

The Politics of Neoliberalism and Social Justice: Towards a pedagogy of critical locational, encounter.

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Abstract:

The neoliberalisation of higher education is gathering pace and momentum on a global scale, albeit with national differences. In this context, a number of challenges and conflicting politics are emerging especially in relation to pedagogical ethos of social justice. Our paper analyzes the general characteristics of neoliberal policy and practices worldwide, looking in particular at their impacts on students and teachers alike mainly in relation to the license to exercise critical thinking and social justice. Subsequently it suggests resisting neoliberal agenda by using radical teaching methods which consider diversity and difference as social and political assets which allow meaningful dialogue across social, ethnic, national and gender groups while working to promote equality and social justice. This theoretical background is formed the five papers composing this special issue. The authors of these articles all introduce radical and critical research and pedagogies posing struggle for social justice and against inequalities at their core – as effective tools of resistance against the oppressive and unjust conditions created by the neo-liberal agendas that are structuring education worldwide. Situated in a range of national contexts, the papers provide the ground for a pedagogy of critical locational encounter, recognizing this as a site of struggle while addressing multiple and complex relationships of power and their contestation.

At the 2016 American Association of Geographers (AAG) annual conference, the Opening Presidential Plenary organized by AAG President Sarah Witham Bednarz carried the title ‘Thriving in a Time of Disruption in Higher Education’. The plenary along with many concurrent sessions raised concerns about threats to academic freedom, increasing pressure from external bodies to demonstrate the ‘value and impact’ of research, and pressure from senior management to ensure that the student-as-consumer is ‘satisfied’. Many of these concerns are linked to wider global issues about the impact of neoliberal capitalism on education as a whole as well as to national political, economic, social, and gender conflicts and concerns. Consequently, these caused many scholars present at the AAG to question the very meaning and purpose of education itself.

This Special Issue engages with these current concerns about the meaning of education in these disruptive times. The five papers comprising the issue address the ways in which neoliberal education systems enforce and reinforce existing hostilities, inequalities and injustices, thus damaging education at all levels (Connell, 2013). Importantly they all illustrate how radical and critical research and pedagogies might become effective tools of resistance against oppressive and unjust conditions. Case studies and examples demonstrates how pedagogic spaces can facilitate cultural, social and political transformative encounters, particularly for students from disadvantaged and marginalized communities, fostering their critical thinking and their agency. Introducing our shared theoretical assumptions, this introductory paper will go on to describe each of the papers, addressing their contribution to the Special Edition and to this important discussion

Neoliberal Education, Neoliberal Academia

Neoliberalism, grounded in logics of globalization, marketization, and individualization, has penetrated many areas of public life as well as public institutions changing their ethos and *modus operandi* with increasingly disastrous effects. Education systems all over the world have been impacted by neoliberal ideology and practices transforming schools and higher education institutions alike. As a dominant ‘economic and philosophy discourse’ (Olssen and Peters, 2005), neoliberalism’s main characteristics have been integrated and embedded in

Higher Education through an audit culture of measurable performance and excellence. Such an approach is increasingly used to sanction and justify the existence of universities and the role that they play in the knowledge economy where knowledge can be turned into a product of capitalism (Olssen and Peters, 2005).

Higher Education around the world is increasingly now organized around standardization, benchmarking and performance. Metrics which include student satisfaction, employability and the proportion of 'good honors degrees' are common examples of this neoliberal approach influencing governance and accountability. These have replaced 'the welfare liberal model' (Olssen and Peters, 2005: 314) and have constituted a shift in the way public education is to be approached. As such, it is no longer governed according to the norms and values of the public good and instead, it is managed and regulated according to the principles of a market economy (Naidoo and Williams, 2015; Olssen and Peters, 2005). Jarvis more specifically highlights the way quality assurance regimes 'have become an increasingly dominant regulatory tool in the management of higher education sectors around the world' imposing 'quasi-market, competitive based rationalities...using a policy discourse that is often informed by conviction rather than evidence' (Jarvis, 2014: 155).

