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# EDUCATION AND THE ALTERITY OF DEMOCRACY

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## ABSTRACT

*The idea of a democratic education in the English context has lost a considerable amount of ground since the 1960s. Here I argue that such is the dominance of neoliberal understandings of education over the Right and much of the social democratic Left that new thinking is required. I begin by considering the view that we have now become so post-democratic that people no longer wish to be free. It is in this context that we may talk about the alterity of democracy. I explore different ideas about how we might seek to link education to ideas of the commons, thereby connecting the idea of education to more participatory notions of citizenship. All of these ideas need to be revived in the context of a state that increasingly controls schools from the center and the dominant rationality of the market.*

**T**HE GLOBAL FINANCIAL CRISIS OF 2008 HAS THUS FAR DONE LITTLE TO ALTER THE destructive course of neoliberalism across the planet. Indeed the election of Donald Trump in 2016 suggested that the world could be entering into a new phase of corporate domination and right-wing populism. The democratic optimism of the radical 1960s has long since receded and one could be forgiven for thinking that the present age is more governed by despair than hope. However, immediately in the wake of the financial crisis, the emergence of the Occupy movement suggested that many citizens had not yet given up on the search for alternatives in a world dominated by capitalism, inequality, environmental degradation, war, and human rights abuse. Previously, after the global demonstrations in 2003 against the war in Iraq, Hardt and Negri (2004) suggested that the world was faced with a choice between state violence and democracy. By democracy they did not mean a return to the debates between representative or more direct forms of democracy, but “new democratic institutional structures based on existing conditions” (HARDT; NEGRI, 2004, p. 354). Here they insist that radicals, instead of simply organising resistance and protest, need to engage in “political realism” (HARDT; NEGRI, 2004, p. 356). Notably, despite the often justified criticisms of Hardt and Negri, these arguments have often been neglected. The possibilities of alternatives remain “embedded in the affective, cooperative, communicative relations of social production” (HARDT; NEGRI, 2004, p. 350). Neoliberalism in more popular understanding

is based upon the common sense metaphors that we are egoistic, competitive creatures seeking power and domination, but other realities also exist, not far beneath the surface. Of course, as Berardi (2017) argues, Hardt and Negri massively overestimate the new forms of solidarity produced by the Internet. Networked capitalism produces both co-operation and connectivity along with fragmentation, precarity and anxiety. However *Empire* remains significant for asking us to think again about democracy. What is needed is less a blue-print produced by elite intellectuals, and more an experimental attitude towards democracy and the construction of many democratic alternatives. Instead of retreating into fruitless arguments that preserve our radical purity, Hardt and Negri can be understood as trying to reignite a more radical debate around what we mean by democracy in the global 21<sup>st</sup> century. Here I want to mostly think about these questions in relation to education, democracy and schools for young people. This follows a long tradition of debate and discussion which seeks to rethink questions of pedagogy in relation to democracy, drawing on John Dewey to Paulo Freire and from Martin Buber to Hannah Arendt (STEVENSON, 2011).

As Raymond Williams (1962, p. 10) argued at the beginning of the 1960s, “it is evident that the democratic revolution is still at a very early stage”. By this he meant that, while securing the right to vote and universal forms of education were important in the context of a democratic society, we should not assume that we had reached an end point in this process. These arguments have been reignited more recently by a wave of protests against austerity, inspiring a range of social movements and alternative political parties. Much of the protest has reopened the question as to whether capitalism can ever be compatible with democracy. While liberalism has brought some rights and freedoms, society remains built upon the rule of capital. This was a point often made by New Left writers such as Williams, but marginalised within more social democratic or liberal concerns. Whose interests does the state serve, given the political consensus around the bail-out of the banks and the imposition of austerity on the social state and the poorest and most vulnerable communities? How sustainable is a society built on the dominance of consumerism, money and profit? Unless seriously challenged by social movements, the ideology of the free market and the rule of the global 1% will lead to an increasingly insecure and hazardous planet for many of the world’s poorest citizens (KLEIN, 2014).

