Education in a Troubled Era of Disenchantment: The Emergence of a New Zeitgeist

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What is an era? How does one characterise it? Identify its attributes and effects? Eras are complex, filled with tensions, internal and external, however, there are prominent values and dynamics that stand out and characterise an age. And capturing an era requires more than just one theory - a Zeitgeist is an elective affinity[i] of a number of forces: cultural, psychological, social, economic and political. While many analyses have been used to critique two commonly associated with the last twenty years, neoliberalism and globalisation, such as a Habermasean (1984) critical theory, a Foucaultian (Burchell, Gordon and Miller, 1991) governmentality examination, a Bourdieuian (1998) analysis, and a postcolonial critique (e.g., Hoogvelt, 1997). The one chosen here, a Weberian (1968) analysis, has been selected because it operates on a micro- to macro-level, and includes value analysis and a role for the inner dynamics in individuals that both produce the social phenomena but also internalise external factors and forces as well as a concept of 'disenchantment' which corresponds well to the emergent Zeitgeist.

For those of us who have been studying and researching for 20 years, we have seen the entrenchment of the neoliberalism Zeitgeist. It spawned the New Public Management and New Public Governance which reshaped relationships between the public and private sectors and between the economic and cultural sectors. However, as Davies (2016) argues, neoliberalism itself has gone through an evolution from a system of power with normative and democratic authority into one lacking these constraints. In other words, a new Zeitgeist is emerging, one of combined political and economic changes with socio-cultural patterns that have implications for education, evident in studies on the new generation referred to as the millennials who exhibit entitlement, narcissism (Burstein, 2014), and a distinctive attitude towards education (Zarra, 2017) and work characterised by a need for immediacy, superficiality and technological dependency (Csorba, 2017). There are counter-movements and critiques as well in the dynamics of an emerging Zeitgeist that also have societal and educational implications such as postcolonialism (Andreotti, 2011), decolonisation (Taieb, 2014), cross-culturalism in educational leadership (Foskett and Lumby, 2003) and transculturalism (Miller, 2016). A Zeitgeist is in dialectical relationship with counter-forces that may themselves emerge as a new Zeitgeist, and complex interplay in which education plays a dual role of causal agent and effect.

Drawing on conceptions of Zeitgeist from Goethe and Hegel and related concepts of disenchantment and the iron cage from Weber, this essay examines the Zeitgeist that has emerged as a successor to neoliberalism. This requires first a discussion of Zeitgeist and Weber's theory of disenchantment and the role of the 'iron cage,' followed by the indicators of eras and Zeitgeists that have appeared in various kinds of commentary and scholarship, and a final discussion of the implications for education.

This exploration follows from an historical line of critical studies on the character of education under the influence of dominant forces in societal ages in the US, beginning with Tyack and Hansot's (1982) classic on the philosophical and ideological orientation of the US educational system from its progressivist period to the changes taking place in the 1960s and 1970s, Bowles

and Gintis's (1977) *Schooling in Capitalist America*, Bourdieu and Passeron's (1977) critical analysis of how educational system reproduce societal structures and ideologies, Giroux's (2007) examination of education in the 21st century becoming a handmaiden to the military-industrial complex, and the many books that have now accumulated about the commodification of education under neoliberalism such those by Readings (1996), Slaughter and Leslie (1999), and Peters (2013) as well as the expanding literature on postcolonialism and globalisation like Asher, Grinage and Kolb (2017). As such, this essay is not a history of ideas in the practice of educational administration, but a critical examination of social and political ideologies that shape social institutions like that of education and its administration from the values they represent, the professional identities that are formed, and the purposes and goals of education as they are affected extrinsically.

