

Miscellany 2

This is my second attempt to gather a series of endnotes from something I have been writing and to present them (with a few changes and specific sub-headings) as though they might make sense without the text. Well, I did say 'attempt' and I do not hide my views. You shall judge. The proper bibliography follows below.

1. The meaning of politics

In 1962, when Bernard Crick published *In Defence of Politics*, his intention was to restore the meaning of politics: to remind us that it is about public values. Fifty years after Crick's book went on sale Michael Flinders, a successor of Crick's at the University of Sheffield, published *Defending Politics* with a similar intention. Why, we should ask, is it necessary from time to time for us to have to be reminded that politics should be an inclusive public activity and not one exclusively limited to a few people making policy?

2. A series of socialist intellectual car chases

In 1940 (shortly before Trotsky was assassinated) Edmund Wilson published *To the Finland Station*. The 2003 edition contains a new and reflecting introduction by Wilson written in 1971. As a history of the development of socialist thought and action it is like reading a series of intellectual car chases. For me it is one of the best books to go to in order to realise that even if you take away from the writings of Marx and Engels the rather confusingly contrived and be-devilling notion of dialectical materialism what you are left with is a passionately expressed and meticulously researched denunciation of the exploitation of workers as commodities. Alienation as a concept can be traced back to Rousseau and even to Hobbes and others but as used by Marx and Engels it is such an appropriate term.

3. Deliverology

Partly self-deprecatingly and partly proudly Michael Barber has adopted the word 'deliverology' to describe his central belief of how to do government by setting clear targets and hitting them as a sign of success. In 2005 he left his UK government job to become a partner and head of McKinsey's Global Education Practice. While there he co-authored, in 2007, *How the world's best-performing school systems come out top*. The word 'instructor' replaces 'teacher' in this short work. Now he is Chief Education Advisor at Pearson, a profit making company with a huge global educational reach. He has been described as 'the control freak's control freak'.

First published in 2007 Michael Barber's *Instruction to Deliver* was revised in 2008. It is endorsed by academics who are fascinated by how government works and keen to know how it can be made to work efficiently. It is almost a textbook for politicians and administrators around the world who want to learn how to implement policy. If you like that sort of thing.

4. Cock up theory

For an antidote to Barber's book and an understanding of how governments, even when putting Michael Barber in charge of the delivery of policy, often do not work efficiently and often work extremely inefficiently, especially when they forget to do politics inclusively, it is useful to look at *The Blunders of our Governments* (2013) by Anthony King and Ivor Crewe. Although the majority of the blunders described and analysed took place in the UK their sections on Human Errors and System Failures are globally relevant. The recurring questions as you read the book are how on earth the devisers of disastrous policies managed a) to escape the blame and b) give all the difficult jobs to others.

5. Plamenatz on progress

In Volume Three of his *Man and Society* (1963 and 1992) John Plamenatz provided us with an authoritative disquisition on the *idea* of progress: how at times it has been taken as a law governing history; how much it is associated with the growth of knowledge; and how much it has been associated with happiness. And more. As I hope I indicate in the text (which in your case you have not got), progress is not a straightforward concept. To hold its meaning captive is, however, to give the impression that it is.

6. Fitting approved templates

First, let's look at the notion of 'developing countries'. In order to join the G8 or the G20 or the EU, for example, countries must satisfy criteria and agree to share values concerning, mostly, the regulation of trade but also, sometimes, human rights and approaches to education. We have to see the process as applying to join a club that you hope will bring you advantages. To gain admittance you must show that you have become like the existing members and have left your old, now undesirable, self behind.

For a self-confident advocacy of why countries wishing to wear the label 'successful' must fit a largely Anglo-Saxon template I suggest having a look at *Why Nations Fail, the origins of power, prosperity and poverty* (2012) by Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson. You might agree with me that the application of the label 'failure' could be based upon a rebuttable assumption.

I do not like this book. For example, the authors think that the Romans invaded a place called 'England'!

For a country to be called a democracy is today another desired label. It was not always. The framers of the constitution of the USA (a republic) took a great deal of trouble to prevent the country becoming one. They did not completely succeed. By contrast there are numerous monarchies that wish to be regarded as democracies. It is a very disputable and variable concept. John Keane's *The Life and Death of Democracy* (2009) is the first history of democracy to have been written for more than 100 years. If there is a single

message from this very large book it is that, despite its desirability, the concept of democracy is fragile.

My main point, however, is about the effects when countries wish to join a desirable education club as part of their plans to become economically successful and desirably labelled: perceiving hard driven education policy as key to this.

Curricula may vary according to local and national customs and priorities but the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which perceives a link between educational attainment and economic performance, has created a Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). It is a way of measuring the performance of school children across the world over a rather narrow range of subjects. Every time the tests are announced the number of countries wishing to take part increases. Unfortunately, the club is also a league table.