These questions are not contained within academic circles, but are being discussed within wider public forums. However, if the democratic Left are no longer seeking to violently over-throw capitalism, what kinds of purchase do more popular forms of control have within the present? Many on the New Left in the 1960s assumed that, while the

dominant class society would have interests in containing democracy, such processes were likely to be resisted due to our shared human nature. Williams (1962) assumes that, if humans are “by nature” rational and communicative beings, then this would give permanent support to democratic ideas even if the organisation of society conspires against this possibility. However, after the postmodern turn in political theory such views came under question. Richard Rorty (1989) sought to disrupt the idea that democracy can be based upon metaphysical thinking. This converts the idea of democracy less into something driven by the secret of our inner natures and more into a “poetic achievement” (RORTY, 1989, p. 77). Similarly Cornelius Castoriadis (1997a, 1997b) recognises that democracy was a historical social creation that society could well have developed without. Indeed he goes further and argues that, if part of the project of democracy was an attempt to take charge of society and its institutions, then the will for this seems to be in long term decline across the West. Political parties have become election winning machines, unions are hierarchical and bureaucratic organisations, and other groups have converted themselves into lobbying organisations. In educational institutions, young people are faced with either marginalisation or what Castoriadis (1987a, p. 260) describes as “the royal road of privatisation”. Here education becomes less about learning and critical exchange and more about the gaining of a passport to gain entrance into the labour market. Provocatively Castoriadis (1997a, p. 263) asks whether modern citizens actually still wish to live in a meaningful democracy. If the privatisation of the political has increasingly given the control of our society over to elected elites and the rule of capital, then to what extent do people still wish to be free? For Castoriadis, the project of freedom and democratic control are neither guaranteed by history or nature, but must be socially created; it must be built on an element of refusal whereby we resist attempts by the wider society to normalise our identities. If the struggle for freedom is not secured by our natures, it requires a considerable amount of personal and collective struggle with no certainty of success. The refusal to be “a passive object” is essential to the struggle for a meaningful democracy that is built upon autonomy and more critical forms of thinking (CASTORIADIS, 1997b, p. 30).

For Castoriadis (1997b) and Williams (1962, 1989), the project for a genuinely more autonomous and democratic society is tied in with the principle of self-management. Without the development of more intensive forms of participation across a range of institutions, the existing democratic arrangements would be described as bourgeois. A more self-managed society would need to radically decentralise power and be far more demanding personally than the existing hierarchical relationships instilled by capitalism and the state. The project of more

radical forms of democracy would make huge demands on society's imaginative and creative capacities. The decentralisation of democracy can also be connected to the project to create a more ecological society. Within this model, local communities and cities are best placed to take decisions at the lowest level possible, attuning themselves to the local landscape while seeking sustainable solutions. The idea of an ecological democracy based upon local forms of control has a different trajectory to that of a society dominated by the needs of capital or a centralised state. These ideas not only connect with Raymond Williams and Cornelius Castoriadis, but also with those of Murray Bookchin. Bookchin argued that democracy's revival depended on transforming municipalities through participating in elections for city councils and setting up citizens' assemblies (BIEHL, 2015). Michael Peters (2017) argues that Bookchin exhibits a strong connection to the work of John Dewey through their shared rejection of the relatively impoverished forms of democracy that take root in market-driven societies. For Dewey (1977), schools were important not simply as places of learning and experimentation, but where democracy could be directly practised. In other words, to be meaningful, democracy is not simply about voting, but a way of life. What is crucial here is not procedures, but the practice of inquiry, discussion and judgement in locations that have a direct connection to the life of the citizen.

Neoliberalism is hostile to deeper forms of democracy. As Henry Giroux (2004, p.106) argues, neoliberalism acts as a form of public pedagogy that seeks to "produce competitive, self-interested individuals vying for their own material and ideological gain" while simultaneously seeking to close down alternative public spaces (especially within education and the media) where its logic could begin to be questioned. In this context, neoliberal domination converts more meaningful forms of democracy into a form of alterity or Other. Here I want to argue that the marginalisation of democratic understandings has implications for the organisation of schools as potential sites that could create alternative ways of living (FIELDING; MOSS, 2011). Indeed, while all governments seek to contain the idea of democracy within limited forms of institutional expression, there are permanent possibilities for more meaningful forms of expression (RANCIÈRE, 2006). Further, I remain unconvinced by a range of radical concerns that suggest that public schools are unreformable and cannot be made more democratic. For example, Robert Howarth (2017, p. 5) not unreasonably argues that state education has never been especially open to the exploration of alternative forms of learning and imaginative pedagogy. This is especially evident within the United States and UK in terms of the neoliberal assault on teachers' autonomy, standardised testing, punitive league tables, and the enhanced grading and increased monitoring of young people. One

approach to these questions can of course be to develop alternative sites of pedagogy outside mainstream institutions. These can offer less formalised and more experimental forms of pedagogy that enable different less instrumental forms of learning. However, I am concerned that, if these arguments are pushed too far, they will mean we give up on the need to imagine alternatives to public institutions. To become more experimental in our thinking about democracy should not only mean exploring alternative spaces, but also involve the construction of public programmes that aim to reform existing modes of pedagogy. However, before I look at some of these questions I want to consider more closely the argument that we have become a post-democratic society, and that attempt represses more autonomous sentiments.

