
RADICALIZING EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABILITY

A Schumacher Institute Challenge Paper

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The Challenge: When capitalism faltered and real change seemed possible, institutionalised Education for Sustainability (Efs) failed to overcome its organizational constraints and internal limitations and seize the opportunity to offer radical alternatives. If Efs is to resist further neoliberal corporatization and make a real contribution to the emergence of a more socially just and environmentally sustainable society it must embrace an alternative and radical critical pedagogy.

1. Capitalism falters...

For a moment, it seemed, another world might just be possible. The greed is good, no such thing as society, the business of business is business lie, loadsa money culture and end of history proclamations that had enabled the ideology of neoliberalism to pervade virtually every aspect of public policy, every social and economic practice, every major private and public institution seemed to be at an end. Capitalism was not only facing yet another of its periodic cyclical crises, necessary for its restructuring and renewal, but was actually confronting a potential meltdown of its values, its rationale and its own propaganda. The prospect of endless wealth and prosperity had been transformed to one of disaster and catastrophe. The financial scams that had engulfed Enron, the speculative real estate bubble, the reckless expansion of consumer credit and the global fall out following the collapse of Lehman Brothers required a rethink, retrieval and re-evaluation of ideas, theories and propositions that had earlier been gleefully thrown into the trashcan of history. In this context, even the Green movement was seen by some elements of the 'power elite' to be offering an analytic and a practical political alternative that might just be credible if existing political and economic power relationships could be maintained. The role of Government is to ensure that the markets can operate independently of democratic politics, that the ruling political and financial elites remain essentially one and the same and that the future that really matters remains the future prosperity of the major corporations. Hence, it should come as no surprise the banks were bailed out and that the calls for increased regulation and public accountability have been virtually ignored. Capitalism had to start the necessary process of 'creative destruction'. Thus, only by eradicating past social and economic achievements through, for example, foreign wars, the devaluation of assets and the degradation or in some cases abandonment of productive capacity, the progressive undermining of civil democracy and so on could this irrational system engage in a rationalization process that would secure a new basis for corporate profitability, economic growth and capital absorption.¹

2. ...but institutionalized Efs fails to take advantage

Drawing on some ideological constructions of the 1930s, the Green New Deal articulated a system reform that privileged environmental sustainability, ecological economics and participatory, and in some variants, direct democracy rather than business as usual (Green New Deal Group, 2008). And an Education for Sustainability (Efs) would be an important element in shaping this expectant reality. However, the moment soon passed. The Green New Deal lacked ideological purchase or counter hegemonic power and actually existing, that is to say institutionalized, Education for Sustainability continued to demonstrate a naivety and weakness that came with decades of accommodation, compromise and wishful thinking. Efs had played its part in making higher education an auditable commodity, had been party to the commercialization of research, the

1 Harvey, D, (2011) *The Enigma of Capital: and the crises of capitalism*. London: Profile Books.

scramble for private sector partnerships, corporate sponsorship or new ways of competing effectively in the global marketplace. (Self interested individualism played a part too). In the struggle to be taken seriously by institutional managers, policy makers and business leaders, EfS was dazzled by the prospect of an occasional bauble or a place at a policy making or public relations table. Thus, in colluding with the myth of efficiency, quantification, targets, performance indicators, strategies, action plans, work plans, outputs and so on has meant that EfS, drowning in a sea of managerialist obfuscation and delusion, lost sight of the ideal of a university as a community of learning and much of its radical edge assuming of course it ever had one.

3. EfS must overcome its organisational constraints and internalised limitations

There has been a public resistance to the neoliberal corporatization within the higher education establishment but this has been often politically quite modest, ‘reasonable’ and sensibly moderate. Bailey and Freedman in their *Assault on Universities*² do go further but their aim is to return to the social democratic status quo that was overturned some years ago and for EfS practitioners, quite frankly, the ‘paradigm shift’ towards a sustainable education Stephen Sterling (2001) called for over a decade ago³ is today further away than ever. Sustainability educators are now confronted with a serious challenge not least because as systems thinkers working within the capitalist system, compromise, accommodation and incorporation have become the price of survival and even a certain flourishing. The system is clearly not working although ecological modernisers, geo-technological fixers, business educators, quality managers, researchers and other system thinkers are doing their best to make it do so. The issue here is not so much that systemic thinking is mistaken but that it is insufficiently political in its contestations of dominant institutional practices, neoliberal ideologies and basic value assumptions of the ‘free’ market. As Herbert Marcuse wrote in *One Dimensional Man*, ‘man [sic] and nature are fungible objects of organization’ and ‘that the web of domination has become the web of reason’.⁴ Thus sustainability educators may oppose ‘mechanism’ but, unlike Marcuse, they pay too little attention to the dialectical realities of political power and the capabilities necessary to fashion a political praxis of educative liberation and ideological emancipation. Organisational constraints and internalised limitations need to be overcome. New, as well as ‘subaltern’, voices need to be heard if meaningful democracy is to be renewed and if people are to be more than the bearers of profit making, injustice and inequality. Market driven media, like formal higher education, offer few if any alternatives to the dominant neoliberal worldview and are not well positioned to say ‘no’ and effectively act on such. For Amsler, the ideologically formulated responses, behaviours and attitudes of therapeutic education that have served to reproduce and reinforce contemporary social, political and economic relations need to be contested and reformulated pedagogically enabling us all to “critically imagine conditions in which radical alternatives may be possible”.⁵

