

THEMATIC SECTION:  
CAPITALISM, STATE, AND EDUCATION:  
THE LIMITS OF THE CAPITAL



## Little to Hope and Much to Fear: radical education and the working class

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**ABSTRACT – Little to Hope and Much to Fear: radical education and the working class.** This article engages with the question of a radical political education from the perspective of a global working class. It explores what form such an education would take and why such an education is central to the creation of a new society. Situating the discussion within a Marxist framework it argues that while it is possible for education to bring about social change a radical political education can only take place outside of the institutions of formal education. It explores the ways in which neoliberalism with the support of the middle class makes an education in the pursuit of justice and the liberation of the working class increasingly difficult. It does not provide any definitive answers but rather offers the possibility of a critical engagement with the questions it raises.

**Keywords: Working Class. Global. Education. Radical. Neoliberalism.**

**RESUMO – Mais a Temer do que Esperar: educação radical e classe trabalhadora.** Este artigo se debruça sobre a questão de uma educação política radical a partir da perspectiva de uma classe trabalhadora global. Ele explora que forma tal educação tomaria e por que ela é fundamental para a criação de uma nova sociedade. Situando a discussão a partir de um arcabouço teórico marxista, argumenta-se que, embora seja possível a educação promover mudanças sociais, uma educação política radical só pode ocorrer fora das instituições formais de educação. O artigo explora as formas pelas quais o neoliberalismo, com o apoio da classe média, dificulta cada vez mais a educação pela busca da justiça e da libertação da classe trabalhadora. Não são oferecidas respostas definitivas, mas a possibilidade de um engajamento crítico com as questões abordadas.

**Palavras-chave: Classe Trabalhadora. Global. Educação. Radical. Neoliberalismo.**

The bourgeoisie has little to hope, and much to fear, from the education of the working class (Friedrich Engels, 2005, p. 139).

The day has passed for patching up the capitalist system, it must go (James Connolly, 1910).

## Introduction

The purpose of this article is to consider how a radical political education in the service of the working class would work, what form it might take and why its implementation has become crucially necessary. This entails orientating the way in which we think about education both theoretically and in practice towards a position that locates questions of class at the heart of the discussion and that views class as a structural relationship whose affects are both subjective and part of a wider system of objective economic conditions. It entails considering this subjectivity and these objective economic conditions as existing within a dialectical relationship premised on the ways in which power, resources and agency are organised in order to block the working class from achieving any access to them. It entails viewing the working class empirically as people who have specific experiences of domination and exploitation in common and who are caught up in conditions of economic hardship leading to constrained opportunities and restricted life chances while constantly being judged by those who occupy higher positions within classed hierarchies (Biressi; Nunn, 2013, p. 63; McLaughlin, 2021).

Inserting this understanding of class as both objective and experiential, to understand it as functioning within the realms of the economic *and* the cultural, it is to give serious consideration to the ways in which “[...] the relationship between culture and the economy is increasingly interconnected [...] given the growing move on the part transnational corporations to monopolise the cultural space” (Herschmann *apud* Albornoz, 2015, p. xiii) and how “[...] neoliberal ideology has exerted market reasoning over all practices and colonised the everyday life of late modernity” (McGuigan, 2010, p. 8; Winlow, 2021; Fisher, 2012). An intervention such as this article into the question of a radical political education in the service of the working class is an attempt to broaden the way in which we understand the purpose education serves both culturally and economically and to construct an understanding of the subversive potential of education to act as an *instrument of social change* (Lovett; Clarke; Kilmurray, 1983). This means viewing education as a cultural process but not within the liberal framework in which it is presently situated and where it affirms the limitations of what already exists but through the optic of a clearly stated objective of the creation of an alternative vision of the world which a radical political education can achieve. This counter hegemonic approach in its commitment to the self determination of the working class must, in order to be successful, accept the distinction Marx makes between membership of a

class and the ability to recognise and act upon that membership. That is the main crisis we are dealing with today in relation to any potentially transformative project.

It is important to point out that this essay is not concerned with the prospects of a radical political education in any specific country. Although there is a concentration on education in the United Kingdom as a case study, much of my analysis as it pertains to the transformative potential of education in relation to the working class can be applied globally. Nor do I wish to discuss teaching methods and pedagogic techniques as if education is a disinterested process of knowledge communication and acquisition. Talk of techniques and methods within the existing system will not change that system, on the contrary:

The capitalist system will seek to destroy any forms of pedagogy that attempts to educate students regarding their real predicament, to create an awareness of themselves as future labour power and to underpin this awareness with critical insight that seeks to undermine the smooth running of the social production of labour power (Hill, 2008, p. 38).