### **CITIZENS IN A POST-DEMOCRACY**

The idea that we are currently living in a post-democratic society has a considerable currency within critical commentary. While the argument has taken a variety of forms, critics usually point to the connection between political elites and the power of capital, the power of business to manipulate the citizenry through the media, the spread of consumerism, and the decline of participation within political parties and broader social movements (CROUCH, 2004; SENNETT, 2006). The ending of social democracy, along with the decline of trade unions and the labour movement and the rise of neoliberalism, has progressively extinguished more meaningful forms of democratic involvement. Wendy Brown (2011) argues that the paradox around the term democracy is that it has never been more popular and, at the same time, as lacking in substance. Today, the state is unapologetically allied to the project of capital, emptying out any deeper meaning for democracy as elections are reduced to televised spectacles, everything is subjected to the rationality of the market and processes of securitization impinge upon democratic movements from below. In other words, democratic movements, when they do emerge, are both marginalised and subjected to state surveillance in the interests of national security. Democracy has always been an unfinished and to some extent unachievable project. As Brown points out, there has been a long history of internal exclusions based upon race, class, gender, and other social characteristics. In addition, there is a long history of democratic societies producing external Others. This is a function currently performed by radical Islam, replacing the role played by Communism during the Cold War. However, this simply points to the idea that democracy is always an incomplete and ongoing project. Similarly, Angela Davis (2012, p. 149) speaks of the struggle for democracy that has dispensed with internal and

external Others, based instead upon a shared sense of human dignity. This does not mean that everything can be democratised as such a project will inevitably hit up against limits. However, it is not the outer limits of democracy that is our current concern, but that the dream of more popular forms of power are being extinguished. Wendy Brown (2011, p. 54) argues in this respect that “the presumption of democracy as a good rests on the presumption that human beings want to be self-legislating and that rule by the demos checks the dangers of unaccountable and concentrated political power”. However, Wendy Brown worries that modern citizens prefer more conformist and consumer-orientated lives to the responsibilities and uncertainties that accompany freedom. Here we could argue pessimistically that the new waves of protest that contested the austerity of neoliberalism have left most people’s lives untouched, with the vast majority showing little inclination to involve themselves. Similarly Murray Bookchin (2015, p. 167) argues that capitalism has become the “natural” state of affairs and that the rich are currently, more admired than they are resented. Capitalism, along with a normative business ethos and the idea of competition, is now pervasive in everyday life, with poverty either swept under the carpet or seen as a personal failing. Of course the other side of these arguments is that, without a fairly substantial reinvestment in the idea of democracy, citizens are unlikely to be able to lead critical or dignified lives. If Wendy Brown’s analysis is too bleak, echoing perhaps some of the views of the early Frankfurt school, she nevertheless presents a challenging set of arguments. It is the task of democratic movements to turn the dysfunctional nature of neoliberalism, built upon the destruction of nature, increasing levels of inequality, the logic of capitalism, and hierarchical control from above, into popular alternatives. Again, returning to Williams (1980, p. 254) we have to recognise that the ruling class has for the most part “done its main job of implanting a deep assent to capitalism”, but that this has all come at a huge cost in terms of the wars, environmental damage and class (and other forms of) domination that the system requires to reproduce itself. In this respect, critical intellectuals continue to have a responsibility to suggest alternatives to the present. Pierre Bourdieu (2003, p. 21) argues that neoliberalism continues to dominate the public space and common sense of society with the aid of sympathetic think tanks. He argues that more critical forces need to subject these ideas to fairly relentless forms of critique while also helping to construct “realistic utopias”. This requires a form of critique that deals with the ways in which the political Right continues to dominate discourse around public policy while suggesting more democratic alternatives.



