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Crisis and Hope: The Role of Contingency in Neoliberal Educational Reforms

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It is the contingency, the sheer avoidability of the current situation, that should rekindle faith that it can be changed in the future. (Ignatieff, 2017)

We examine the effect of schooling as a formal site of deliberate intervention in shaping society's collective memory, especially pertaining to the truth-seeking and decision-making capacities of citizens in the 21st century. The premise of our work is that the particular social knowledge generated and promoted from two school subjects, science and social studies, has been underdeveloped—neglectfully, if not deliberately—regarding an understanding of its contingent and humanly-generated nature (i.e., science) for purposeful human uses. A raft of neoliberal and neoconservative education reforms in the past three decades has further reified, decontextualized, and technocratized school science and social studies knowledge. We argue that the curriculum and pedagogy of both subjects would yield greater social benefits for 21st century democratic citizenry if we grappled more seriously with the philosophically pragmatic concepts first developed by John Dewey in *Democracy and Education* (1916). Applied within our own framework of a critical social constructivism are dispositions and beliefs enabling educators to more effectively penetrate the ideology of neoliberalism that today permeates educational thinking and practices.

We begin with two questions as teacher educators who, in 2018, work within one of the most highly educated societies in the history of the world:

- How is it that such wide swathes of the population put greater trust regarding human matters in mystics and faith rather than in verifiable empirical scientific findings--especially concerning practical matters concerning the survival of the ecosystem and all it contains?

- Why, in spite of substantial formal institutional efforts to educate citizens broadly regarding science and democracy, are we now verging on the brink of environmental and political disasters?

Why the distrust and denial?

The recent election and empowerment of the most anti-science and religiously-oriented Executive Branch of the United States government in modern times is immediately disconcerting, with political leaders and agency appointees labelling climate change a hoax and denying that “contingency” itself—that is, their decisions about human activities—has consequences on natural and social systems. Despite the ill-begotten beliefs of these elders, all of the world’s children will face the consequences of their decisions. Nafeez Ahmed (2017) writes that, “For the first time in human history...we are standing at a point where we need to basically undergo fundamental systemic adaptation.” (p. 5) For many species, there is no time, and certainly there is no guarantee of our own success at adaptation. For us as a social species, adaptation is likely to be painful, as measurable environmental changes are already underway, and not every consequence of anthropogenic alterations of natural systems can be fully predicted, despite continually improving scientific modelling.

Not to be alarmists, but each of us have gone through a fair amount of personal testing in our six-plus decades of living and can testify to Ahmed’s point that there is “no guarantee of our own success at adaptation.” Sometimes adaptation is not possible, or its realization too late in our personal lives. Will the same be true regarding our environmental and political worlds? At what point is the increase of CO₂ too much to reverse? How many liberal democracies can veer to the right before a critical mass of fascism and authoritarianism becomes the norm?

How did we arrive here?

In *Age of American Unreason* (2008), Susan Jacoby portrays a societal “dumbness” being defined downward for several decades, including a merging of anti-rationalism with anti-intellectualism, and a persistent ignorance of basic concepts in geography, science and history despite increasing levels of formal education. Various surveys of American publics reveal that most agree science should contribute to public policy (Gauchat, 2015), yet large differences about the natural world occur in the collective views of scientists compared to those of the general public. For example, 88 percent of scientists believe in the safety of genetically modified crops and 97 percent in the reality of anthropogenic climate change, compared to 37 percent and 57 percent of the general public respectively (Funk & Reine, 2015).

We find it significant that an individual’s adherence to fundamental religious beliefs—more so than to left or right political leanings—appears to be the stronger determiner for discounting science (Gauchat, 2015). Gauchet’s distinction between the effect of “religion” versus “political leanings” on acceptance of science is somewhat clarifying, but insufficient. Our reasoning is that, more than

the content of belief, it is *the structure of absolute belief itself in the reasoning process* that promotes and sustains a socially dangerous religious fundamentalism. It serves likewise to sustain a socially dangerous political fundamentalism in the form of neoliberalism which is really a secular religion:

“So pervasive has neoliberalism become that we seldom even recognize it as ideology... (Neoliberalism) sees competition as the defining characteristic of human relations...(and) redefines citizens as consumers, whose democratic choices are best exercised by buying and selling” (Monbiot, 2016).