The reason this is the case is because our understanding of education at the present takes place within a socio-economic system that encourages and rewards ruthless free market competition and wealth accumulation. Education within the formal institutions of neoliberalism holds little relevance or material benefit for the working class and at its core is concerned with communicating ways in which to adapt to the logic of capitalism. It is this reciprocal relationship between neoliberalism and education through which we can approach the question of what exactly is the purpose that education serves.

This essay is an attempt to formulate an answer to that question. But it is also an attempt to bring into focus the interdependence of the global working class and sketch out the effective tools necessary for developing a theory of education for a global working class. One that can be put into practice and that crucially does not function as a site for the ideological reproduction of the tenants of a neoliberalism that continues to destroy the lives of so many people. It is an attempt to link the interdependence of the working class and their relationship to education to larger questions of employment, the economy, culture, the environment, the public sphere and the wider political struggles of the working class.

## **Neoliberal Education**

Constructing a model of education that functions as a potential tool for developing a counter hegemonic position capable of challenging the status quo must concern itself with addressing the politics of education in the macro sense of how we build the conditions for a radical political education but also at the micro level of understanding the

way in which class prejudice is embedded within the framing and delivery of formal education (Reay, 2001, p. 23; Hill, 2018, p. 43; Friedman; Laurison, 2019, p. 57). Class prejudice occurs at each level of education ensuring the working class receive a schooling that is not fit for their purpose but for the purpose of situating them within the hierarchal stratification system upon which neoliberalism is built and upon which those with power and wealth utilise education as a means to passing on that power and wealth.

The main way in which privileged households pass on their advantages to their children is by ensuring, through whatever means, that their children obtain better educational qualifications than their peers. To be sure there are all sorts of other resources which the advantaged can bring to bear, but the most important would appear to be those which can be mobilised to improve children's educational performance (Savage, 2000, p. 90).

We need to review our understanding of what constitutes education in relation to the working class in our present moment of a conservative, narrowly focussed curriculum, standardized testing, targets, increasingly market led privatisation and the way in which these are constructed precisely to fail the working class (Reay, 2017, p. 177-178; Hill, 2008, p. 41) and in the process reproduce a labour force that is easy to manage and control (Tyler, 2013, p. 114). The increasing encroachment of the private sector into educational spaces serves to reinforce the relationship between education, global corporations, the economy and class, where educational achievement and success is measured in abstract statistical terms through the optic of international league tables and OECD statistics (Biesta, 2006, p. 106). Education has become yet another commodity in the neo liberal marketplace. Marx refers to commodification as process whereby “[...] a definite social relation between men [...] assumes [...] the fantastic form of the relation between things”. The commodification of education draws a veil over how the relationship between education and knowledge has been severed and how education is considered only in relation to its exchange value. It is not concerned with the ability to critically engage with the world around us (Winlow, 2021) it is about the ability to produce passivity and to generate a profit for the capitalist who owns the forces of education.

The state school system does not just function to reproduce the advantages of the middle class over the working class. It has a more fundamental purpose, which is to help reproduce the conditions of existence of capitalist society as a whole. In this context the principal function of the school is to produce the sort of future workers the economy needs (Hatcher, 1998, p. 15).

The post Fordist collapse of Marxism and the entrenchment of the present authoritarian liberalism offering only a tightly constrained version of progressive politics has seen the rejection of class politics and reduced education to a market product devoid of critical engagement and

reliant for its validity on how well it delivers in the marketplace. *Chaotic* working class children are disciplined in academies that drain money from local authority schools (Reay, 2017, p. 46-49), thousands of working class children are failed by the school system and leave it without even the basics of literacy and numeracy in place, alongside a profound distrust of educational institutions (O'Neill, 2018, p. 39). In some countries working class children are denied even the basics supplied by the systems in place in the global north. At the same time universities fall over themselves to create courses that guarantee *transferable skills* that will be useful in the workplace while academics drown in bureaucratic form filling and data analysis.

Both teaching and learning are geared towards employability confirming Badiou's claim that this is "[...] a brutal state of affairs [...] where all existence is evaluated in terms of money alone" (Badiou *apud* Fisher, 2012, p. 9). The neoliberal approach to education has resulted in an education system aligned to the imperatives of the state sanctioned goals of profit and commodification and finds itself restricted by the logic of expertise and the acquisition of cultural capital. It is important here to consider the political implications of the phrase cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1996) and how crucial this type of capital is to the middle class. How it ensures that members of the working class who do receive an education in spite of the many barriers placed in their way still find their access to decision making employment blocked on the grounds of possessing the wrong kind of cultural capital. It is through the optic of cultural capital we can gain access to an understanding of the way in which rather than belonging to mutually exclusive spheres cultural power is intimately linked to economic and political power; as Michael Parenti has pointed out "[...] one cannot talk intelligently about culture if one does not at some point also introduce the dynamics of political economy and social power" (2006, p. 17). The advantages that accrue because of easy access to what is considered legitimate and valuable culture serves an organisational function working to articulate and justify the social arrangements of class stratified societies which in turn create narratives of inclusion and exclusion. Culture as Bourdieu understood it is not distinct from economics or politics on the contrary it is intricately entangled with them in an enclosed hamster's wheel of skills, values and competencies which generate privilege for the wealthy and educational failure for the working class. The political, the social and the cultural as a set of relations are deeply imbricated within the capitalist system. While historically Marxists have analysed society through the lens of economics it is important to acknowledge that the reproduction of class relations is not dependent solely on the economic. We have to consider how the economic affects these *other dimensions* and the way in which each relates to the other (Fraser; Jaeggi, 2018, p. 13). The reproduction of class relations requires agencies other than the economic in order to succeed. "To have a total picture of society it is necessary to examine both the objective and subjective that are at play in any particular period" (Ashman, 1998, p. 152).