Two anxieties come into play: the desire for membership and the fear of being outperformed by others. Countries that respond to this fear by introducing more central control, a narrower curriculum, more competition and intensive testing seem not to have noticed that Finland, the country that consistently comes at or near the top in the PISA tests, does the opposite. I suggest reading almost anything by Pasi Sahlberg.

7. The wisdom of Saint Jerome

From Jerome Bruner come lots of terms that gained currency especially in the 60s, 70s and 80s: terms such as *scaffolding* and *discovery learning* and *the spiral curriculum*. As a psychologist he is interested in how learning takes place as a human activity and how it can be re-visited in differing contexts over time. He also, like Dewey and others, takes account of cultural links and contexts. While some may wish to portray his ideas as simply allowing children to do as they like that would be to disregard the need for careful planning and observation required by his approaches.

What, however, continues to puzzle me is why educators and psychologists such as Bruner in the USA use the word 'instruction' to describe what educators do. It's meaning seems totally counter to his approach.

8. A golden age that vanished before policy makers noticed its arrival

In 1975 Lawrence Stenhouse produced *An Introduction To Curriculum Research And Development*. It was an Open University set book. The Times Educational Supplement called it 'a profoundly important book' and predicted that it would be read widely. That was a time when thinking and experimenting about what and how to teach and what and how to assess were regarded as proper activities for professional educators and when universities appointed professors of curriculum development: a time when at least some educational policy was made on the ground.

Although he began and did much of his work in Scotland it was in England at a time when the Teaching Council was dominated by educators that he became part of, and a force for, professional research activity. He even saw school inspectors as collaborators with and enablers of schoolteachers undertaking research. We have moved far away from that position and now, monitored by inspectors, must hit targets set up by others.

Stenhouse must have been so pleased to have been external examiner for my masters degree! I am and still boast of it.

9. Quality but what for?

The International Standardisation Organisation (usually represented as ISO) has a family of standards derived, first, from a set of British quality assurance standards but, ultimately, from the USA which some years ago realised that if a soldier aiming a gun at a target pulled the trigger the bullet should go on its way as intended.

Becoming qualified to wear an ISO label is important for many businesses. It means that other label wearers accept them. Label wearers are able to advertise to customers that they only deal with or sub-contract to fellow label wearers. This becomes a quality assured family all of whom are dedicated to doing better what they already do. Asking awkward questions about their central purpose is not part of the accreditation process. It is also not part of the audit process. Is education going this way?

10. Capturing modernism

We often regard the French Revolution as the great event that gave us so much inspiration to confront and correct social injustice and exploitation. It also gave us the word 'terror'. To start our modernisation clock in 1789 would, however, be to neglect the prior work of the, mostly French, Encyclopaedists.

They were not of uniform mind but, nevertheless, a sizeable, collective and widely influential intellectual attempt to generate and make sense of new knowledge. Their work helped demonstrate the ancientness of the current regime in France. Along with the French Revolution it suggests, in my view, that the concept of modernisation (though the concept had yet to be so named) included, at least for a time, an increase in equality.

To see how the concept developed we should mention Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) who is often referred to as the father of sociology. In France during a time of political upheaval and military defeat but also of artistic and philosophical creativity he developed ideas about what it took to make societies cohere. Structure and function feature prominently, as you might expect, and have contributed to a general belief that they are the two main pillars of modernisation. To work on better and better structures and to push to make them function better and better is, if you accept this way of thinking, what it means to modernise.

The concept has been formulated, re-formulated, promoted and critiqued by very large numbers of philosophers, anthropologists, historians, political scientists and sociologists. Without venturing into postmodernism and post-postmodernism I think it is sufficient here to point out that modernism remains a very powerful concept and that policy makers are very keen to capture it.

The French psychologist Emile Coue' (1857-1926) gave us the phrase *Every day in every way we are getting better and better*, which he suggested should be repeated as a mantra. Autosuggestion and psychotherapy are not my fields. And maybe he was right that there are great benefits for our health in being optimistic. I am, however, borrowing the term to suggest that it can be unwise to accept history uncritically when it is presented to us complete with some rather grand labels suggesting that the future will be better than the past.

11. Modernism can be dangerous

Modernizing Minds in El Salvador, Education Reform and the Cold War (2012) by Lindo-Fuentes and Ching describes how, in the name of modernisation, supported by lots of money and designed by very clever people, the military regime of the country managed to create an educational policy that helped to start a civil war. Failing to include schoolteachers at the policy making stage was a contributory, some think key, factor.

12. Modernism can be silly

Massive Open On-line Courses (MOOCs) are discussed very frequently on the professional network LinkedIn. On the one hand we have arguments about this being the only way forward and warnings that universities and countries that stay out of the game will lose out somehow. On the other hand we have arguments about the social nature of learning. Squeezed into the arguments are points about practical problems and low completion rates.