Referring to academic institutions, Brule (2004) claims that practices like 'accountability processes, standardization measures, performance indicators, benchmarking achievement audits' have developed since 1980 in the UK, US, Australia and Canada and increasingly in other parts of the world. Terms like 'institutional efficiency', 'global competitiveness' and 'teaching excellence' have been regularly used clarifying how intensely market ideology invaded higher education (Brule, 2004: 247). Other phenomena includes the branding and marketing of the university; the decline in public spending on higher education; the speed-up of the academic assembly line and casualization of teaching workforce as well as the decline of a privileged sector with tenure, research opportunities and promotion paths (Maskovsky, 2012, Connell, 2013). Universities are increasingly run as businesses (Ball, 2012) and we have seen the emergence and consolidation of the 'student as consumer' discourse with an impact on the way students perceive and approach their studies (Naidoo and Williams, 2014;

Molesworth et al, 2010; Saunders, 2007). Naidoo and Williams (2015) notably warn against the longer-term effects of students becoming 'passive and instrumental learners who are unwilling to extend their intellectual horizons' (Naidoo and Williams, 2015: 219). Student consumerism influences their behavior and ways of learning, yet it also has damaged teachers' wellbeing and practices, and the way knowledge has been constructed and taught (see for example Slater, 2015; Feigenbaum, 2007 and Connell, 2013).

Research also argues that the neoliberal shift has shaped the policies of schools, changing their ways of operation and funding and gradually their symbolic and cultural capital (Hill and Ruska, 2009; Busch, 2017; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). In the Australian context, Raewyn Connell (2013) asserts that schools have been more resistant to the excesses of managerialism than universities, yet they also have been re-shaped by the market agenda relying on 'the creation of hierarchies and mechanisms of competition' (Connell, 2013: 99). At the state level, policy initiatives such as the de-zoning of state schools, promoting competition among schools for students, marks and money and the expansion of state selective schools have undermined the public-school system of the previous generation. In the increasing audit surveillance climate, 'teachers' capacity to make autonomous judgement about curriculum and pedagogy in the interest of their actual pupils is undermined by the system of remote control' (Connell, 2013: 108).

Education thus is not a citizen right anymore but has been converted into a commodity; students (or their parents when they are in school age) have become seemingly empowered autonomous clients expected to exercise choice; while teachers whose work conditions are marked by increasing precarity and casualization have turned into anxious and oppressed service providers. In such context, educators find it increasingly difficult to fully embrace their liberal humanist motivation in order to foster learners' active and critical citizenship, delivering instead quantifiable and measurable services and skills for readying the students-consumers to the capitalist and corporate job market (Brule, 2004: 248; Vallally, in press Connell, 2013). It is not surprising therefore, that everyday life in higher education campuses - with their vocational and professional agendas, with the special deals offered in cafeterias

and bookstores, with job and cheap services proposed by student unions - is entirely saturated by consumer capitalism.

According to Giroux (2010) (who borrowed Giorgio Agamben's theory) neoliberal ideology led to using 'bare pedagogy', that is pedagogy which places 'an emphasis on winning at all costs, a ruthless competitiveness, hedonism, the cult of individualism' while minimizing and even removing ethical considerations (Giroux, 2010: 185). Within such circumstances, hierarchical divisions and social, national, ethnic, class and gender disparities are reinforced and values such as social justice, equality, anti-racism and care for others as well as collective mutual learning are almost impossible to maintain (Giroux, 2010; Jones Jr. and Calafell, 2012).

In fact, competition, aiming for excellence and intense individualism appear entirely at odds with dissent thinking and radical critique of social and political power relations as well as with learning about equality and social justice (Feigenbaum, 2007, Giroux, 2010). Lynch (2006) argues that such circumstances pose a challenge to academics who should work on developing a 'counter-hegemonic discourse, a discourse that is grounded in the principles of democracy and equality that are the heart of the public education tradition' (Lynch, 2006: 11). For academics who work in the arts, humanities and social sciences - fields that are exceptionally at odds with the neoliberal agenda and 'critical of the values and operational systems of profit-driven interests' - this is particularly challenging. (Lynch, 2006: 8).