As Marx himself famously put it: “Men make their own history not do not make it just as they please: they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past.” (Marx, 1977 p. 15).

The colonisation of all areas of personal and civic life by the *logic of capitalism* premised as it is on consumerism, individualism and competition has subverted any potential for the development of education as a liberatory and democratic process relevant to contemporary working class life. An education practice that aligns itself with the working class and produces a critical understanding of the capitalist system and how it “[...] pervades and shapes every aspect of social life” (Hatcher, 1998, p. 20), where learning is the right of citizens who consider themselves to be justified in questioning the basic assumptions of the institutions that hold political power.

Schooling in most societies ignore not only the struggles of the working class but also the knowledge of the world that come with being working class. Industrial action, strikes, protests, are ignored as essential components of education both in theory and practice. And collective activity, cooperation and solidarity are not valued above the “[...] dead end of individualism” (Lovett; Clarke; Kilmurray, 1983, p. 5). The exclusion of working class perspectives is as Peter Stead has pointed out is a form of censorship “[...] restricting the expression of a whole range of experience” (Stead, 2001, p. 52).

This censorship results in the reproduction of ideological positions which encourage ways of (not) seeing while perpetuating existing hierarchical relations whose function it is to prepare children for their role in the workplace (Bowles; Gintis, 2011, p. 12) or as is increasingly the case unemployment. For this to be successful it is important that the neoliberal system is presented as a natural and common-sense arrangement and the possibility of fairer more equitable alternatives obscured. At the same time in an ideological sleight of hand which suggest a plurality of opinion progressives are *allowed* to question the neoliberal system and offer superficial disagreements. Of course, this can only happen within the limits set by the system itself within a framework that ignores questions of class but offers the façade of progressive fightbacks. One example of this can be seen in the periodic investigations into why the education system is failing working class children. What these points of resistance often fail to do is realise how easily neoliberalism can assimilate a certain amount of push back in the interest of demonstrating plurality (O’Neill, 2018, p. 7). As Schwartz has pointed out in relation to higher education in the United States of America “[...] students know why corporate boardrooms should be more diverse: but few question the concept of corporate rule itself” (2015, p. 184).

This is made possible because the concept of education we are presented with is a narrowly imagined one, embedded within and confined by an institutional environment that validates the social hierarchies already entrenched within the existing social order and which are

in turn replicated throughout the broad spectrum of other institutions. What therefore becomes clear is that we must address the concept of education in its broadest sense in relation to the role it plays in the political economy and the cultural environment and view it not simply as something children participate in a classroom, in an institutional setting or as students in the lecture theatres of the neoliberal university. We have to view education as a process that in its present form is a site of ideological reproduction and which has a debilitating effect on the potential for any kind of political resistance. We therefore have to consider education as a strategy of control put in place to ignore, censor or conceal the history and memories of working class lives and working class struggles providing an institutionalised mode of education dependent on the elision of working class knowledge and the suppression of any radical potential. A marketized education system that views knowledge as a commodity driven by the needs of the employment market is by its very nature opposed to any idea that education should be an emancipatory project predicated on actions to improve the world.

This means that we have to be alert to inherited and habitual ways of thinking about education. We need to concede how our own education has inflected the modes of thought through which we make sense of the world. We need crucially to consciously gravitate our understanding of politics and power relationships towards a class based materialist perspective. Mara Sapon Shevin, (referring to the education system in the United States of America in way that can be applied more generally) points to how easily our habitual assumptions can lead us to superficial assessments of the purpose of education. In drawing this to our attention she offers us the opportunity to realign the forms of consciousness that our own education has fostered particularly in relation to the way in which we conceive of success and failure within education systems. The relationship between these two concepts and the way in which they are represented within mainstream discussions of education strengthens the continuing generational reproduction of class positions. Rather than an alignment with liberals whose perpetual handwringing about how the working class is failed by the education system is utilised as an ideological escape route we should delve deeper and consider how the education system is actually succeeding for the ruling class. We can see more clearly the rationale of the system if we judge its success or failure on an understanding of its need to reproduce class difference and the preparation of certain members of society to accept a position of subservience and manual employment that is distributed negatively across the spectrum of market rewards:

If we are concerned that we are failing to educate all children, or failing to prepare our future citizens, or failing some commitment to equity and social justice — then, yes, the system is failing. If we wish to see the reproduction of the current unjust system then the system under which we all live is actually succeeding perfectly. It does a superb job sorting out the winners from the losers, perpetuating a stringently classed society, and creating the

work force that our stratified, capitalist society requires (Sapon-Shevin, 2011, p. 22).

Only an analysis that places class at its centre can view the kind of education the working class receive in terms of the successful reproduction of the hierarchies and inequalities that structure the societies we live in. Only then can we begin to see education as a consciously strategic practice existing within a hegemonic framework designed precisely to reproduce existing class based relations. That is an education system shaped by the demands of a capitalist system requiring working class children to learn passively and absorb prescribed, commodified bite sized pieces of *knowledge* that can be transferred into the marketplace to be sold as inadequately remunerated skills. Therefore, the institutional education system offered by most countries across the globe offers no movement for the working class from a proscribed position or if they do move from their proscribed place that movement is premised on assimilation into the very status quo that oppressed them in the first place and which demands a cognitive and perceptual blindness to the ways in which structures of power operate. This blindness to the way in which structures operate is an essential component of a neoliberal education. It is knowledge of those structures and informed opposition to those structures that have the power to shift the way in which they operate.

Therefore, any radical political education concerned with the relationship between class and education in the present moment must stake as its major claim the idea that a radical political education must necessarily take place away from the institutions and evaluative practices of formal schooling. This is because formal schooling even at its best is not an education in the broadest sense of the word but a pedagogy of neoliberalism which means the first premise of a radical political education is an informed rejection of formal schooling. It would be difficult to argue that formal schooling prepares the working class to play an active role in society or creates a demand that society acts in the interest of the poor and marginalised. It perpetuates, within a framework of meritocracy (Todd, 2021; Reay, 2017, p. 122) a neo liberal notion of what construes success. The concept of meritocracy within education is useful as a method to deflect attention away from inequality, poverty, homelessness and lay the onus on the individual (or the school or the parent), constructing educational success as a product of hard work and commitment and not the advantages garnered from the unfair distribution of economic and cultural capital or the structural barriers that prevent the working class from succeeding within that system.

Meritocracy has the ability to obscure questions of class while at the same time incorporating those most marginalised within the neoliberal framework in the belief that hard work will mean they will *succeed* on merit. At the same time, it fails to remove the structures that necessitate the concept of meritocracy in the first place and functions to disguise an education system premised on the exclusion of the working class from any chance of *success*.



## Class and Classes

Before I move onto to discuss what shape a radical political education in the service of the working class would take I wish to consider how we are defining class. The discussion of a radical education by and for the working class at this particular historical moment is dependent on the utilisation of a marxist understanding of class as necessary to the conceptualization and practice of a class based radical education. It has become received wisdom that the shift from an industrial to a post-industrial mode of capitalist production that began in the 1970s led to a reformulation of the existing socio-economic environment. This has led to a situation where the concept of class is considered redundant and representative of an outmoded method of explaining social relations (Allman, 2001, p. 67; Biressi; Nunn, 2013, p. 171). This of course is not a logical position to take. It is true that the way in which we understand the working class has shifted and been reformulated over the last forty years or so. It is also true that the nature of work itself has changed during this time particularly in advanced western economies where it has shifted away from industrial production to information, service and finance based employment. With the changes to the traditional employment routes of the working class there has also been a shift in the engagement of the working class in organised politics. Trade union membership has dramatically dropped in the UK and class alignments to traditional working class political parties have shifted while the political sphere has become dominated by the middle class (Savage, 2000, p. 154). So, while there is no doubt neoliberalism has dramatically recalibrated the working class, class is a dynamic category which adjusts itself to the changes in the content and organisation of production. What does not change is the working class relationship to those forces of production (Choonara, 2018, p. 19).

Therefore, it would be a mistake to believe that this recalibration of the working class can be interpreted as class losing any theoretical or practical significance. On the contrary neoliberalism is a 'class project' which means class as an analytical framework within which to make sense of the world is as significant as it ever was: "Masked by a lot of rhetoric about individual freedom, liberty, personal responsibility and the virtues of privatization, the free market and free trade, it (neo liberalism) legitimized draconian polices designed to restore and consolidate capitalist class power" (Harvey, 2005, p. 10).