## NEOLIBERAL PUBLIC POLICY AND SCHOOLS

While not wishing to be over-optimistic concerning the emergence of more democratic voices and concerns, there is a continual need to construct alternatives in the face of the dominance of the political Right. Beginning in the 1980s, with the Thatcher and Reagan government, the political Right has long held comprehensive and public schools in disdain, wishing to return to the more overtly tiered system. This has meant that the Right had to reluctantly acquiesce to the comprehensive or more liberal ideals in relation to public schools' ideal for a period of time. During the New Labour period in the UK, there was a renewed attempt to confront what were seen as the failings of what became known as the "bog standard" comprehensive schools. New Labour had been elected on the platform of what the Prime Minister Tony Blair had called "education, education, education". Within the new policy agenda, social class could no longer be seen as an "excuse" for failure as the state sought to change the policy agenda around schools. The key intellectual in this respect is E. D. Hirsch (2009), who in the United States has long been a critic of the so-called "child centered learning" and links together a concern for educational standards and national forms of identification. These ideas can be considered to have had a global impact (OLSEN, 2004; WARD; EDEN, 2009). Indeed, social democracy during the 1990s, which historically had a different orientation to ideas around education, has often failed to adequately confront neoliberal policy in this area (GIDDENS, 2003; HALL, 2003; TOMLINSON, 2005). R. H. Tawney (1965, p. 159), writing in the 1960s, identified the economic power of capital as "a menace to democracy and freedom". A shared civic life and a civilised life depended upon "not of quantity of possessions, but the quality of life" (TAWNEY, 1965, p. 159). The long struggle by the labour movement for shared and quality communal resources was understood to have implications for health, education and other aspects of the social state. As Henry Giroux (2000, p. 113) argues, the political Right across the world has managed to move the agenda from "social investment to one of social containment" while cancelling any concern around questions of class, gender, race, and disability. For the political Right (and some of their social democratic allies), the welfare state, by perpetuating a culture of failure, held back relatively disadvantaged groups; instead the new emphasis upon rising standards enables them to compete in a meritocratic society (ADONIS, 2012). This is a vision of education that is entirely compatible with a neoliberal world dominated by the global 1%. Franco Berardi (2012) argues that the dominance of digital capitalism does not liberate the populace from state control, but instead reduces social life to that which can be counted. For Berardi (2012), we are at the end of the bourgeois era (where we might have expected a separation between culture and the economy) and the finance system

has progressively re-ordered everyday life. The obsession with standards, league tables, results, and the humiliation of teachers and students who cannot meet these standards creates a new Other based upon failure. If concerns around the effects of class, gender, race, and disability are almost entirely absent from the agenda of the Right, then so is a concern about being branded a failure and what this means in terms of the democratic attempt to construct a society that respects the dignity of all. The age of market fundamentalism has arrived in a society where many citizens are now assumed to be disposable. As Giroux (2011, p. 100) argues, without the security of the social state, many marginalised citizens become subjected to the “school-to-prison pipeline”. A more progressive agenda would lead to the employment of more teachers and support staff specifically aimed at the poor and marginalised while simultaneously dramatically reducing class inequality and emphasising democratic values. What is missing at present from the debate on policy and schools is a more far-reaching vision for the democratic schools of the future. In other words, as we shall see, many on the so-called “progressive” Left have adopted a more conservative position.

## **COMPREHENSIVE CONSERVATISM AND DEMOCRACY**

Some on the social democratic Left have begun to develop a critique of the failings of capitalism and the effects this then has on education and democracy. Melissa Benn (2011) in this respect identifies a pincher movement that has denied schools adequate resources while a battery of measures has deemed them as failing. What is under attack here is the idea of a school as a place that mixed young people of different abilities and class backgrounds together. What has come about instead are more exclusive schools that are geared to improve social mobility and spread the ethos of competition and enterprise. As Benn points out, the move away from a more egalitarian ethos that has reduced the status and autonomy of teachers is a profoundly political project. However, we need to be clear that publicly funded education has had a number of critics. This is not to argue that publically funded schooling should not be considered an advance over the more overtly class stratified model that it replaced. However, missing in the argument is a range of critics who have explicitly sought to explore the damaging effect that state organised and controlled institutions can have on freedom. Colin Ward (1973) asks, how well are democratic freedoms served by schools that are integrated into a hierarchical, class-based society? If the task is to produce a society based upon freedom and responsibility, then education would perhaps be better organised outside pyramid-like structures like the state. The argument then is to think of new associations dependent