It is hard to fulfill such vocation when students come to disavow any connection with critical analysis of the social structure. According to Brule (2004) searching clear-cut and easy paths to knowledge students often see critical educators who invite them to question and challenge their reality, as obstacle and as a proof to the teachers' incompetence. This negative judgment which is reflected in teachers' assessments makes it increasingly difficult for educators to foster social critique. Moreover, faculty that bring up issues of difference that either cause students discomfort, or turn the classroom into a site of conflict, may find themselves without institutional support, facing hostile students as well as antagonistic colleagues and

administration (hooks, 1994; Jones Jr. and Calafell, 2012; Hager, 2015). In such cases, teachers are blamed for/accused of politicizing what should be a neutral space. Although it is known that classrooms are never neutral locations, critical and feminist educators find themselves having to defend themselves from these unreasonable accusations (hooks, 1994). Since students' evaluation of teachers' aptitude can determine an educators' career, promoting social critique becomes a gamble many teachers are not willing to take.

In this context, this Special Issue raises the importance to investigate our capacity as educators to insist on resisting the market-driven forces despite institutional hazards. The five papers demonstrate the necessity to oppose the forms of governmentality that tries to discard pedagogies which promote ethics of democracy, freedom and social justice as well as critical engagement and independent intellectual thought.

Towards a pedagogy of critical locational encounter and resistance

Finding a site of resistance where our existence is not simply reduced to a set of educational and research measures can sometimes feel like an impossible or futile task (Lynch, 2006: 7). Under the oppression of neoliberal governmentalities, Ball and Olmedo (2013), using the Foucauldian notion of subject, consider subjectivity (who we are as teaching subjects, what we have become and what we ought to become) as one such site of struggle where power-relations are brought to the fore to be resisted and contested (See also Ball, 2016). This resistance is not necessarily overt or done on a grand scale and more generally implies techniques and tactics of 'maneuvering within neo-liberal policies and technologies' (Raaper, 2016: 186). However, seeing the possibility of resisting the oppression and the power relation, which is carried out by a neoliberal academia, may help us (re-)envisage our teaching practice as a significant vocational commitment and practice.

For us as co-editors of this Special Issue education that promotes humanist values through critical pedagogies is seen to be a very effective tool in opposing the alienated institutional structure. Entailing prolonged meetings among people from diverse social groups, humanist approaches to education enable participants to practice what has been learned on the spot

(Connell, 2013). Such encounters which involves care, respect, reciprocity and a degree of mutual engagement, require social inclusiveness and a fundamental sense of equality between students and teachers. However, Connell also reminds us that maintaining such form of encounters is not trouble-free:

Educational encounter is always multiple, in terms of the numbers and diversity of people involved and the number of structures shaping educational relationships: not only class structures, but also gender structures, ethnic and race relations, connections with region and land, generational relations and more (105).

The papers address educational encounters as opportunities to politically engage with differences. Surveying multiple and complex relationships of power and their contestation, the authors demonstrate the degree in which these encounters are burdened with social and educational potentials and complications. This perspective enables the authors to depict complex yet at times constructive exchanges which are thriving even in spaces where individualism, racism and xenophobia that come with neoliberalism, powerfully reinforce social 'maps of rules and regulations that serve to either limit or enable particular identities, individual capacities, and social forms' (Giroux, 2005: 136). Even in such oppressive locations, borders are always crossed, and social and political disparities are overlooked.

Tamar Hager (see article in this issue) suggests analyzing an educational encounter by using Mary Louise Pratt's term: 'contact zones' (Pratt, 1992: 6). According to Pratt these are spaces where peoples who come from diverse social, cultural, ethnic and national backgrounds 'come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving...radical inequality, and intractable conflict... [but also] interaction, interlocking, understandings and practices.' (Pratt, 1992: 6-7).

However, inter-group and intra-groups connections are not inevitable. Magali Peyrefitte's proposes employing Ash Amin's observation on the need to foster such social and cultural interactions (see her paper in this issue). According to Amin (2002) although colleges

'constitute a relatively unstable space, bringing together people from varied backgrounds engaged in a common venture...[t]hese openings do not automatically lead to cultural exchange... but joint projects across ethnic divisions and the sheer contrast of the sociality of this space...can help' (Amin, 2002: 970).