The working class are habitually viewed within the framework of the nation state even as we recognise the global nature of capitalism. Situating them transnationally and viewing them through an optic of an increasing polarity between a global working class and the wealthy of all nation states provides support for Marx's foundational claim that economically capitalism can be considered to produce two opposing classes: the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. This claim is premised on a recognition that the specific classed experience of exploitation on a global scale is a direct result of the working class relationship to the cap-

italist class. The usefulness of this binary division is that it situates both classes within the relations of production allowing us to examine them dialectically and consider how they relate one to the other. According to Marx it is this dialectical relationship which goes to the very heart of capitalism and generates both struggle and conflict within the system. It is this antagonistic relationship, this experience of both struggle and continuous conflict that is shared by the global working class (Marx; Engels, 1967, p. 95).

Therefore, this seemingly crude distinction serves an analytically adequate purpose if we consider the working class in global terms. The poor in *developing* countries work in the factories and fields of the large corporations in order to provide the cheap goods demanded by the first world and at the same time generate enormous profits for these corporations.

[...] the experience of people all over the world who live and work in conditions reminiscent of the Britain of the early industrial era, replicates, to an astonishing degree, that of the workers of Manchester, London or Leeds 150 years ago. Of course, there are differences. People live in other climates and cultures; they are the inheritors of other religions and ethnicities. In spite of this, the inhabitants of the slums of Sao Paulo, Manila, Dhaka or Manila suffer the same want and insecurity which were characteristic of our own workers. People are always poor in the same way. Hunger, insufficiency, sickness know nothing of cultural difference, but torment the body of Hindu, animist, Nigerian and Burmese in an identical fashion (Seabrook, 1999).

So, while it is of course necessary to both recognise and take into consideration local differences and experiences it is crucial to acknowledge and to highlight the extent to which the experiences of working class communities whatever their geographical location, have become more homogeneous in relation to the distribution of power and resources under the global onslaught of the neo liberal order.

There is no need to repress the differences within the working class or essentialise them. We can recognise that there are diversities within the working class populations of different nation states in relation to histories, languages and cultures and draw attention to the fact that specific groups - women, children, people of colour etc. – face unique forms of oppression. We can also argue at the same time that in the face of global capital these differences become subsumed within the totality of capitalist relations and have become linked together in what amounts to a collective reliance on the market to meet all needs – material, social and educational. We can also argue that the existence of a global working class creates the material conditions for international solidarity and global working class subjectivity as Harvey has pointed out (2005, p. 23):

Neoliberalism has in effect swept across the world like a vast tidal wave of institutional reform and discursive adjustment. While plenty of evidence shows its uneven geographical development, no place can claim total immunity (with the exception of a few states such as North Korea). Furthermore, the rules of engagement now established through the WTO (governing international trade) and by the IMF established through the WTO (governing international trade) instantiate neoliberalism as a global set of rules.

As discussed above the globalization of capital has highlighted not the differences but the similarities in the working class of geographically different nations and created a global working class. A commitment to a radical political education in pursuit of social and political justice makes possible the potential for this global working class to develop a resistance to their positioning within the mode of production. As Thoburn (2007, p. 57) has argued the rapid changes in capitalism could be seen to be strengthening class allegiances. Class is not just one subject position among many other subject positions, situated within the notion of power differentials it is *the definitive* subject position. The concept of radical education will be effective if it is linked to the conditions of the working class of all nations and if action for a universal ethical and just system is situated within our understanding of what constitutes education and the role it currently plays in maintaining and reproducing unjust power relations. Links between the radical education projects in other countries have become possible because new technologies have allowed us to be interconnected in ways we have not been before.

In our discussion of class, it is also necessary to take into consideration the middle class, a class whose expansion Marx did not envision. As David Harvey has argued, the economic shifts that have paved the way for neo liberalism are not only dependent on the elites but need the cooperation of the middle classes (Harvey, 2005, p. 12). It is the middle classes that provide the dialectical dynamic of contemporary capitalism. Caught within the conflicting and contradictory pathological demands of capitalism, the professionals and managers of this class desire the bourgeois (for what they have) and fear the proletariat (for their potential). This dichotomy is not as simplistic as it first appears. To be middle class is to “[...] internalize the dominant meaning system of capitalist society with its strong emphasis on competitive individualism” (Benson, 1978, p. 109). It is the values of the entrepreneurial middle class that dominate in a capitalist society. Encouraged by those who own the means of production, the middle class belief in a paradigm of individual achievement and mobility justifies their emphasis on an education that denies the inequalities it produces and the vital role it plays in reproduction of the class system (Lockwood, 1989; Reay, 2001).

