

The Anatomy of Neoliberalism and Education

Imperialism, Class Struggle and Pedagogy

by Maria Nikolakaki (2022).

A personal response.

Rather than write a conventional review I have chosen to share some personal thoughts that the book has brought to mind. It is a book that stimulates and has helped me to make sense of my professional past.

In the 1980s I worked on what we then called Alternative Curriculum Projects, designed to make the formal educational experience of young people something that they might find enjoyable and fulfilling. At that time the UK government was led by Thatcher. Her Secretary of State for Education was Kenneth Baker about whom someone wittily said that he, as a privatising Tory, was nationalising both the curriculum and the system of assessment and examination. In other words, government was deciding what should be taught and how and what should be examined and how. A somewhat different approach was taken for commerce and industry. We acquired a National Curriculum and System of Assessment and at the same time all of that was meant to work within what we were told was a Free Market.

But educational policy required the expertise of professional educators to join in and put flesh on the bones of policy and people like me felt that we had the chance to capture that policy and humanise it. Many of us believed that for too long. One day a colleague said, "I think we are heading for a crisis." Suddenly, I found what I think were the right words in response. I said, "No we are not heading for a crisis, we are in one."

Reading Maria Nikolakaki's book reminds me of that moment. For years we have seen that word 'Neoliberalism' and possibly not used it often enough to make sense of the vicissitudes of what we regard as our ordinary professional lives. The Neoliberal crisis has been with us for some time. But right now I believe that we, not just in the UK, are confronting an attack upon our right to protest, even our right to express points of view that differ from and challenge the views of our rulers. This is what can happen when the people of power feel that they are simultaneously near to fulfilment and also to rebellion. In more than one country I perceive a sense of desperation by rulers. They feel that they are close to the implementation of their ideal, but, simultaneously, they are aware of resistance from disbelieving people and groups, even from other countries.

As Pax Americana comes under both internal and external threat so we are made aware of its overwhelming military might. Instead of engaging in arguments that it might not always win the US and its allies wave sabres. Might this have parallels in education?

Back in the classroom.

You are a teacher who thinks your job ought not to be confined to a simplistic measuring of the extent to which officially approved knowledge, skills and attitudes have been acquired. But, compared with more educationally adventurous days stimulated in my case by people such as Olive Banks, Eric Midwinter, Denis Lawton, Stephen Kemmis and Lawrence Stenhouse, that is what the job has become: a job of measuring. One of the most frequently used words in a Further Education College is 'Level'. Programmes, courses, come as levels. Discovering penicillin by accident when signed up to a lower level means failure. It was not part of the planned curriculum. And the thought of accidental learning!

The book is a stimulating resource. It provided me with new information while also making me reflect upon a long professional life. If you are reading for the first time about Neoliberalism and its impact upon education the book will pull back a curtain that was hiding a set of purposes that were possibly the opposite of what you were taught and imagined you were doing as an educator.

Professional educators might ask themselves what word is formed from the first seven letters of 'professional'. What is it that we profess? When we put our beliefs into words who might have influenced us?

Not only has the book stimulated my recall of people and events but also provided a clarifying prism through which to re-examine so much.

I am reminded that Ideology, no matter how well explained, is like a faith that believers do not wish to have challenged. Theory, on the other hand, is formed after the collection of evidence and is then tested and subjected to constant questioning and the collection of more evidence. When educational policy is formed and handed down to professionals the only testing that is permitted is how close those professionals can get to the targets set for them. They must adhere to a faith and are not permitted to question its fundamentals.

I am also reminded that the deeply experienced expert on foreign policy, particularly that of the USA, Walter Lippmann, strongly disagreed with John Dewey, the educational philosopher who saw schools as places for development and fulfilment rather than as educational factories where young people were prepared *for* a stratified society. The differences between those two have not gone away. Lippmann felt that democracy had to be managed by an elite. He liked to use the word 'rational'. In his book on U.S. Foreign Policy (1943) he supports the notion of national self-interest, but, he says, it has to be rational. Who decides what is rational? Perhaps the most powerful interest groups make such decisions.

For years I made much use of **Orientations to curriculum and transition: towards the socially-critical school (1983)**. Many people contributed to the book, but the most prominent name among the authors is that of Stephen Kemmis. Using that book with Palestinian and Israeli teachers studying in the same room for masters degrees helped, I hoped, to make a point. Official educational policy in Israel imposes a teaching of history that reinforces the views of invaders and suppresses those of the invaded.

Keith Joseph, once described as The Spectre Haunting Education.

A British professor of education told me the story of Keith Joseph informing him that Dewey was responsible for all that was wrong with education. Joseph, remember, was regarded as the person who taught Thatcher to be a Thatcherite. As Secretary of State for Education under Thatcher Sir Keith gave a talk to the Politics Association, a now defunct association made up of teachers of government and politics. I remember his astonished response when he learned that young people might discuss political issues before they were eleven and had gone to secondary schools to be prepared for exams that would determine their futures.

I retain a fondness for Keith Joseph, partly, I think, because as he was giving his talk my old prof, Fred Ridley, leant over to me and loudly whispered, "Not very bright is he?"

