

# Critical pedagogy in hard financial times

Professor Peter Mayo takes issue with education financing not from an economic or technical viewpoint, but from a philosophical and systemic one, drawing on critical pedagogy. There is no sense, this article argues, to talk of higher education or its funding without reference to the capitalist system which the mainstream education discourse reaffirms. The author concludes with an alternative vision of lifelong learning as a social act for the creation and enhancing of democratic spaces, embodied by the ongoing global “Occupy” protests for social equality.

Peter Mayo

We are living in hard though interesting times. They are hard times in the sense that ordinary people are being made to pay for the lavish greed of a few beneficiaries of the Capitalist system, the 1 %, comprising CEOs and bankers, who have brought the world to almost inconceivable ruin, placing the burden of austerity squarely on the shoulders of the 99%. They are also hard times because, in North Africa and the Middle East, legitimate human struggles for work, dignity and genuine democracy have been and are still being met with some of the most brutal repression.

And yet we are also living in interesting times in which an attempt is made for politics to be rescued from the exclusive clutches of politicians and bankers. It is constantly being played out in globalised public arenas such as the squares and streets of Athens, Madrid, Cairo, Tunis, New York and Damascus, as a clear groundswell of dissent, indignation and tenacity is manifest and beamed throughout all corners of the globe. Meanwhile precarious living is the staple of everyday life for thousands of citizens, skilled or unskilled, formally well educated or otherwise, as much coveted well paid “middle class” career jobs are at a premium globally.

In this context, and bearing in mind the forum for this discussion, a special issue on the financing of education and lifelong learning in general, I explore signposts for an alternative approach to education and cultural work, constantly bearing in mind the Millennium Development Goals which though difficult to realise by the established deadline remain important points of reference when critiquing current policies in a variety of aspects of life, especially health and education. In this article, I draw on what is commonly referred to, in educational parlance, as critical pedagogy which draws inspiration from Freire and a host of other writers and movements. While the people involved demonstrate a variety of approaches, one common element is that they underscore the *political* basis of education. Education is not a neutral enterprise and heuristically can be regarded

as serving either to “domesticate” and strengthen the status quo and therefore keep in place much of the frequently perceived ills, economic, social and environmental, or else “liberate” in the sense of contributing to the ushering in of a new world in which principles of social justice and ecological sustainability are held uppermost. We associate this thinking with the work of Paulo Freire, though he is not the only one who thought, wrote and worked along these lines. One major exponent of critical pedagogy, Peter McLaren defines critical pedagogy as “fundamentally concerned with the centrality of politics and power in our understanding of ” education and learning. (McLaren, 1994, p. 167)

### MARKET IDEOLOGY

This approach, as part of a more critical approach to education, strikes me as serving as an antidote to much of the Neoliberal policy discourse that has dominated thinking over the last thirty years or so and which has been the object of critique in most recent literature in critical pedagogy. We have been swamped by policies and formulations about education strongly connected with the market ideology, referred to as Neoliberal. Education is seen as a consumption rather than a public good with responsibility for learning being placed on the individual. The Chilean experience represents the most extreme form of this approach where even state was conceived of this way by the perpetrators of a most bloody dictatorship following the 1973 coup. It remains to be seen whether the changes augured by those struggling for more jobs and greater democratic spaces in the Arab world will represent a departure from this kind of approach which was prevalent in places like Egypt during the Mubarak period, even though jobs for the majority of Arab youth and other people were and remain “thin on the ground.”

### THE INTEGRAL STATE AND EDUCATION

In this regard, one cannot separate discussions concerning education from

discussions concerning the state. There has been a whole debate concerning the role of education and the state. Educational sociologist, Roger Dale analyses the immensely complex relationships occurring between capitalism, state, and education. Drawing on Claus Offe, he analyses the process whereby education is linked to both capitalism’s legitimation function, by persuading us that inequality is not endemic to the system but a consequence of our different “abilities”, and to the production of necessary “human capital” for national and global economic ends. Dale argues that the ways those tensions are felt and addressed through education are central to our understanding and experience of the world. In this regard, reference should be made to Peter Thomas’ (2011) highlighting of Gramsci’s notion of the “integral state.” This entails a comprehensive view of the State’s role in the consolidation and the provision of a context for the consolidation or contestation of hegemonic relations. The separation of political and civil society, the latter used by Gramsci in a manner that differs from the way it is used today as a third sector between the state and industry, is done specifically for heuristic purposes. The state embodies both, as Thomas underlines. Equally heuristic, in my view, is the separation between the ideological and repressive as the two cannot be entirely separated unless in terms of degree. Institutions have both their repressive and ideological sides and this applies to the health sector, religion, education and other areas.