It's a metaphysical phenomenon: Neoliberals worship at the altar of the market, promote incantations to limit the evil of government, and judge equality as both “counterproductive and morally corrosive.” The adoption of neoliberalism by both major political parties relates directly to the ecological crisis in which we now find ourselves. Monbiot (2016) concludes that the ultimate effect of neoliberalism undermines democracy; those of us involved in schooling can attest that this political consensus has already made a mess out of democracy's main instrument, public education.

Capitalism and democracy: Once a symbiotic relationship

Historically in the United States, formal public education contained two citizenship functions, one economic, one political. The first was to teach the basics of reading, writing, arithmetic in order that future citizens better conduct themselves in their community and in performing their work; the second was that these future citizens gain knowledge about the geography and history of their country, thereby linking personal, community and national values. Through these academic means, both the vocational needs of a fledgling and developing capitalist economy, and the political needs of a fledgling and developing democracy, were being accomplished with little conflict. Thus, the framers of our Constitution left matters of education to the state and the states, at least initially, largely gave local school boards control over each community's schools. Two early advocates of public schools were Thomas Jefferson, noted for his adamant belief that a common and wide-scale primary education for the population was necessary for the safety and survival of democracy, and Horace Mann, superintendent of schools for the state of Massachusetts in the mid 1800s and one of the first officials to ensure public schoolhouses in each little town and community received the financial support necessary to conduct education. As part of his tenure, Mann personally walked from community to community throughout Massachusetts, conducting a full inventory of the buildings, resources, and conditions of learning for children. Publication of his dismal and startling reports were the impetus for some of the first educational reforms.

The period after the American Civil War, the “Watershed Period” of the 1890s, is noted in history books as a time when large numbers of European immigrants came to the United States to work in factories. But an even larger number of rural residents in the United States migrated from their farms to work in these same city factories. The rapid mixture of so many people with so many different cultural values—now portrayed as a positive aspect of “pluralism” in the United States—

frightened those people who were in leadership positions at the turn of the 1900s, especially educators. Thus, Progressive Education was forward-looking and innovative when compared to the traditional teaching and learning practices of the “one-room schoolhouses” that marked the Common School Movement, but in retrospect, it is easy to understand that progressive educational reforms were more rooted in the fears of society’s political and educational leaders about what might happen if the values, beliefs and behaviors of the country’s new pluralistic population was not appropriately shaped.

As part of the Progressive Movement, a new class of professional educators arose who specialized in managing education (similar to other institutions that were also industrializing). Local boards of education retained authority, but increasingly followed the advice of those who specialized in education. Under the influence of educational experts, the public school curriculum expanded its capacities for fulfilling both the economic and vocational needs of capitalism, as well as the political needs of an expanding democratic society. Nevertheless, the school curriculum continued to provide reading, writing, arithmetic and civics at the elementary level, but now, with the push from various educational organizations, could offer more vocational and academic “tracks” in the upper grade levels.

Progressive educators differed in fundamental ways

While John Dewey (1916) is most often associated with the Progressive Education Movement, his philosophical concepts about teaching, learning, and democracy have been far less influential than Frederick Taylor’s (1911) principles for organizing and controlling large numbers of people (i.e., administrators and teachers), with specialized functions and roles in large industrial complexes, exacting both the greatest efficiency and productivity from the workers (teachers and/or students).

Of course, more could be said about the multifarious effects of the Progressive Education Movement on public schooling in the U.S., but suffice it to say that a progressively structured public educational system was quite successful in creating a highly productive economic workforce and a highly cohesive society (albeit with fractures and fissures); a system that provided more educational opportunities for more women and minorities, and one that generally provided most students a level of critical thinking sufficient to successfully engage themselves in making decisions together (democracy). In fact, the reason for the reactionary educational reforms in our country since 1983 appears to be that public education has actually been too successful, both in preparing the knowledge and skills for capitalism, and for democracy.