This is particularly true of the United Kingdom where class as a system is embedded deep within the fabric of its society and where it is theoretically productive and politically expedient to take into consider-

ation the expansion of the professional middle class in the last hundred years. The cooperation Harvey refers to has been built on a continuing weakening of the politics of class and its potential to build towards a politically transformative imperative dedicated to fighting structural oppression. In its place has been the passage towards a politics built on the rejection of enlightenment thought and the politics of solidarity, constructed on the foundation of shared beliefs and values. This has been substituted by a concern with “[...] an exaggerated subjectivity, identity politics, anti-empirical theories of power, an obsession with difference [...]” (Smulewicz-Zucker; Thompson, 2015, p. 7).

The middle class liberal attempts to resolve the conflicting and contradictory demands of their own privileged positions within neo liberalism with the cognitive dissonance caused by their professed liberal fight against inequality. At present this contradiction is most apparent in the endeavours of professionals and managers of this class to deny the relevance of class while continuing to function within the institutions that exploit and exclude the working class. The exclusion of the working class from the institutions of the state has consequences not *just* in the shape of the ongoing material and political inequalities of working class life but in how we understand and put into practice the concept of democracy itself. We could spend another article deconstructing the concept of democracy but it is sufficient here to point to the importance of understanding how politically significant this concept is and the way in which, as Callinicos points out, in our present moment it is “[...] effectively equated with liberal capitalism” (2006, p. 147). Our present degraded and curtailed concept of democracy distorts both the way in which it is understood and how it applied particularly in relation to the power of the state to intervene in questions of justice and equality: “[...] under neo liberal hegemony, decision making powers in key policy areas have been surrendered to the financial markets or transferred to public institutions such as central banks that are not accountable to citizens or their elected representatives [...]” (Callinicos, 2006, p. 254).

This is of course absolutely the core of my argument in relation to the way in which formal education is conceived of and delivered by the state in many societies. The effective censorship of working class culture within the institutions of the state is of course anti-democratic and has resulted in the domination of these institutions by the attitudes and values and resulting tactical choices of a middle class with no experience of working class life. Across a broad range of institutions people who work within them that have no knowledge of poverty, hardship and struggle so it is perfectly logical that these institutions legitimise ways of thinking and being that are premised on the writing out of working class voices. As Marx pointed out it is social conditions that shape our ways of thinking. Those conditions that shape our ways of thinking are both personal and institutional. We cannot therefore expect those in positions of power to think in ways that would benefit the working class and bring about a transformation in the way we all live our lives.

The entrepreneurial values of middle class subjectivity, competition and individualism have become legitimatised, treated as the norm and validated within the institutions of the state as characteristics of a *functioning democracy*. Consequently, the possibility of a consideration of the barriers these values construct to emancipatory political and economic changes are minimised, censored or ignored completely.

The lack of working class political and social knowledge within the public sphere has become more pronounced over the last forty years as education is more and more geared towards the careerist ambitions and lack of political imagination of the professional middle class. At the same time this state of affairs is maintained through a series of legal and political systems put in place to ensure the hegemony of the neo liberal system.

### **Radical Political Education**

A radical political education is a conception of education that rejects the conventional narrative of knowledge transmission and acquisition and understands education as a reaction to our environment (Biesta, 2006, p. 27) and the ways in which our experience of that environment shapes how and what we learn and so consequently conditions our interaction with the world (O'Neill; Wayne, 2007). This approach to education is not involved with the gradual, unquestioned accumulation of facts rather it is a conscious political strategy which analyses the contradictory nature of the totality of society. It encompasses a dialectical approach to pedagogic practice that engages with the surface reality of society as means of exposing the underlying mechanisms that generate that surface reality and in the process offers the potential to produce counter hegemonic understanding of the world. A system that is not understood cannot be challenged or opposed in any meaningful way rather it can only be experienced. A radical political education contextualises that experience so that it can be analysed and interpreted through the lens of class struggle. This contextualisation is the means by which it becomes possible to identify and engage with the cultural and experiential difference between social classes within the structures of capitalism. In this sense of the term experience becomes the starting point for the articulation and organisation of working class consciousness. It is to realise existing knowledge of the world when viewed from the perspective of the working class produces not universal knowledge, but an awareness of how predominant meanings function separately from the experience of being working class. It is important not to underestimate how important this recognition of social difference can be:

The recognition of social difference produces the need to think differently: thinking differently reproduces and confirms the sense of social difference. What is crucial here is that the thinking is different [...] not divorced from social reality: thinking differently involves the subordinate in making their sense of their subordination, not in

accepting the dominant sense of it or in making a sense with no relationship to domination (Fiske, 1995, p. 58).

Approached from this perspective of the struggle over meaning it is possible that we will find the frameworks we are provided with in order to make sense of the world mean something completely different when viewed through the optic of class struggle. Then we can initiate a prising open of the inconsistencies, contradictions and incoherence within the capitalist mode of production and begin to question the true nature of its seemingly insurmountable hegemony (Wendling, 2011, p. 5-6).