### HEGEMONY

Hegemony is the means whereby social forces, manifest throughout not only civil society but also what is conceived of as political society (the division is heuristic), are, as Thomas notes, transformed into political power within the context of different class projects. I would also add to this conceptualization the view, mentioned by Thomas and certainly by Gramsci, following Marx, that the integral state has a strong relational dimension. For instance, critical educators write about

the need for new democratic kinds of social relations in production (inspired by Gramsci here), the public sphere (see for instance the Participatory Budget experiments in Porto Alegre and elsewhere where citizens are called on to discuss optimum and equitable use of municipal funds including funds for education), education and other aspects of social and economic life. These “prefigure”, to use a verb adopted by the late Paula Allman, a new form of state, through its more democratized horizontal social relations of production. This prevents us from reifying the state as a “thing”, from engaging in “thingification” as Phil Corrigan (1990) would put it. The question of the state comprising a set of social relations is also manifest in Gramsci’s conceptualization of every relationship of hegemony being a pedagogical relationship.

The importance of this theorization for those who believe in a politically engaged education, for the gradual ushering in of a different world, cannot be missed. It is perhaps for this reason that Gramsci has had such a considerable influence on critical pedagogy, as the works of authors such as Paula Allman, Jean Anyon, Michael Apple, Antonia Darder, Henry Giroux, Deb J Hill, Margaret Ledwith, Peter McLaren and David W. Livingstone so clearly indicate. What emerges from Thomas’s careful exposition is the notion, emphasized by Gramsci, that different historical formations are at different levels in terms of their development of civil society. These formations differ in the quality of the relationship between state and civil society. This applies to East and West and North and South. As Thomas rightly notes, there are social formations in the west, including the most western of the west (e.g the USA in Gramsci’s time), which are bereft of many institutions of civil society. (Gramsci, 1975)

„Education upholds the hegemonic apparatus.“



Sam B.

*“Tent City University” over the tents of protesters of Occupy London. The improvised temporary university offered guest lectures to activists and passers-by alike. Some academics lauded Tent University as a more intellectually stimulating environment than their home universities after their visit.*

## HEGEMONY AND EDUCATION

The hegemonic apparatuses need to be built and consolidated to become the channels of the ruling class’s life-world (*lebenswelt*). The implications for educational activity are enormous. Education is viewed in the broadest sense, the way Gramsci viewed it, seeing it as central and integral to the workings of hegemony itself, and the way many critical pedagogues view it. Notable here is Henry Giroux, very much inspired by Gramsci, who developed the notion of “public pedagogy”. Education plays an important role as a hegemonic apparatus. This insight should allow us to view theories and philosophies in terms of their being institutionally embedded, serving as a hegemonic apparatus and being integrated in and therefore being ideologically over-determined by the integral state. Educators, seeking to highlight the politics of education, can draw on this insight. They can engage in uncovering ways by which dominant educational philosophies serve as hegemonic apparatuses for the “integral state.”

## HEGEMONY AND LIFELONG LEARNING

In these times, for instance, this concept would enable educators to expose the dominant philosophies of lifelong learning closely connected with the hegemonic notions of “responsibilisation” and “employability” as linked to the neoliberal integrated state and its relations with, for instance, the supranational state that is the EU. Many of the claims made in relation to the fallacy of lifelong learning, distorted with respect to its original concept as “lifelong education” as propounded by UNESCO, would seem hollow. There is an over-emphasis on work, employability and ICT. All this indicates that the discourse thus far is removed from a broad conception of education that takes on board the individuals’ different multiple subjectivities. It still gravitates around the notion of a knowledge economy which, as certain research from Canada shows, is not the reality people are made to believe it is (Lavoie and Roy, 1998; Livingstone, 2004). It might not lead to the level of employment and financial rewards being anticipated given the global competition for

the few high paying middle class jobs available (Brown, Lauder & Ashton, 2010).

