Even then, Industrial Relations had been merged into the Business School, and within a few years it would be merged into HRM. I also came to realise how little undergraduates know of life, and the perfect sponge they are for ideas that shape cultural conformity. Even the political attitudes of left-leaning students are corrupted with the conformity of neoliberalism, leading to alliances with liberals on globalisation, individualism and the kind of economics cultivated at university. Also, a dogmatic defence of all that they have received as 'empty vessels' is a hallmark of those wishing to leave their class rather than strengthen it. After the 2019 election I swapped experiences with two activists from Leeds, who recounted canvassing with university students in the Morley constituency and feeling that 'they may as well have taken Martians to the doorstep', so different were their views of the world.

I now live in a city with two universities, but am struck by how the loans system has changed the student view from an educational experience to a

market exchange and 'social experience'. The marketisation of universities and the loans system has turned even higher education into a badge-collecting, earnings opportunity. It again emphasises the 'golden ticket' experience of education of those that succeed and of those that fail - the 'one chance' and the created myth of meritocracy and social mobility.

Higher education is probably the final con trick of neoliberalism and Third Wayism, with its motto of education, education, education and 'good jobs' - manifestly untrue, with fewer 'good jobs' replaced with societal conformism alongside the coercion of debt. Along with debt, Jimmy Reid's view of alienation also comes into play, as many working class university students experience their own personal alienation from their class, as they are forced to adopt conformist mores and values to convert their 'golden ticket' into market earnings. HE also has the 'benefit' both of robbing the working class of potential future leaders and of reinforcing the class perception of the 'swinish multitude' beloved of Burke, reality television and the Brexit experience. Those differing values were recently expressed in Kerry Hudson's book *Lowborn: Growing Up, Getting Away and Returning to Britain's Poorest Towns*, which charts the author's progression from the working class to middle class writer.

All this leads to my fourth anniversary, that of both the birth of Antonio Gramsci (1891) and of his foundation of the Italian Communist Party (1921), and his important idea of cultural hegemony. After forty years of neoliberalism we are now witnessing the high water mark of the cultural hegemony of ruling elites and neoliberal conformism. In their formative years, our children and young people are forced into a limited view of education and of their life chances, with little opposition from formal political or cultural institutions, alongside a workplace experience of conformism either through coercion or manipulation. The workplace view is best expressed by Harry Braverman in *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*, when he says that 'manipulation is primary and coercion held in reserve', with the manipulation 'held in place by the capitalist system itself'. Marx expressed the societal view when he wrote that 'the dominant ideas of any age are the ideas of the ruling class', and even the founders of neoliberalism claimed that they did not want it to become the economic mantra of any one party, but of all parties, and that its procreation would not be via a mass movement but through ruling elites. Our education system reflects very much the manipulation of the neoliberal system, but also the predictions of Marx's theory of base and superstructure, with social structures supporting the economic base.

So 'whither political education?', as seen from this outlook of alienation, both of those excluded from education and pushed into a bleak workplace, and a

different kind of alienation of those in higher education schooled in the conformity of a ruling hegemony and alienated from their class roots. Can we find a way forward to ally the two to go forward with respect and acceptance of each experience?

Although I never thought of myself as an educator I was attracted to the IWCE Network by its history of opposition to the co-option of working-class students into liberal education, and the Ruskin strike. In 1909 working-class students at Ruskin College rejected the cultural hegemony of the time and the opportunity of class collaboration. The liberal blandishments 'especially in the humanities and social sciences, was about trying to cream off and neutralise sections of the working class;' to co-opt potential leaders into the ruling class. Their rejection led to the founding of the National Council of Labour Colleges, in existence until the 1960s and the foundation of much trade union education.

The story of the Plebs League, founded by these students, is recorded in Colin Waugh's *'Plebs': The Lost Legacy of Independent Working-Class Education*. In more recent times, opposition has come in the form of the strike of Manchester economics students after the financial crash of 2008, opposing the narrow content of the economics curriculum there. Their founding of Rethinking Economics and publishing of *The Econocracy: The Perils of Leaving Economics to the Experts* demonstrates that there are still cracks in the hegemony.

Some are beginning to experience the alienation of the workplace as members of the new precariat and through the new unionism of couriers, fast food and call-centre workers. The cohort of those alienated by the disappointment of university life may be easier to attract because of their relative success in the education system, but they will need to be challenged over their conformity to elements of the ruling hegemony and lack of critical examination. More importantly, how do we recapture those alienated at a much earlier stage of life? How do we recapture the Freirean respect for working-class experience and lives lived under the coercive side of globalised cultural and economic hegemony? With low trade union membership and little formal political representation, the opportunity to work with them rather than regarding them as 'empty vessels' is much more difficult but probably more urgent. Their alienation is much deeper, and the Freire conversation of 'it's because life is so hard they don't have much choice' rings as true today as fifty years ago. As examples, there are still huge gaps between, on the one hand, those wishing for equality of opportunity and those of us more wedded to equality of outcome, and, on the other, between those who see globalisation and the advancement of capitalism as a move towards internationalism and, as in Seattle and Genoa, those deindustrialised workers and indigenous peoples wishing to build barriers to it. These issues need to be

debated, but most of all there is a need for all participants to be treated with respect. I don't have all the answers, and the hill looks a steep one, but if we do not attempt to reconcile the differing elements amongst the alienated then there are others who will fill the gap of discontent.

I leave with another quote from the Jimmy Reid alienation address:

To the students [of Glasgow University] I address this appeal. Reject these attitudes. Reject the values and false morality that underlie these attitudes. A rat race is for rats. We're not rats. We're human beings. Reject the insidious pressures in society that would blunt your critical faculties to all that is happening around you, that would caution silence in the face of injustice lest you jeopardise your chances of promotion and self-advancement. This is how it starts and before you know where you are, you're a fully paid-up member of the rat-pack. The price is too high. It entails the loss of your dignity and human spirit.

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