One of the ways in which we can do this is by revisiting and examining the expansion of the provision of education for the working class in England, firstly through the extension of secondary education in the 1940s and later the expansion of university education in the 1960s which allowed some members of working class to gain access to a prolonged period of education that removed them from their class. While they gained access to the established canons and attitudes of the middle and upper classes, the education was one designed and delivered by the middle class and acceptance often meant the rejection of their class of origin, its history, its culture and its value system. The brightest and the best of the working class were removed from their environment in order to support the discourse of a faux egalitarianism and in the process become complicit in the continuing oppression of their own class. Members of the working class who do succeed academically bear the psychological trauma of separating themselves from their class and often assume the values and attitudes of the dominant class into which they have arrived by dint of educational achievement. Any attempt to insist upon their working class identity results in being told they no longer have a *right* to be recognised as working class (Munt, 2000, p. 9). This, of course, makes perfect sense if we consider the snobbery inherent in a middle class culture predicated on the exclusion of the working class (O'Neill, 2018, p. 52).

The continuous renewal of capitalism by those who would claim they are contributing to its downfall is apparent in the continuing worsening of the condition of the working class across the globe. This is because there is a failure to understand that the solutions they offer are themselves products of the neo liberal order. This is why it is crucial that we are suspicious of solutions that come from within the very social structures which we aim to resist.

A radical political education situates the working class firmly within their class and does not consider education as a means of escape from it. It positions the working class as different from other classes in order to expose the universalising impulse of hegemonic narratives. It begins from the premise that the working class has a culture and shares experiences both historical and contemporary that mean it is distinct from that of other classes. The emphasis on history from a working class perspective as a characteristic of a radical political education is

a crucial one for as Chris Harman points out: “If a ruling class can stop people understanding where society comes from, it can stop them understanding the development of society and so consolidates its power” (Harman, 1998, p. 9).

Schools generally speaking wherever they are located geographically are spheres of middle class hegemony more often than not centred around the demands of the middle-class and the middle class insistence on an egalitarianism built on the notion of a meritocracy that functions to mask structurally embedded inequalities. This is why it makes sense to situate the critique of mainstream education practice as I pointed out earlier in this essay within the framework of a global economy. Neoliberalism is a global political, economic and ideological system which extends into all areas of our lives. Our lives are dominated by multinational corporations whose rapaciousness has witnessed the outsourcing of working class jobs, the privatisation of public institutions, a lack of democratic accountability, the hollowing out of welfare provision and the removal of safety nets, the result of which is that the social relations and experiences of the working class are becoming increasingly more homogenized as Tyler has pointed out “[...] [i]n the globalised twenty first century, economic polarization has reached unparallelled depths” (Tyler, 2013, p. 5).

This economic polarisation I would argue had resulted in a situation which has thrown up two important considerations. Firstly, the role played by a depoliticised education provision explicitly designed to silence dissenting perspectives and alternative views in the reproduction and deepening of the inequalities Tyler refers to. The second consideration is the possibility of considering the working class of different nations not as isolated and distinct from each other but as potentially linked. This entails viewing the concept of globalisation itself through a specifically classed lens. As Marx (1967, p. 102) pointed out in the communist manifesto:

The working men (sic) have no country. National differences and antagonism between peoples are daily more and more vanishing, owing to the development of the bourgeoisie, to freedom of commerce, to the world market, to the uniformity of the mode of production and in the conditions of life corresponding thereto.

Developing a theoretical and practical, politically committed, radical pedagogy will take time and careful planning. To begin with the question is not so much of creating a changed world but of orientating ourselves in the direction where a changed world becomes a possibility.

Crucially it will involve tailoring our conception of education as much as possible to the contextualisation of the life and experiences of working class people. This means positioning the concept of class as both personal experience and crucially as a structuring force with instructional power. This dialectical approach to class makes it possible for us to consider the importance of class based experience as the start-

ing point for a radical political education. The importance of starting from the point of working class experience is twofold. Firstly, working class experience is often defined by those who have no experience of it. The upper middle class dominated media industries filter the lives of working class people literally through the lens of a middle class with no experience of poverty, unemployment, hunger, bad housing and all the other conditions of the working class. This results in a continuous stream of stereotypes of working class life which bear very little resemblance to working class life (O'Neill, 2018, p. 14). The other reason why this emphasis on working class experience is necessary is because the embodied experiences of the working class are in direct contradiction to the discourses that purport to represent them and the education that is imposed on them.