less on top-down forms of organisation, but upon more voluntary affiliations built upon the idea of mutual aid. It was probably Ivan Illich (1973/2002) who came closest to this view in respect of his critique of the institutionalised nature of school. For Illich (1973/2002), the institutional popularity of school has accompanied capitalist modernity and has been built on a development myth, that school offers equal chances to all of its citizens to progress up the ladder and that, through its capacity to spread criticism and learning, it is reconcilable with liberal values. Illich argues that, while such views are widespread, they are misleading as poorer children are encouraged to enter a competition they cannot win, and that undemocratic hierarchical institutions based on the authority of the teaching profession and the state dictate what counts as knowledge. More critically, in seeking to understand why many pupils resist the message of the school, Illich (1973/2002, p. 46-47) revises Marx's theory of alienation. By denying the creativity of children and preventing them from becoming producers of knowledge, children learn their place in society. This in fact prepares them for life within modern factories and corporations rather well as within school they learn how to follow rules made by a higher authority. James C. Scott (2012) similarly argues that the state school system is designed to produce unquestioning citizens who are both patriotic and will be dutiful workers in the labour market. This is why the political Right, when faced with the failings of school, seek to push the institutional logic even further rather than seeking to dismantle the system. This has deeper implications for democracy, as the authoritarian characteristics of such an institution are unlikely to produce genuinely independent-minded people. Illich (1973/2002, p. 19) sought to address these questions through the promotion of educational networks where we could all choose to learn what we wished. Elsewhere Illich (1973/2009) argues that a future society should break with the conventions of manipulation (of which school is part) and aim for a more convivial world where we live in smaller scale, face to face communities that have progressively dispensed with the bureaucracy and centralization that comes along with capitalism. Illich seeks to imagine a future society where the institutional routines of school built upon the feelings of inferiority of those who are destined to fail are no longer necessary. Illich's ideas have been significant in helping inspire a home school movement for those who do not wish their children to encounter the institutional features of schooling. While this is unlikely to be a solution for everyone as it certainly seems to privilege parents who have the educational cultural capital, time and capacity to educate their own children, it also gives up on the idea that schools could be made more democratic places.

Some of Illich's later work (1988), along with that of his collaborator Barry Sanders, argues that literacy and learning is as

threatened by schools as by modern computing and mass media. The economic growth society had witnessed the erosion of language and the emergence of Orwellian newspeak. The degradation of language in society led Barry Sanders (1995) to argue that an understanding of literacy beyond “basic skills” continues to depend upon the experience of being told stories. Our attachment to complex forms of linguistic investment is threatened by the media of mass communication as it is mostly non-dialogic. Face to face interaction allows children to ask questions and to have a rich experience of the complexity of language. Sanders (1995, p. 46) is concerned that children who only have access to televised narratives “can only recount clichés”. While this argument comes too close to a discredited mass culture thesis discounting the complexities of some popular culture, Sanders has a point about the interconnection between traditions of story-telling and literacy. As electronic communication has progressively enclosed the commons of language, Sanders (1995, p. 127) worries that what happens is less de-schooling but dis-education. To this extent, the political Right are correct that poor levels of literacy are not only bad for society, but also deeply problematic for any society that wishes to call itself a democracy. However, unlike much of the political Right, Sanders (1995) argues that literacy cannot be seen as something that can simply be repaired by the school in isolation from the rest of society. What is required is less the dis-establishment of the school as Illich imagined, but more its societal reform. Sanders (1995, p. 243) argues that the “teaching of literacy has to be founded on a curriculum of song, dance, play, and joking, coupled with improvisation and recitation”. Here the emphasis placed on language and literacy is at odds with the more functional requirements desired by the market or indeed testing system. A more democratic society where citizens have become skilled readers of the world is less likely to take things at face value and requires forms of literacy beyond that likely to be produced by an education system geared towards the success of a few.

Similarly Richard Hoggart (2001) argued in favour of schools as publicly funded institutions where citizens could learn complex forms of literacy. Hoggart was an important critic of the instrumental agenda of learning. The emphasis on basic literacy did little to encourage broader more complex understandings as these were often neglected by an economic system driven by profit. For Hoggart (2001, p. 196), profit-driven societies “need a majority just literate enough to be hooked by every form of modern, industrialised fishing trawler persuasion”. Ultimately, these arguments are representative of a market rationality that wishes to sell cheap commercialism to the masses and thereby to dispense with questions of quality and value. Not surprisingly, this kind of liberalism has anti-intellectualism at its heart and can diminish the