Yes, for so many of our politicians education is about preparation to be measured in order to see how closely young people conform to official requirements. We in the UK, particularly in England, ought to have taken more notice when in December 1988 the report of the Task Group on Assessment and Testing had to be altered at the last minute because Kenneth Baker realised that Thatcher would not like the word 'task' and 'test' had to be substituted for it. The story was told to me by a member of the Task Group. A secretary, late at night but fortified by a glass of sherry, had to go through several documents using a spell check to change the words. She did not catch them all and later academics and local authority advisors would puzzle over the reasons for the continued use of both words. I am sure it was the sherry.

The book takes me back even further, to when I was eighteen and trying to prepare myself to study Government and Politics as an undergraduate. I read the Economist and in 1960 came across W.W. Rostow's **The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto**. His fifth and final stage is the stage of Conspicuous Consumption.

Today the term Failing State is often used. I see it from two perspectives. It can indicate a state in which the mechanics of public services are functioning badly, even disintegrating, and it can be used about states that have failed to achieve Rostow's fifth stage. If I try to bring those perspectives closer together I see in the UK, again particularly in England, a mechanical failure being brought about because the rush to reach the Conspicuous Consumption stage excluded so many people.

In 2010 as our Coalition Government was being formed I coined the phrase **Social Fracking**. As in physical fracking the purpose was to make money by drilling deep into the foundations of society. For a while the resultant social/earth tremors would be confined to those living nearby. Eventually, however, that desire to live a life of conspicuous consumption would be adversely affected. The gated communities of conspicuous consumers not only begin to shrink but they also suffer damage when social services cease to be effective.

Marx and Engels studied Capitalism. Where and to what did they believe Capitalism would lead? It would lead to chaos. I look around me and hear the voices of friends, shopkeepers and neighbours all complaining about the chaotic state of the country. They also complain about the growing gap between the rich and the poor. Might we connect the two?

Returning to Lippmann's point about rational self-interest, two memories come to mind. It was as an undergraduate that I wrote my first book review.

The book was, **Cuba: an American Tragedy by Scheer and Zeitlin, 1963**. The surprise for me was just how irrational was the Foreign Policy of the USA. The attitude that it adopted towards Cuba seemed to serve the interests of a particular group of gangsters in the US rather than the interests of the country as a whole.

Later, trying to choose options (now called modules) in my final year I was told that Twentieth Century Marxism was off the menu. Instead I had to study the government and politics of South East Asia. That meant that I was shocked again by the irrationality of US Foreign Policy. Vietnam and China had long been opposed to each other, but the US forced them to be friends. What did the USA gain from all this? There was a gain. It was a gain explained to us by President Eisenhower in 1961. The benefits went to what he termed the Military Industrial Complex.

In other words, governments pretending to serve the interests of voters in general are so often serving the interests of powerful groups with whom they have strong financial links. Just think about how often words such as Freedom, Liberty and Democracy are used by governments. Then ask who are the beneficiaries when those words are used in speeches by so many politicians.

Commodification.

Go into a supermarket and look at the shelves. What do you see? Commodities. They are bought at one price and sold at another. They are advertised to customers to make them attractive. But might those customers see their children in school or college or university as receiving a commodity called education? Might people shopping for food come to realise that choosing which privatised school, college or university their children might go to is similar to searching a shelf to find the most desirable commodity at the most affordable price?

Let us go further. Are the customers themselves commodities? Did their parents buy an education for them that set a price on them? Does that price make them decision-makers or decision-receivers?

We need books like this and voices to listen to like that of Maria Nikolakaki. Short term policy-making provides us with so much about which to complain. From time to time we see a trend and move to the medium term. Our complaints become sprinkled with more examples. But what of the long term? Do we know what is really happening to us? Are we only to be complainers, or are we going to attempt to apply the mind of the researcher

to the impositions of the ideologue? Marx famously said, “philosophers have only interpreted the world in different ways, the point is to change it.”

We need knowledge; we need to question that knowledge; and if we do not like what that knowledge tells us we need to find out what to do about it. Reading this book will help. It has certainly helped me.

Finally.

The book has almost fifty four pages listing its references. It is encyclopaedic in its scope. Having access to a copy provides readers with a very large resource to support and to counter arguments.

The book also reminds us that despite attempts to associate Marx with an autocratic version of communism as practised especially in the USSR his main subject of study was capitalism. It is ludicrous to imagine that Marx would have endorsed the actions of Stalin, for example. What Marx and Engels gave us was a devastating analysis of how capitalism de-humanises us. It even de-humanises those that control how we are valued. In my professional life I have seen schools, colleges and higher education in the form of polytechnics prised away not only from each other but also from democratically accountable local authorities. The owners and controllers of such units now compete with each other to achieve high ratings that make them more successful in capitalist terms.

In order to create free market education the people of power have gained the means to set a sale value on both institutions and people. When Tony Blair was asked in 1997 what were the priorities of his government he replied: EDUCATION, EDUCATION, EDUCATION. Some of us laughed. It took a while to realise that he was about to create not only different kinds of schools but also to separate them from those democratically accountable local authorities. He has told us very clearly that New Labour was all about ‘choice’. That word came with another of his favourites: ‘aspiration’. While still retaining his membership of a socialist party he worked to and promoted capitalist ideals.

A society of aspiring people want to be able to choose the expensive commodities on the top shelves. If we have an educational system that encourages this then it also becomes essential that some are confined to the cheap commodities on the lower shelves. How will you know that you are at the top unless you have people you can look down on?

I said that I would respond and not judge this book. But I cannot resist a final judgement: I must read it again.

Cliff Jones, 21/09/2022.

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