As the papers in this issue jointly demonstrate educational spaces open occasions for scrutinizing and analyzing power relations among groups, exposing patterns of consistent discrimination endorsed by neoliberal institutional structures. Susan Gair and Ben Baglow, for example, analyze the growing material hardships of social work tertiary students in Australia. Struggling with the embedded social inequalities that persist within increasing neoliberal institutions, the students point to the disconnect between the social justice agenda of social work curriculum and the lack of empathy or action of faculty and other students for their economic and psychological difficulties.

While Gair and Baglow conclude their analysis by proposing to raise students' awareness to the hardships of their peers by adding radical pedagogies to the academic curriculum, the four other papers put critical education at the front. As previous research demonstrates, critical education could be very valuable for raising consciousness to social and political injustices. Giroux (2010) introduces Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy as a way of struggling against the neoliberal idea of education as efficient market-oriented training. Critical education is very far from the widely spread 'bare pedagogy'; it is a 'political and moral practice that provides the knowledge, skills, and social relations that enable students to expand the possibilities of what it means to be critical citizens while expanding and deepening their participation in the promise of substantive democracy.' (192). Within the neoliberal academia it entails creating a space of resistance towards managerial oppressive authority by 'teaching students to think critically about the world around them and recognizing interpretation and dialogue as a condition for social intervention and transformation in the service of an unrealized democratic order' (Giroux, 2004: 501).

Therefore, despite their awareness of the institutional impediments awaiting educators who are

engaged with such pedagogies within the neoliberal campuses, the writers in this issue strongly believe that this is the right path to follow, demonstrating each in her own national and institutional context, how critical methods can turn educational encounters into a significant opportunity for students to learn and practice social critique of their surroundings. This type of teaching also increase students' ability to oppose the damages of neoliberalism as well as the injuries of other kinds of national, ethnic, gender and social oppressions, subsequently enabling them to act for social change within campuses and outside their boundaries.

Pedagogy, Equality and Social Justice: the politics of education

The authors of the five papers believe that pedagogic spaces might help facilitate a move towards more egalitarian society. Using different methodologies and ways of writing, they explore issues of inclusivity/belonging, equality, and social justice within diverse national contexts. Thus, readers can explore educational spaces in Australia, United Kingdom, Israel and United States. However, despite the different locations, all papers illustrate how social and political structures shape educational spaces, calling for ways of de-centring current hegemonic neoliberal structures to foster meaningful knowledge construction and learning experiences.

Each of the papers draws on research conducted with marginalized groups to argue that education is always political and therefore educators and educational institutions have an obligation to challenge the status quo, encouraging students to think critically about the world in which they live. In this vein, the articles consider strategies (including changing of policy, radical teaching practices, and changes of curriculum, artistic and creative approaches) that may help create more egalitarian educational spaces.

Susan Gair and Len Baglow expose the effects of neoliberalism on Australian academic system by analyzing results of a 2015 survey of 2,320 social work tertiary students. The study revealed some students barely survived, and their juggling act of course requirements, paid work, family commitments and affording necessities impacted their mental health and study success. Since social work has a mandate to uphold social justice, these findings are alarming. The authors' concluding remarks include recommendation to use critical education to raise students'

awareness to patterns of ethnic, class and gender oppression within the classroom.

Erin Sanders-McDonagh and Carole Davis who describe a particular gender studies course taught in a post-1992 university in London where many of the students originate from highly deprived areas, by employing critical pedagogy, undertook this challenge. They argue that the introduction of 'quality assurance' measures such as the National Student Survey and the Teaching Excellence Framework are driven by an ideology which purports to have student's best interests at heart. Such approaches are justified by the claim that they raise teaching standards, focus on graduate employability and wider participation, whilst in fact they work to discourage critical pedagogic practices that would allow for more democratic and dialogic spaces of learning. Interviews with the students reveal the course to have had transformative impact on their lives. They maintain that critical pedagogies work to disrupt the neoliberal narrative that champions individual success and the student-as-consumer model, and by so doing, helps to redress the persistent inequalities that non-traditional students face in UK higher education settings.