And, is it now the case that Capitalism no longer needs democracy?

Neoliberalism in the United States owes its rapid growth at the beginning of the 21st Century, in part, to Ingo Schulz’s (2012) point that “capitalism doesn’t need democracy.” More precisely, we should qualify Schulz’s statement: capitalism may *no longer* need democracy, a point that seems evident when one traces education reforms.

The purpose of public education for most of its history involved preparing citizens with the skills and knowledge to successfully live, work and participate in a democratic society—goals that were vocational, social, and moral. The student and citizen riots and uprisings of the 1960s and 1970s gave rise to a backlash, a vast network of private, socially conservative foundations and lobbying organizations had become alarmed about the potentially destabilizing effects on society of progressive ideas. For many of them, too many women had taken over the work roles of men, and too many individuals from traditional minority groups but most especially African Americans and Latinos/Latinas had gained access to higher levels of education and higher occupational roles. It was discomforting, unsettling and threatening, and best summed up euphemistically when President Ronald Reagan first suggested curtailing the accessibility and availability of educational programs to everyone, “We have tried to do too much, too quickly” (Mondale, 2004). His election in 1980 offered the perfect political opportunity for influential culturally concerned neoconservatives to resist the gains of the Civil Rights movement and for influential neoliberals to use education reform as a smokescreen for their own responsibility in creating high national unemployment levels.

In 1983, a special commission appointed by President Reagan published its report titled *Our Nation at Risk* (United States National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). Its effect was to establish in the public's mind the existence of an educational crisis similar to a military attack by a foreign invasion (likely the fear of the Soviet Union was being evoked). Since that time, the corporate business values of "accountability" and "efficiency," and measurement techniques such as "performance standards" have been promoted by powerful economic and political interest groups as the educational solution to a trumped up crisis.

Some three decades later, President Obama's competitive federal education funding program called "Race to the Top" signaled an almost complete transformation of public education from one with democratic purposes to one with corporate purposes. Public education morphed from a system that aimed to develop knowledge and values in order for citizens to enjoy productive and democratic living into a system whose practices restricted the development of critical knowledge, enhanced the consumptive values of "corporate citizens," and controlled access to the riches of the global workforce. No longer under the influence of local community members or of the educational specialists, educational reform in the United States became a major part of "big business" and "part of a wider crisis of politics, power and culture in society" (Giroux-Searls, 2004).

Local school boards continue to meet and make decisions, but more and more educational decisions have become pre-made because of state and federal regulations (“mandates”) based upon the dominant bipartisan neoliberal/neoliberal corporatist reform movement. Local boards and districts can reject these regulations but doing so could also mean their districts would receive reduced state or federal financial support, or none at all.

Under closer scrutiny, U.S. public education in 1983 was neither failing nor in a state of crisis. Evidence abounds that public education was a "roaring success" (Lapham, 1987) in fulfilling the

vocational, academic, and democratic goals desired by most of the citizens, creating higher levels of thinking and enacting civil rights legislation, thus providing even greater educational opportunities for ethnic minorities, students with special needs, and women. We have learned from a closer analysis of international test score data, and from national and international economic indicators, that the purported failure of the educational system was a crisis created by influential neoliberal business leaders and culturally neoconservative foundations and individuals represented on President Reagan's Task Force in 1983, and almost every iteration of reform panels created at the State and national levels since then, to further the Capitalist agenda.

A highly profitable education industry has arisen to address a claimed need for greater student and teacher accountability, so what we have achieved is a lot of statistical reliability but no demonstrated educative or social validity (Ravitch, 2013). Furthermore, the commodification of formal school knowledge for the purposes of testing and standards has solidified content borders into hardened boundaries, thereby reifying official knowledge for students while discouraging their creation of conceptual or material relationships through critical questioning, inquiry, problem-posing, and other similar activities. A rationality of deliberation has largely been replaced with one of calculation, favoring efficiency of decision-making, such as in cost-benefit studies, and test and score-driven instruction in education. In this ideology, the values, needs, and wishes of local communities are considered insignificant "externalities". Since the mid-1980s, a combination of these dominating ideologies has reshaped the characteristics of education reforms in the U.S. and elsewhere, one of those being the ethical and political value on what it means to be a human being, on how humans should relate to each other, and how decisions affecting others (society) can and should be made together.