The Anatomy of a Zeitgeist

The use of the term 'Zeitgeist', as an analytic construct, begins with Goethe's use of the term to denote opinions which dominate a period in history, unconsciously shaping thought, and thereby decisions and actions (Ross, 1969). Hegel's (2014) definition of it in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* presented a more teleological sense in which the term means 'spirit of the age'. The Zeitgeist originates in individual self-consciousness, through which one recognizes oneself as a self-conscious subject and similar patterns in others, creating a mutual recognition that forms an 'objective spirit' or social matrix or pattern of social interaction. These form patterns of thought, belief and value that shape action into customs or conventions of the culture which form the ethical order. When sufficiently dominant in a culture they become institutionalised into social roles and ideas that form the substance of organisational life and an acculturation process for those entering its sphere of influence. People internalise these norms influencing their sense of identity, values, thinking and actions. In more formal organisational terms, they shape the policies, procedures and practices from which authority, power, and accomplishment are created.

In other words it is not the only, but the dominant character of the age, although it contains within it sub-currents and contradictions including those which may supplant the Zeitgeist in the future.   The thesis here, too, is that the social institution of education in a society is a critical factor by reinforcing the Zeitgeist and providing the critique which influences the emergence of a replacement through the reproductive role of education in societyand in Weberian (1968) terms, the formation and maintenance of organizational, status and class structures through values inculcation. But, both Bourdieu and Weber's systems of thought provide an explanation of the dynamics through which these change, for Bourdieu (1977) through 'fields' in which a complex interplay of various kinds of capital (social, cultural, etc.) are power resources in the games and strategies play out, and for Weber (1968) through the social constructions of value orientations and the conflicts that occur due to value conflicts and changing conditions.

Weber, as a neo-Kantian, was heavily influenced by idealist philosophy, including that of Hegel, in shaping his ideas about the individual unit of analysis and how collectively individual action forms roles, groups and organisations in a complex interplay of ideas and material conditions, and subjectivity and objectivity (Turner, 1996). It is essentially this type of construction that his

'spirit of capitalism' is in the Protestant Ethic essay (2005), and from which his conceptions of disenchantment as the excessive use of technical rational thought that excludes other values and the 'iron cage' as the unlikelihood of escaping once it has taken hold. Disenchantment is a social condition in which rationalization through bureaucratisation and/or a reduction of meaning to economic values dominates or even excludes other sources of value. This is the condition of the neoliberal age, where people are mathematically measured and which dehumanizes people into cogs in a wheel producing disenchantment and eventually the 'iron cage.' This bleak condition is one in which the materialisation of individual value and group interaction occurs, and where formal rationality overtakes substantive rationality, that is, the procedures for doing things (e.g., performance measurement) overtakes the substance of meaning in teaching and research in the case of higher education. What is important in this discussion, though, are two human reactions to disenchantment that themselves can spawn a new Zeitgeist: following a charismatic leader who promises more meaning in life or self-indulgence to compensate for a loss of meaning.

The Eras and Zeitgeists

In the last few years, there are indications of other configurations of ideas and material conditions emerging – a shift that affects culture, social institutions, decisions, and policy and programmes, including the educational sector. Recent literature gives an indication of ways that changes in the times are being characterised in a number of disciplines. Globalisation as an era is still a dominant paradigm used to explain politics and international relations (Baylis, Smith and Owens, 2013) and the production of a 'global melange culture' (Pieterse, 2015). Globalisation is also a major paradigmatic approach to international changes in education, critiqued for relative power relations between the West and the developing world (e.g., King, Marginson and Naidoo, 2013) and for identity disruption based on a subaltern analysis (Spivak, 1988) or colonisation of mind (Thiong'o, 1986).