Magali Peyrefitte's article also explores the impact of critical education in the multicultural classroom at post-1992 academic institution in London. The paper describes the findings of a research on students' experience of a course 'Researching the City' designed to introduce social science research skills and methods. The paper introduces the course that was built around students' experiences of living in London as a key tool for creating meaningful engagement with the learning materials and with one another in the classroom. Drawing on an analysis of student reflective diaries, the paper presents data that makes clear the value of a reflexive approach that allows students from diverse mostly disadvantaged backgrounds to draw on and share their everyday experiences of the city as a form of situated and experiential knowledge. This experiential knowledge is used in the development of a sociological imagination that is intended to encourage students to think about issues of poverty, inequality, and power in new and transformative ways that is counter a neo-liberal ethos and culture. This pedagogical approach is reliant on a dialogical approach between students' experiential knowledge and

teacher's ability to be responsive in providing theoretical and methodological tools to make sense of these experiences on sociological terms.

Whereas the last two articles centre their analysis on students' experiences and voices, Tamar Hager's paper addresses the teacher's standpoint. The article focuses on a moment of failure to notice a fragile attempt at solidarity between two female students from adverse ethnic and national groups, reading it instead as an act of mutual hostility and responding accordingly. This episode took place following the 2014 Gaza as part of a course 'Jewish Arab Dialogue: Action Research' taught in a small peripheral college near the northern border of Israel. Within radically asymmetrical relations of power, the course potentially offers an open radical space for secular westernized Jewish students and teachers from hegemonic groups in Israel to interact with students from political and social minorities. Despite continued estrangement and mutual hostility, these encounters lead at times to unexpected moments of trans-group and multicultural alliances. However neoliberal ideology and social and political stereotypes and prejudices often block the vision of teachers and their students destroying as a result occasions of transformative interactions. The author reflects on what went wrong in this particular episode, while trying to learn from the experience how to construct a more open and safer educational encounter in the future.

Some of the answers to Hager's questions could be found in the final article by Amy Shimshon-Santo that recounts several tender and moving stories of educational encounters. It is a compelling example of how it is not always necessary to conform to academic orthodoxy to produce something of relevance and value. These episodes take place outside higher education and academia in the deprived area of South Los Angeles as part of the COCO Art Lab, carried out during 2016. Gathering high school mostly black and brown students from the poor neighborhoods of the city, the Lab catalyzes youth creativity, develop multi-media literacies, and amplify youth voice through music, creative writing, and media. However, the bodies and lives of children of color are often endangered in Los Angeles. On the second day of class, a student scribbled on the green chalkboard, 'Do our lives matter?' The core aim of the project quickly became to support students' lives. Through music and creative writing, the

participants were invited to investigate their own existence and the city and imagine new visions for living. The paper focuses on several exchanges of the author with individual students throughout the project where students are considered and valued as creators/co-creators as opposed to consumers, exposing both the misery of deprivation and the hope for a better future. It captures the originality of our Special Issue perfectly, that is asking the questions whilst not necessarily having all the answers and having the courage to embed radical pedagogies in our teaching practices as a key alternatives to neo-liberal impositions and forms of governmentalities.

The oscillation between despair and hope is reflected throughout this collection. Describing reality as contaminated by social injustices, the authors trust education to be a liberatory practice, promoting social change. Therefore researchers, educators, teachers and any readers who are concerned with the contribution of education to active citizenship will find various ideas for linking pedagogic spaces with social justice issues; inter alia, recommendations for how to make learning open and inclusive even in the current neoliberal educational systems. However, the papers here offer little in the way of 'how to teach'. While we think this is a worthwhile and important endeavor, our aim here is to shed light on strategies that have been used to further social justice ends within specific national, political, and social contexts. Yet the range of national settings does not prevent the papers from being engaged in an important global discussion on the current role of education and its transformative potentials in these disruptive times.

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