The confluence of ideologies: "neo-liberal" meets "neo-conservative"

In a purely strict sense, there is little of substance that makes neoliberal and neoconservative ideologies compatible; the former promoting free-market values, the latter wishing to constrain the liberalness of cultural ones. On the other hand, there is nothing mutually exclusive either, so on particular policy issues at particular times, individuals and groups favoring one or the other ideology have coalesced to get a job done. This describes both the genesis and trajectory of educational reforms since the 1980s, which have sometimes involved the efforts of factions such as the Business Roundtable and other neoliberal sponsors of the First, Second, and Third National Education Summits, and sometimes have been directed by neoconservative "think tanks" such as the Fordham Institute or Education Trust. Merely the tip of two non-contiguous icebergs, the philosophical underpinnings that inform a vast structure of loosely and not-so-loosely networked corporations, foundations, and private individuals are easily traceable to the free-market economic principles of Milton Friedman, or the restricted democratic political principles of his contemporary at the University of Chicago, Leo Strauss.

For the neoliberal business community, public education had educated too many citizens for the jobs that were available. The problem was not that workers were unprepared; rather, it was

increasingly clear in the 1980s that workers were over-prepared for the positions available in industry and society in general. In addition, manufacturers were moving productive operations to countries such as Mexico, China and Southeast Asia to escape the responsibility of paying unionized workers (an unfortunate byproduct of democracy) in the United States. Lowering their production costs increased their profits, but rather than draw public notice of how their decisions to move were creating job scarcities, it was more appealing to attack educators for not preparing sufficiently skilled workers (Berliner & Biddle, 1995).

Educational reforms in the United States, as in most industrialized countries at this point, aim at creating a workforce for the new global corporate society. Unlike previous educational eras such as the Common School Movement or Progressive Education, capitalist interests today need workers with neither democratic values nor the ability for critical thinking. There is only the need to educate the population to a certain standard of competence in order to maintain the basic services and functions in society; there is no longer the need for workers with democratic values or the ability for critical thinking.

Today, similar neo-liberal and neo-conservative reforms are permeating higher education, once a bastion of democracy. Neo-conservative attacks on “liberal” professors have been particularly vitriolic, but at least these critiques are obvious and usually very loud. More dangerous is a creeping neoliberal ideology and rationale that reduces the purposes of a liberal arts and sciences education to one of preparing corporate workers. Long standing practices of colleges and universities such as faculty tenure, faculty control over curriculum and faculty workload are being renegotiated in an aggressive way by college administrators, many of whom have pressure exerted on them by college trustees from the corporate and business world.

It is not an easy time for anyone who understands that how we academics both organize education and deliver it to students shapes their image of the possibilities for themselves and others within a democracy, but we might find hope from another time. Walter Lippman (1955; 1922, 2010), the nemesis of John Dewey’s pragmatic faith that the public could be educated for democracy, believed the masses could not be trusted to make informed decisions. Originally writing in *The New Republic* in a muckraking, progressive tradition, his restrictive views of a theory of democracy and the ability of the masses to make informed, useful decisions had dramatically changed by the time he authored *Public Opinion*. The further development of the logic of his argument three years later in *The Phantom Public* against the possibility of involving the masses in decision making was so dismal that even his mentors and supporters rejected his analysis. His logic was solid, but the vision too dim for contemplation even by neoconservatives. One might find hope that in the struggle of beliefs and values over liberty and equality and a morally just society, even the staunches ideologues have limits when faced with the full implications of such an ideology. This might be enough to sustain the vision of educators working for a more critically minded society.