Another dominant discussion is the era of digital technologisation both in terms of benefits it provides such as social reform opportunities (Howard and Hussain, 2013) and access to educational sources (Peters and Roberts, 2012).   But there are also negative impacts on personality and social development. Turkle has been a long-time critic of digital technology overuse, from personality impairment in *The Second Self* (1984) to negatively affecting our social development by replacing actual interactions with simulations in *Alone Together* (2013). There are also problems with addiction to social media (Young and de Abreu, 2011), and risk to the safety of children (Livingstone, Haddon and Görzig, 2012) as well as organisations and nation-states (Corera, 2016). The digitised world that dominates through communication and social media has an impact on how we develop psychologically, socially and culturally, making our personal information accessible, organisational information vulnerable, and facilitates the spread of disinformation and pressure through cyberbullying (Smith and Steffgen, 2013). Actor-network theory of Latour (1987) also examines how technology itself, as well as people who use it, are parts of large networks of power and causality of which most users are not fully awareOn a psychological level, Harris (2015) has examined the loss of time to ourselves due to continuous 'connection' through social media and email to think, reflect and imagine. He found in his research that many in the generations borne after 1980 do not even know what it means to

be unconnected digitally or are aware of how they can be manipulated through marketing, government or even individuals online, and many of them resist being unconnected. The implications of this for education are to not reinforce this dependency but teach students how to work without being digitally connected, particularly teaching that tweeting is not a developed form of human conversation or interaction.

Related to technologisation is the emergence of the surveillance and security state, which also has an impact on and implications for education. The technologisation of surveillance through computer systems and the internet is the subject of a large body of literature on many intelligence and security organisations, expanded by the consequences of 9/11, Wikileaks and the Snowden incident is an indication of both fascination with it and concerns about its impact on privacy, freedom and political systems (e.g., Landau, 2010) including universities as sites of surveillance (Gilliom and Monahan, 2013; Marx, 2016) and the expansion of surveillance and security studies in teaching and research (Giroux, 2007; Samier, 2014). The security state, the rise of a security industrial complex (Keller, 2017) and the role of universities in this (Williams, 2007) has been greatly advanced through the 'cyber' world but so has our vulnerability wherever we are living or working. More importantly for education is the quality of information available on the internet and the ways in which using it affects learning and understanding (Lynch, 2016; Nicols, 2017). One way in which neoliberalism and the security state have affected education and other sectors, Lea (2017) argues, is the colonisation of social existence by economic values and a 'quantification of reality' with an accompanying decline in professionalism in favour of managerialism and a restructuring of higher education to reflect these imperatives. Much of this he attributes to a form of rationality that is quantitatively based, shifting from a qualitative view of the world dominated by higher order moral and humanistic end values ultimately causing self-alienation and controlled social conformity, in part through quality assurance regimes (Morley, 2003).

Another identifiable emerging era is that of populist politics in a number of Western countries, described by Mudde (2004) as using emotional rather than rational rhetoric, opportunistic policies, aided in recent years by social media, and a demagogic charismatic leadership style associated with both right and left wing political parties. As Mudde explains, populism is 'hostile to the idea and institutions of *liberal* democracy or *constitutional* democracy,' (p. 561), because they represent limitations on the general will. The form of recent and current American populism is grounded in celebrity and reality TV, described by Kellner (2016) as an authoritarian populism since it embraces a number of prejudices, employs new media and social networking, and spectacle, and departs from the values and traditions of political office. The implications of populism for education require, according to Ranieri (2016), a concerted effort to deconstruct this kind of content and concentrate on citizenship education.

Related to these era developments is the emergence of 'post-truth.' Most often it connotes the content of political expression from the current American administration, alternately referred to as lying, and 'delivered through video and social media, especially Twitter, that are not ideal media for argumentation, disputation, reflection and fact-checking' (Peters, 2017, p. 564). As Peters notes, its origins stretch back a number of decades, that began with 'the 24-h news cycle, "sound bite" and "photo opportunity" to bypass public discussion' (p.564). But more deeply there is a denial of knowledge, of rationality, higher order values and the sweeping away of

cultural traditions. In Weberian terms, this is a deep disenchantment and an indication of the greater stranglehold of the 'iron cage.' I In the last year there has been a rapid expansion of literature,for example: Levitin's (2017) exposing ways in which data, statistics and logic are manipulated in print and social media; Rabin-Hayt et al.'s (2016) critique of the industry of 'organized misinformation' affecting politics, particularly its legislative process in the US; and Davis's (2017) discussion of dishonesty in politics and the corporate spheres by using bullshit as a main communications strategy. Education at all levels are a critical sector with a political, social, moral and epistemological responsibility to expose 'post-truth', inoculate students against it through the acquisition of knowledge and skills, maintain the fundamental principles of the community of scholars, and ensure that it is not produced in the academy or used as a site through partnerships to disseminate it.