appreciation of more complex forms of culture. This view is broadly correct and has implications for learning within a democratic context. However Hoggart wants to argue that it is the cultural professionals and the state that should judge what is best. Such a view, as we saw earlier, finds itself mirrored by many perspectives on the political Right, and can easily be converted into a disdainful attitude towards more popular forms of culture, which many young people are deeply invested within such as alternative web pages, popular music and fanzines. These alternative modes of cultural production may of course fail the quality test and yet exhibit new opportunities for learning and literacy. Instead of the state setting itself up as a cultural authority and reproducing many of the hierarchies which impress a culture of conformity, we would be better placed to explore the possibility of less hierarchically constructed schools based upon openness and dialogue. This is not the relativistic world so feared by Hoggart and the political Right, but institutions that have been radically democratised, inevitably having an effect upon the kinds of culture that become associated with it. A more democratised school setting would need to become more open to more varied forms of cultural expression.

Marshall Berman (2017) offers an important counter-narrative to those who simply want to bemoan the collapse of standards within our schools and the swamping of young people with a mass culture. Berman offers a corrective to previous waves of critical theory and structuralism that have too quickly presumed that citizens can simply be slotted into oppressive structures. Instead, Berman (2017) argues that contemporary humanistic analysis needs to follow Marx and carefully explore some of the more contradictory or dialectical features of everyday life. If along with modernity came an oppressive and exploitative economic system, then there was also a strong imperative, often explored by artistic movements, for self-development and expression. At this point, Berman (2017, p. 33) argues for a “Marxism with soul”. By this he means that, despite the continued dominance of exchange value over other values, much cultural creativity is more easily linked to the need for authenticity and self-expression. The unrealised potential for creativity and self-expression should be something that can find a footing within the education system. Similarly, Raymond Williams (1980) argued that one of the main reasons to keep referring back to Marx was the need to explore the contradiction between the demands of the economic system and the capacity of people to be creative and self-expressive. A more democratic society would involve “the general ‘recovery’ of specifically alienated human capacities” along with the development of new modes of expression and experience (WILLIAMS, 1980, p. 62). A considerable amount of popular creativity is not allowed expression, or indeed development, within a school system that fosters an overly

narrow set of capacities based upon instrumental criteria. Further, the problem with school as a system is that too many young people become marked by a sense of failure and humiliation. If much of the radical writing of the past was inspired by the need to dis-establish the school, then this no longer seems like an option. Instead, further work is needed to explore the experiences of those who are deemed unable to compete. Under neoliberalism, the status quo continually seeks to normalise dominant institutions despite the considerable evidence of the human cost. Social movements, trade unions, parents, and students need to disrupt the system from below while arguing for alternatives. Here I want to explore the idea that democratic schools that are human scale and self-managed is perhaps currently the best way to explore the interconnections between education and democracy.

## SCHOOLING FOR DEMOCRATIC COMMONS

While living in a democracy depends upon citizens exhibiting a certain level of literacy and linguistic competence, this is not the end of the story. The attack on so called “progressive teaching” was led by arguments that schools simply fostered illiteracy and poor learning environments. The arrival of the service-based economy meant jobs were based increasingly on linguistic skills while also requiring more flexible labour and insecure patterns of work. As Hardt and Negri (2000, p. 295) argue, the assembly line has been replaced by the network, placing a renewed emphasis upon basic computer literacy and more symbolic skills. Many on the political Right (sometimes with support from social democrats) criticised a generation of teachers for failing to pass on the basic skills required to be a citizen and to gain meaningful forms of employment. The problem with this view is that it sees knowledge as something which is transmitted and fails to understand schools as hierarchical places which could become more and not less democratic. The tighter control over the curriculum, testing and the content of what goes on within schools has potentially made schools more and not less hierarchical. Notably, as Francis and Mills (2012) point out, the hierarchical nature of schools not only means that they are undemocratic, but that they are also potentially damaging places as well. This can be seen in the blame that is placed upon teachers and pupils for poor test scores, but also in terms of the explicit creation of authoritarian environments that arguably make bullying more and not less likely.