Michael Ignatieff (2016) reminds us, “We are in a full gale of a conservative counterrevolution that could last for some time and reshape modernity in a very reactionary direction.” Many educators

feel hopeless, but rather than despair, it is “the contingency, the sheer avoidability of the current situation, that should rekindle faith that it can be changed in the future.” (p. 5) Ideas first laid out by John Dewey in *Democracy and Education* (1916) have been seminal in our own pursuit and development of a more philosophically vigorous contemporary constructivist theorizing whose philosophical anthropology embraces and engenders a more critical, creative, and emancipatory education. The constructivism we advocate emphasizes social consciousness and democratic citizenship in which teachers’ practices deconstruct and reconstruct contingent categories that have been continually reified through their own educational biographies. We pay particular attention to the educative and emancipatory competency emanating from Dewey’s emphasis on habit, contingency, community and communication, exemplified in our descriptions of actual classroom practices in science and social studies. We argue that critical-constructivism should be a central theoretical referent particularly for science and social studies educators and for teacher educators in those fields. In preservice education, the nature of learning, teaching, content, and schooling as a sociopolitical process should be at the center of discourse. Without doing so prospective teachers rarely become perplexed by socio-epistemological considerations or are made aware of their political consequences.

We take a culturalist perspective of education and educational reform, that is, that while formal schooling in most societies has an intentional and a deliberative function, it is the influence of all of culture—all institutions, all structures, habits and behaviors—that comprises the education of every individual. This cultural way of viewing education is consonant with the tradition of critical educational theory, drawing both directly and indirectly from many theorists (e.g., Peter McClaren, Michael Apple, Henry Giroux). We have pointed out how both the neoliberal and neoconservative premises that have reshaped politics and economics can lead to the reification of learning standards and the institutionalization of testing, two powerful bulwarks for maintaining and sustaining capital. We are interested in education illuminating all aspects of the production, justification, and ownership of knowledge in society—scientific knowledge in particular because of its status in contemporary culture, and its rootedness and shared values with democracy. In opposing a scientism that accompanies the West’s legacy of cultural colonization, we promote a pedagogy that does not rank knowledges/forms of knowledge, but rather promotes a pluralistic epistemological democracy favoring the enrichment of possibilities for student learning. We agree with Ernst von Foerster, that the aim of education is the “multiplication of potentialities” - encouraging knowledge development which shows potential for spin-off, i.e. toward invention and research (Laroche, 1994).

Decision-making removed from teachers and local schools, instruction scripted through the use of consumable programs, and learning and teaching evaluated on the basis of competitive test scores, all manifest the pervasiveness of neoliberalism. Education in the United States has shifted from a public right to a private privilege with the Orwellian titled No Child Left Behind policies of Presidents Clinton and Bush, and Obama’s competition-based Race to the Top education policies to most recently President Trump’s outright moves toward total privatization.

The cumulative effect of these reforms is that a tremendous amount of educational energy has been diverted from improving and enhancing genuine educational opportunities for achieving the traditional purposes of public education. Instead, great efforts have been misplaced on creating mechanisms of control over teaching and learning by using standardized testing and curriculum standards, subsequently promoting the competition of states against states, school districts against school districts, administrators against administrators, teachers against teachers and students against students. Powerful individuals and groups in both major political parties—factions of Democrats and Republicans—embrace the current educational reform ideology, despite the critique and resistance by many educators, students, and parents. And as more teachers are encouraged into early retirements, novice teachers are less able to provide genuinely thoughtful learning within these new parameters, though highly valued for being technologically savvy and accepting of reforms. In fact, despite the reformers' rhetoric about "high quality teaching" being most valued, new and inexperienced teachers are precisely what the neoliberal reformers in politics and businesses want: those who are young, impressionable, grateful for work in tough economic times, and cheap, but most of all, eager to please authority.

The constructivism we advocate becomes a powerful ethical project, placing its emphasis on the social consciousness and democratic citizenship students co-create as they experience communicative classroom acts. Such educative experiences don't happen randomly, but through the teacher's careful planning, a teacher who himself or herself understands and acts within a sociocultural perspective, co-creating with students' habits of mind for constructing contingent categories/knowledges and re-constructing those that have been wrongly reified throughout his or her own educational biographies. The ultimate goal such a teacher always would have in sight would be a more conscious, just and democratically-permeated social and civil society capable of tackling the daunting challenges now facing our planet ecologically.

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