What I think is detectable is a fear by some that a future is emerging that will be disturbing because it challenges them to adapt to new technologies and at the same time seems to be threatening long held beliefs.

When change seems to signify a combined threat like this to competence and values there is the potential to become lost in a modernisation maze and a need to find something solid on both counts to which you can cling, if only till you get your professional bearings.

13. John Dewey: born five years after The Charge of the Light Brigade and seventeen years before The Battle of the Little Bighorn (as was my mother's father)

First a confession: in the late 1960s, when I was qualifying as a schoolteacher, we were given a lot of Dewey. Looking back, although he was born in 1859 and died in 1952, he could almost be said to have represented the Spirit of 1968. At the time, however, I suppose I lumped him with all the

other people such as Rousseau with whom our teachers had chosen to burden us: he and his like were simply yet more 'stuff' that we had to wade through in order to qualify.

Having since had to experience formal education as it has entered the cul-de-sac of instrumentalism I find him inspiring. There are far too many books and articles for me to recommend a single text, and I am not suggesting total acceptance of everything he said and wrote, but to be reminded that education is about far more than passing examinations: that it is part of what makes a democratic society he has to be revisited.

14. Still a great book

In 1983 Stephen Kemmis, working with others, produced *Orientations to Curriculum and Transition: Towards the Socially Critical School*. The authors argue that schools can do better than simply prepare young people for a world of work or for life as individuals: that they need to realise that schools are not simply preparers for society but are actually participants in society and that this has implications for how they approach what they do.

The book was written in Australia but I have used it with educators in Israel and the UK over many years. For me it helps to show leaders of learning that there are other perspectives: that there is a valid educational language somewhat different from the language of a quality assured pursuit of targets.

15. Humanity anyone?

Published in 2012 Nurit Peled-Elhanen's *Palestine in Israeli School Textbooks, ideology and propaganda in education* confronts an issue that is not confined to Israel. It is the issue of establishing an official national narrative that suppresses the narratives of others. Except that, unless it is revealed, there can be no issue. To be dehumanised and devalued is to be dismissed from discussion. If you are one of the 'others' your maps, your place names, your customs and your celebrated events are not allowed into the classroom.

16. Pharmaceutical education

In *Cracked, why psychiatry is doing more harm than good* (2013) James Davies looks very closely at how respected medical academics and famous pharmaceutical companies so easily medicalise everyday sufferings, hide research failings and build up false categories of conditions in order to meet the targets sustaining a massive industry. Is it possible that the education (publishing) industry might do the same in response to policy imperatives?

17. A bit of ecology, a bit of structuralism and a bit of functionalism

I am thinking here of the work of FW Riggs. In 1964 Fred Riggs produced *Administration in Developing Countries: The Theory of Prismatic Society*. Because he introduces readers to so many newly minted terms (a tendency of structural functionalists) his book, though short, can be a struggle. The irony

being that his new language was part of an attempt to make his work accessible.

He saw society *and* administration in ecological terms and in order to get us to see this clearly he used the concept of a prism. Fused light indicated a society administered by means of very simple administrative structures. Refracted light indicated societies beginning to generate multiple structures. He was careful, however, not to see this simplistically as a transition from traditional agrarian societies to 'modern' industrial ones. His point was that here was a way of looking at the shifting inter-relationships between administrative structures and society.

In *Prismatic Society Revisited* (1974) Riggs gives us a term for oppressively imposed harmony: 'malintegration'. If, for example, the different parts (we might think of them as components or interest groups) of society are integrated in such a way that they serve the interests of or work to the values of one dominant part we have malintegration. We can, in other words, have a multiply structured society that might appear to acknowledge variety and difference but in reality damps it down.

18. Equality assurance

In the last few years there have been a number of books appearing arguing in favour of a more fair and a less unequal society. At times the arguments are made on moral grounds: that it is simply wrong that people can be exploited while others are privileged. Powerful economic arguments in favour of fairness and equality are also made.

In 2012 Stewart Lansley published *The Cost of Inequality, why economic equality is essential for recovery*. Based upon considerable and very thorough research his point is that if we wish for a good economy we must narrow the gap between the rich and the poor. Concentrating mostly on the UK and the USA he shows the social, individual and economic damage that has been done in those countries since the end of the 70s when the gaps began to widen.

Joseph Stiglitz, concentrating mostly on the USA, makes very similar points in *The Price of Inequality* (2010).

Lansley quotes Wilkinson and Pickett's book of 2009, *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better*. The point being made here, supported by a great deal of evidence, is that not only does inequality increase illness and stress for individuals but that society at large, including the presently rich and privileged, will enjoy more well-being in a more equal society.

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