Such a critical pedagogy and alternative learning networks are emerging outside the academy. The Occupy movement has offered a glimpse of a new counter culture and a few radical academy members such as David Harvey, Slavoj Zizek and David Graeber have openly embraced their contestations. Dougald Hine’s Dark Mountain Project with its manifesto challengingly titled *Uncivilisation*⁶ similarly offers to reconfigure the cultural politics of education by privileging the adventure of social creativity. With its intellectual debts to Paulo Freire and Ivan Illich a critical

2 Bailey, M. & Freedman, D. Eds (2011) *The Assault on Universities: a manifesto for resistance*. London: Pluto Press.

3 Sterling, S. (2001) *Sustainable Education*. Totnes: Green Books.

4 Marcuse, H. (1972) *One Dimensional Man*. London: Abacus, pp. 137-138.

5 Amsler, S. (2011) From ‘therapeutic’ to political education: the centrality of affective sensibility in critical pedagogy. *Critical Studies in Education*, 52: 47-63, p. 58.

6 Dark Mountain (2009) *Uncivilisation: The Dark Mountain Manifesto*. Available at: www.dark-mountain.net.

space of, and for, deinstitutionalised learning is being created. Other educators have been inspired in their critical scholarship and pedagogy by Guy Debord and the Situationists of the 1950s and 1960s whose practices of detournement and derive sought both to divert and subvert established priorities, discourses, organisational structures and everyday behaviours. The Canadian radical educator Richard Day has drawn on the anarchist tradition, and particularly the work of the relatively unknown thinker and activist Gustav Landauer, perceiving within new social movements the kernel of an alternative pedagogy and processes of social renewal informed by a logic of affinity.⁷ The editors of a recent collection of essays, *Utopian Pedagogy: Radical Experiments against Neoliberal Globalization*⁸ included theoretical pieces and discussions of actual radical/utopian education actions. Members of the Schumacher circle particularly those associated with the Schumacher Institute have a clear role in further developing our own space, influence and cultural resonance through research, community action, education, conferences and multimedia publications. The task then for academic dissenters, Schumacher Fellows and others is to increasingly become public intellectuals inventing, building, experimenting and creating powerful, persuasive and alternative mental conceptions and practices that challenge the morally and financially bankrupt culture of neoliberalism. Not to make capitalism responsible or natural, to find ways of supporting never ending economic and corporate growth, but to redefine the future that translates dissent and disgust into practical non-capitalist, non-statist, ecological and egalitarian possibilities that serve to destabilize the forces of power and domination.

4. Conclusion: critical and visionary dialectics, critical pedagogy and oppositional politics can invigorate and radicalise EfS

Clearly, another world is possible but the problem is that the social relations reproducing neoliberalism have also produced a public belief that debt reduction trumps all else. Essential public assets that add value to civic life are now unaffordable. Critical education is a luxury we can no longer afford and may indeed anger the gods of the all-powerful markets. A new legitimization crisis is upon us perhaps best voiced by the non-leaders of the Occupy movement who refused to present a programme of reforms or demands in the same old way. There is a lesson here for EfS practitioners too for the legitimacy of institutionalised higher education is likely to suffer by association given its closeness to, and affinity with, neoliberalist ideology and corporate business practice. The philanthropy of Bill Gates, the ideology of corporate social responsibility and PR opportunities like the Shell's Fuelling Change initiative are simply ways in which the corporate world pretends the world is safe in their hands. And, Sky News tells us that this was ever so. The task of EfS and other intellectual cultural workers, therefore, is to build a new legitimacy and genuine alternatives to what we have at present.

An emancipatory politics and educative practice will not emerge from a single social agent or from another accredited course on sustainable development but may do so from a combination of different agents and agencies inside and outside the tent. David Schweickart, the author of *After Capitalism*,⁹ sees the answer in increased democratisation of the labour process and of investment. Necessary to this, as Harvey argues,¹⁰ is a more nuanced understanding of the interplay between environmental transformations and social relations "of which the class dimension is fundamental because that is what capitalism is all about". Interestingly, the class issue is frequently missing from

7 Day, R.J.F. (2004) From Hegemony to Affinity: the political logic of the newest social movements. *Cultural Studies*, 18: 716-748.

8 Coté, M., Day, R.J.F. & de Peuter, G. (2007) *Utopian Pedagogy: Radical Experiments against Neoliberal Globalization*. Toronto, University of Toronto Press.

9 Schweickart, D (2002) *After Capitalism*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

10 Harvey, D. (1998) Marxism, Metaphors and Ecological Politics. *Monthly Review*, 49:17-31.

EfS debates even though the global labour force, unemployment and the capital/labour ratio is larger today than it has ever been. A shift has occurred in the balance of power towards capital at a time when capital is not working. A strong infusion of critical and visionary dialectics, critical pedagogy and oppositional politics could invigorate and radicalise EfS. There is no shortage of higher education faculty researching, teaching, learning and wishing that the trajectory of change be other than it is. New learning configurations and opportunities are emerging and older co-operative, democratic and egalitarian conceptions of the ideal university are taking on a fresh complexion and attractiveness and movements outside capture the imagination. Calculation kills, inspiration inspires. Subjectivity rather than objectivity may be the key to effective university governance and the free development of learning that will shape a more democratic future. All this is clearly antithetical to the corporatization of traditional universities, our 'democratic' politics and our unsustainable economic practices. So, although there may have been a strange non-death of neoliberalism there are exciting opportunities to turn a challenge into a reality.

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