But what is the new Zeitgeist that is noisily and aggressively showing itself? It is anti-humanistic, lacks moderation, civility, social responsibility, and a sense of community based on a shared humanity.   What condition thrives on populism, social media, a disregard for truth, exhibitionism and spectacle, reality TV, online gaming, strives for celebrity and fame, bullying and voyeurism, a fuzzy notion of personal boundaries, and popular culture dominated by vampires and superheroes highly sexualised in (dark) romantic fantasies? I believe that the emergent Zeitgeist is a pernicious narcissism, evident in the patterns of behaviour described above, and also in another major body of literature not yet referenced: the rapidly increasing problems and study of toxic leadership (see Samier, 2012, forthcoming) for which narcissism is one major cause.

The beginnings of American narcissism can be found in post-World War II cultural changes, examined by Lasch (1979). Among the new sensibilities and states of mind that emerged through the 1960s and 1970s, were a combination of high consumption and a form of individualism that was unrestrained and lacking in industriousness producing a culture that supported or even rewarded narcissism. Cushman (1990) observed that a significant change has taken place in how the self develops with an absence of 'community, tradition, and shared meaning' typified by 'a lack of personal conviction and worth' producing what he calls the 'empty self' (p. 600). As a 'self-contained individualism', it is driven by emotional hunger which consumerism and advertising, populism and some forms of therapy feed creating social alienation and fragmentation and unrealistic expectations of romanticised conception of a problem-free life. Cushman also sees this as a 'narcissistic dynamic'.   Twenge (2011) argues, drawing on a number of international and comparative studies, that narcissism is more common in individualistic cultures like the US than in the collectivist cultures of Asia and the Middle East, and that rates, particularly in the US are rising. Some of the cultural factors that encourage narcissistic development are the language of advertising, reality TV shows, the increase in celebrity in the US, and media like gaming that emphasise individuality over responsibility to others. Twenge and Campbell (2009), in *The Narcissism Epidemic*, document how it has become a cultural epidemic in US society, in part fostered by a movement for higher self-esteem and self-admiration in adolescents and young adults in parenting and education consisting of five key causes: 'a focus on self-admiration, child-centered parenting, celebrity glorification and media encouragement, the attention seeking promoted on the Internet, and easy credit' (p. 268), in other words, the emergence of cult of personality and the inability to distinguish between private and public spheres.

Clifton (2011) finds in studies on narcissism and electronic social networks that a narcissist's interpersonal functioning impairment like aggression, vindictiveness, intrusiveness and domineering behaviour also appear in their egocentric higher use of social media however with overstated quality of relationship, manipulation of others or the control of information and an overly positive presentation of self not supported by usage.

But how do narcissists succeed and attain leadership positions? As Hogan and Fico (2011) explain, narcissists often succeed in rising in an organizational hierarchy because they appear to be bold and assertive in their opinions, characteristics that are generally valued along with a high level of projected confidence and self-promotion, and they are highly manipulative in pursuing their goals, although in the long term their narcissist patterns of behaviour become destructive to those around them.   In a culture that has become highly narcissistic one could speculate that a narcissistic leader would seem to affirm the inclinations in others as long as it serves their ends, and narcissists will make any promises that serve their immediate ends. Its spread and a growing tolerance for it have been examined by Cruz and Buser (2017), concluding that it displays a demand that the world conform to their own image of themselves, vindictiveness when a grandiose image of themselves is challenged or critiqued, and the inability to deal with any form of response other than praise. Samuels (2016) looks at the negative impact of narcissistic nationalism on social justice and government. The danger in a political office is potential dismantling of social institutions, undermining of governance structures nationally and internationally, and an authoritarian plutocratic view of politics.