Access to the resources essential to the task of communicating an organised opposition encompassing radical versions of social and political reality are extremely unequally distributed and dominated by an elite class (Benson, 1978, p. 96). As we have seen one of the results of this is that the working class has become increasingly excluded from the public sphere and working class culture has become subordinate one to that of the middle class. Of course, what Boggs has called *the deterioration of the public sphere* (Boggs, 2000, p. 9) has not happened by mistake. Rather it demonstrates how the attempt to stabilise the current system and the continuation of the reproduction of neoliberalism as the norm is dependent on excluding and rejecting working class culture: (these) ideas, values, and experiences of the dominant class are validated in public discourse and are simply considered the norm, while those of the working class are not (Cruz, 2021, p. 45).

The contradictory nature of a class society and the unequal access to the dissemination of knowledge and education results in an antagonism between those who are *educated* and those receiving an *education*. As Gramsci pointed out, all relationships that are hegemonic must be considered as pedagogic relationships as they are all involved in the struggle over whose perspective holds the most power to influence the education of other groups (Sanbonmatsu, 2004, p. 146). Gramsci's approach acknowledges the class based nature not only of education practices but of all social institutions. This in turn draws attention to the importance of working in collaboration with subordinate groups, acknowledging the particularity of their experiences and providing access to both material and ideological resources. This means encouraging a questioning of their own common sense view of the world and of the legitimacy of the prevailing order and so gradually reach a dialectical conceptualization of the society in which they live (Allman, 2001, p. 115).

Engels acknowledges that it is the dialectical relationship between knowledge and the possibility of a personal liberation that will inevitably lead to a fairer and more equitable society but that's it is dependent upon a critical engagement with the forces at work. It is only by understanding how these forces work that we will be able to apply that



knowledge to building a society that recognises the need of all members of society:

Active social forces work exactly like natural forces: blindly, forcibly, destructively, so long as we do not understand them and reckon with them. But once we understand them, where once we grasp their action, their direction, their effects, it depends upon only ourselves to subject them more and more to our own will, and by means of them to reach our own ends...with this recognition at last of the real nature of the productive forces of today, the social anarchy of production gives place to a social regulation of production upon a definite plan, according to the needs of the community and of each individual (Engels, 2008, p. 68).

This interrogation of the normative conceptions and universalised principles of capitalism is dependent on an education, as Gramsci conceived it, by and for the working class so that it becomes possible to 'truly understand the full implications of the notion of *ruling class*, (Forgacs, 1988, p. 88). For Gramsci as for Bourdieu (Callinicos, 2006, p. 82) the disjuncture between the experiences of what Gramsci calls the subaltern and the ideological system is one that creates contradictions in their relationship to capitalism. It is awareness of the existence of these contradictions that can initiate the process of viewing the institutions of capitalism and the role they play in the reproduction of the *relationships* of class.

In my own practice I have worked with serving prisoners, ex-prisoners and foodbank users making films through which they represent their own experiences and narrate their own stories. The theoretical and practice based radical pedagogy of the *Inside Film* (O'Neil, 2018) project refuses any attempt at neutrality. It is the refusal of a neutral one size fits all approach to education that can expose the differences between a state sanctioned education and one with a liberatory potential (Freire, 1978; Hooks, 1994). The *Inside Film* project insists on the decoupling of working class experience and working class meaning from the ideological masking and universalism of middle-class education provision and in the process bring into focus the specificity of working-class experience and the mode of living of the working class. For both Marx (1970, p. 118, 121, 123) and Lukacs (1971, p. 262) it is through the development of critical cognitive powers that it become possible to perceive capitalism as a historically specific set of relations. The narratives of the inside film students depicted in the films they make tell stories of deprivation, derision, violence, and harrowing oppression. While we do not claim experience as a means for gaining direct access to the lives of the working class people who participate in the project we do claim these narratives as *system of knowledge* able to expose the inadequacies of the current ways of knowing the working class.

Whatever form it might take, and in which historical period we consider it education must be acknowledged as a political practice. A

radical political education is concerned with the liberation of the working class and the production of critically engaged citizens who will work towards a fairer and more democratic society (Freire, 1978; Giroux, 2014). A radical political education intends education to be a transformative practice linked to both social and personal change. Freire referred to such an education as a cultural act and considered it as a process of educating for the development of a critical consciousness, and he claimed it *had the power to transform reality*. A radical political education links education to questions of agency, legitimization, ideological perspectives, and power. If we consider education in these terms, a politics of redistribution in the pursuit of a fairer and more equal society cannot depend solely on a redistribution of wealth. On the contrary any lasting and sustainable change depends upon the redistribution of ideas (Haylett, 2001, p. 366).

We end this essay with the question we began with: what would be the impact of an education for the working class by the working class free from the market led corporatisation of today's education bodies? Would an egalitarian educational practice in the hands of the working class change the world? It's a complex question that as we have discussed in this essay encompasses the ideological, the institutional and the power of the imagination and one we don't know the answer to ... yet!

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