If we are unable to make the argument that we prefer democratic institutions as they are in line with our true nature, we can at least claim that they potentially enable the expression of different human capacities, which are cancelled in harsher more neoliberal



environments. Democratic and humanist sentiments remain linked in the history of European thought. The problem has been, however, many of these humanistic concerns have been perverted by hierarchical social relationships and the recognition of rights has not been possible without their recognition by state power. The task remains how to democratise coercive institutions while searching for a world without damaging hierarchies (HARVEY, 2014). As Castoriadis (1991) notes, just because there are no absolute foundations to anything does not mean that we are not bound by particular traditions of human thought and practice. Within this struggle, there is an ongoing conflict between authority and freedom or heteronomy and autonomy. Ultimately, our freedom in this setting depends upon shared norms, such as the freedom of speech, questioning and autonomous thought. In other words, democratic space is not simply defended by certain laws, but depends upon a democratic education through which public norms are defended. The democratic education of citizens involves “becoming conscious that the polis is also oneself and that its fate also depends upon one’s mind, behavior, and decisions; in other words, it is participation in political life” (CASTORIADIS, 1991, p. 113).

In terms of their institutional arrangements, schools cannot afford to be “neutral” about democratic ideas and arrangements. Indeed, if schools were to become more democratic, they would inevitably become more argumentative and potentially disordered places than they have been and less places of institutional conformity. This would mean a radical change in direction of education policy, which looks unlikely under the current set of institutional relationships. As Beane and Apple (1999) argue, a democratic education would require, firstly, democratic structures to enable meaningful student participation in the life of the school and, secondly, a curriculum orientated towards more democratic experiences. The idea of participation within the governing of a school is something which is often paid lip service to, but mostly has little authenticity. Ultimately, a genuinely democratic school would need to develop a different ethos to the current scramble for grades and status that seeks to change the direction of the school for the common good, beyond the narrow ideas of self-interest that are fostered by neoliberalism. A democratic school would need to see difference as a resource that placed upon the school an obligation to foster a common environment where all could flourish. This would mean schools that took positive steps to address exclusions based upon disability, race, gender, sexuality, and other social and cultural characteristics. Further, in terms of the curriculum, the problem with much subject-based learning is it that it tends to silence young people. Within this context, the move towards students encountering a much broader curriculum that did not downgrade the arts and humanities is necessary, but that

also thought carefully about the ways in which the creativity of the students could be called upon. Currently, much of the life of the school is of lifeless dead zones where knowledge is simply transferred from the teachers to the taught (GRAEBER, 2012). What bell hooks (1994) describes as more engaged forms of pedagogy depends less on the structural violence of hierarchical arrangements and standardised testing, and more on students being able to see the link between ideas and the world around them, the ability to share personal experiences, while encountering genuinely pluralistic views that recognise there may not be a “right answer”. A more convivial education based less upon hierarchy and discipline would also need to think carefully about what counts as knowledge. Jeff Adams (2013) skilfully identifies the ways in which schools are often suspicious of more creative forms of learning as they are perceived to interfere with the capacity to meet the required targets to ensure the survival of the school. The systematic assault on creativity will inevitably have an impact on the kinds of learning culture that operate within the school.

These ideas are all consistent with the histories of critical pedagogy. What is often missing from this tradition, however, is a more concerted attempt to explore the actual physical environment of the school. Colin Ward (1995) argues that much critical philosophy on schooling radically underestimates the actual environment of the school. Children often experience schools as prison-like as they are isolated from the rest of the community. Here we might imagine schools that share facilities with the rest of the community (like libraries and sports halls) while also making sure that the school does not grow too large. Above a certain size, schools lose their face-to-face quality and become huge, bureaucratic organisations full of impersonal rules and strained human relationships. These are important questions as the human-sized and democratic school would need to be a decentralised school, taking as many of its decisions as possible at a local level rather than being governed and controlled from above. This would inevitably call for a different relationship with the state and of course something of a cultural revolution in terms of how we collectively imagine what we mean by education and the role played by schools in this process. However, just as important is the idea that the children, teachers and others can influence the local environment and that it is not conceived as static and unchangeable. Colin Ward and Anthony Fyson (1973) wrote a short publication aimed at radical junior school teachers in the 1970s. Within their short book, they argue that young people should be encouraged to investigate their own locality. While studying local campaigns and attempts to transform the locality by looking at housing projects, town developments and other features, the students gain a sense of the malleability of space. Ward and Fyson explicitly argue, in



this respect, that a democratic education should seek to communicate the possibility of the city being transformable from below by popular movements. Similarly, David Harvey (2012, p. 4) argues that democratic participation in the urban context is fundamentally “a right to change and reinvent the city”. The key question is whether this is a right only exercised by capital and the state, and to what extent there is room for the interventions of citizens. Murray Bookchin (2015, p. 100) emphasises that the project to expand the experience of freedom in a meaningful sense is an “attempt to enlarge local freedom”. If the democratic school is reimagined as part of the life of the city, this should help close the gap between the ideals of democracy and the importance of it being practised within specific locations.