Implications for Education, Or, How Do We Combat an Emerging Destructive Zeitgeist?

The impact on education of a post-truth Zeitgeist is, according to Peters (2017), a lack of criticality that has been substituted with 'narrow conceptions of standards, and state-mandated instrumental and utilitarian pedagogies' aided by big data systems and attacks on professional autonomy (p. 565), along with consumerist marketing and branding. Essentially the main implications for education are: to what extent does educational practice contribute to the Zeitgeist, a topic amply analysed by Bowles and Gintis (1977) as it applied to capitalism and through Giroux's (2007) work on how higher education has become embedded with the military-industrial complex. The new Zeitgeist is a different animal. It is, at least in the US, a clear case of self-indulgence emotionally and materially combined for many people with a reaction to a charismatic individual who speaks to their inner needs and demons. The latter stages of the iron cage which, according to Weber (2005), are very difficult from which to extricate oneself, partly because it affects the substance of social institutions. Currently these include: demands for entertainment, where the boundary between learning and entertainment have become blurred (Buckingham, 2003), entitlement to praise and high grades (Bergman, Westerman and Daly, 2010), and the decline of public service career interest among university students in the US (Bright and Graham, 2015). A 'post truth' environment is a lack of respect for knowledge and educational systems, narrow training, lack of circumspection, and a lack of discipline, work and responsibility for self which results in students blaming teachers and professors for their own poor performance.

If, as Collins (2017) argues that reality TV, a narcissism combined with consumerism, is having a significant effect in conceptions and perceptions of ourselves. These psychological and social forces, she claims, drive people to create artificial selves. And, I would argue here, create virtual realities, aided by popular culture, digital technologies in social media, and an alienation from social and political reality. This emerging Zeitgeist is not just a matter of problematic acculturation and social interaction, but, as Bailenson and Blascovich (2011) maintain, it is behaviour that is produced by brain function in virtual environments. Identification with an internalisation of avatars in terms of our identities has been an issue in the study of virtual reality sites: Waggoner (2009) has been studying the relationship people have with their virtual identities in online gaming, raising issues of the degree to which people identify with them, and Wolfendale (2007) argues that the distress experienced when avatars are harmed, is one indication that the avatar attachment people experience is as morally significant as their 'real world' attachments. There is little evidence to demonstrate that education systems are able to counter these developments, and in many cases, [are]is aiding and abetting [them]it. If ever there was a time for educational leadership at all levels in the system informed by higher order values, knowledge, critical capacities, and a deep connection to the communities in society, it is now when the newer generations are demonstrating a preference for fantasy, artificial worlds, and themselves as avatars.

The implications for education and its administration are manifold. On an individual level, the humanistic ideal of intellectual, emotional and physical development is abandoned to the vagaries of the market and emotionalism, identity is formed out of self-interest and attachment to fantasies and ghostly, often counterfeit, personas in cyberspace and popular culture. Teachers and administrators can be relegated in a system like this to simple managerialism, serving corporate commercial interests and digital imperatives. On a group and organisational level, cohesion and coordination are impaired and the end values of the moral, social and political spheres are replaced by extrinsically-driven means values. And, finally, on a social institution and societal level education cannot contribute to the creation of knowledge, to the critical evaluation of historical forces and their impact on social welfare, and impairs the ability to contribute to social and political reform. The world of the avatar, while attractive in its endless distractions does not translate into real world conditions – the avatar is conditioned to avoid and deny reality rather than engage with it.

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[i] 'Elective affinity' is a term initially coined by Goethe in his novel by that name, and later adopted by Max Weber to describe the interaction of causal factors.