The ideas of a democratic and a more humanistic society remain connected. In the 1960s, Erich Fromm (1968) was concerned that, as society became more authoritarian, many of its inhabitants became more robotic in terms of their inner and outer lives. The problem with a society that had converted education into a commodity that is practised by institutions that are controlled from above is that it negates our capacity to be ourselves in our overly controlled and bored lives. We also learn to become afraid of our own creativity as we seek to pass standardised and meaningless tests. Fromm’s hope was that more radically decentralised institutions would give people a stronger sense of control and authenticity and would enable people to live lives of deeper meaning, with more intense feelings of being alive. However, as society has lost faith in its capacity to democratise its institutions, people have tried to find meaning elsewhere, outside of workplaces and the public sphere. Alongside neoliberalism, a strongly anti-humanist sentiment developed, seeing people as intrinsically selfish and unconcerned with the fate of others. Murray Bookchin (1995) argues that, if we wish to live in a more democratic world, then we need to simultaneously re-enchant our views about humanity. An enlightened humanism would hold out the prospect that we could indeed become more co-operative, imaginative and humane beings than we currently feel able to become. This is not to argue that humans are not capable of being cruel and barbarous, but that, if we wish to see a different future for humanity, we need to attend to the current state of our institutions and their capacity to be able to foster the conditions for more democratic ways of life. These arguments are even more pressing in modern technological contexts, where capitalism literally seeks to reduce people to segmented chunks of time that can often be bought on-line through a computer. In order to challenge this logic, people need to be able to view themselves as democratic citizens who can experience their own lives as connected to others.

What is being suggested here is that we should reimagine education as part of the democratic and city-based commons. If authoritarian learning patterns under neoliberalism seek to impose control from above, while encouraging students to view themselves as potentially upwardly mobile consumers of knowledge, then what is missing from this pattern is that many leave school having failed. Indeed, it is perhaps not surprising that institutional contexts that favour conformity, uniformity, standardisation, and hierarchy are also breeding grounds for those with a disposition for being authoritarian (ELMORE, 2017). A more democratic mind, necessarily fearful of simply imposing absolutist views on others, is not best fostered within such a context. A democratic education will necessarily encourage the exploration of truth, ambiguity and creativity while being sceptical of environments that are ruled by fear and top-down forms of control. A school for the democratic commons would depend upon more participatory and decentralised systems of self-management. A school for the commons would need to be small enough to create the environment necessary for human relationships based upon care and the ability to respond to difference. As Rebecca Martusewicz (2005, p. 334) argues, the dominant mode of being in the context of capitalism and consumerism depends upon “the spell of denial, disconnection and hyper-separation”. Similarly, Raymond Williams (1989, p. 117) persistently pointed out that the desire to view others and the natural landscape as resources to be exploited acts as a form of “imperialism”. In other words, capitalism naturalises a wider society based upon the rule of private property and hierarchy, while holding in check more complex, democratic and attached sensibilities. This would inevitably mean that, once the state’s direct control over education had been substantially relaxed, then schools would become free to experiment with more democratic and place-based pedagogies (WILLIAMS, 1989, p. 242). In a more global context, it is capitalism rather than citizens that have no specific attachments to the meanings of place. A democratic pedagogy would not only need to give expression to a broader range of subjects, made possible by a less centralised curriculum, but also be able to more carefully explore a complex politics of place in relation to questions of culture and nature. If the need for a democratic education can no longer be justified in respect of questions of human nature, it is likely to have a crucial role in helping foster the diverse and argumentative citizens of the future who feel a strong connection to the ecological commons. Finally, it remains to be seen whether social movements begin the project of rethinking questions of democracy. This need not lead to an all-out assault on the established routines of liberal democracy, but should instead acknowledge the importance of the limited freedoms that have been won historically. If campaigners against war, austerity,

ecological destruction, women's, and gay rights are fundamentally asking questions about democracy and public space, then this also needs to be linked to ideas associated with schooling and the design of our institutions. As Colin Ward (1973) recognised long ago, all human beings desire some control over their environment, and to do so means establishing a form of human dignity. However, this is often opposed by authoritarians of different kinds who like to imagine institutions as behaving like machines. It is the duty of those who believe in more meaningful forms of democracy not only to interrupt this process, but also to seek to establish the right to a humane education for all of our children (STEVENSON, 2017).

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