This discourse also limits human beings to two dimensional persons, consumers and producers, rather than expands the conception to embrace a more holistic view of persons who have the skills to engage critically and collectively not only *in* but also *with* the work process and also engage in the public sphere, that domain of democratic practice which critical pedagogues such as Giroux, perhaps inspired by Dewey and Habermas, have been writing about for years (Giroux, 2005). This would entail a notion of citizenship that can be called “really and critical active citizenship,” embracing the “collective” (in the sense of people working and acting together, complementing each other), rather than the notion of the atomised individual citizen that is often promoted by the dominant discourses surrounding citizenship. I am here referring to the idea of atomised individuals who facilitate *governmentality*, in Foucault’s sense of the term. Governmentality refers to the state’s production of citizen behaviour according to its policies, fostering mindsets and practices that allow subjects to be governed “at a distance” (English & Mayo, 2012). Many of the issues being faced throughout society call for coordinated collective actions involving both ICT and the streets and squares, (as the numerous demonstrations in Greece and other parts of Europe, as well as many parts of the Arab world, have shown), albeit not necessarily attaining the desired outcomes. The struggle remains an ongoing one, as I have emphasised time and time again. They are also public, and not simply individual, issues that entail social responsibilities.

As the literature on this kind of action has shown, such an ongoing social engagement entails constant learning and relearning, pointing to a notion of lifelong learning that, as expounded on by a number of writers from a critical perspective (Williamson, 1998; Wain, 2004), constitutes a refreshing alternative to the one that prevails in the dominant discourse. It is a type of lifelong

learning that has been occurring for years but which has not always been recognised as such. It is one which is inextricably intertwined with ongoing popular struggles for the creation, safeguarding and enhancing of democratic spaces in which men and women live as social actors. This is all part of the process of renegotiating the apparatus of hegemony.

### SOLIDARITY

Furthermore, we require a critical pedagogical approach to education that takes as its point of departure a new and more pressing notion of solidarity, one which cuts across class, gender and racial lines. It should be an education or kind of political activity that focuses squarely on not different identities in total isolation from each other in a process of segmentation but on the totalising structural force of capital, the “universe of capital” if you will. This is what the thousands who have been taking to the streets in various cities of Europe and the USA as well as beyond seem to be gesturing towards and I use “gesturing” since we need to adopt a tentative and groping approach to our analysis of events here. Yes there was racism, sexism and many other isms before the inception of capitalism but here we have a totalising structuring force that is predicated on segmentation on social class, gender and racial lines. At the heart of this approach, there should be an anti-racist education which does not sanitize the unequal and violent, physical and symbolic, relations that exist and are promoted by an ever globalizing and criminalizing capitalist system. On the contrary it should be one that induces human solidarity, avoiding misplaced assumptions and alliances. It would seek, through problem posing, to unveil the fact that both the so-called and often self-styled autochthonous working class and the immigrants share a common fate: that of being oppressed and subaltern. Both are victims of a ruthless process of capitalist exploitation.

### HIGHER EDUCATION

One other point concerns higher education, an important sector of lifelong

learning in these and other times. This area is under vicious attack by those taking advantage of structures which require renovation and perhaps a wider purpose in society. Rather than being widened to render the university and institutions of higher education more responsive to the democratic needs of society, the discourse is being reduced to one regarding another form of business governed by the principles of the market. And yet one would expect universities to serve much wider causes than those of the economy and employment. They can well provide, and happily some indeed do provide, against all odds, responses to some interesting innovations, in different pockets throughout society, with respect to different forms of production. These entail different and more horizontal relations of producing, as well as the identification of alternatives to what is being produced. To the contrary, however, these institutions are exposed to a discourse that is divisive in its encouragement of diversification in terms of research, teaching and regionally responsive universities, with ramifications for the Ancient Greek notion of *praxis* (reflection upon action for improved action, involving the codification of such reflection into theory).

There is the danger that teaching is to be separated from research. And praxis is a central concept in critical pedagogy based on the old Socratic maxim, reproduced by Plato in the *Apologia*, that an unexamined life is a life not worth living. Quite laudable in this regard are initiatives such as that of Lincoln or “Tent City University”, UK (an activist-founded ad hoc-university with guest lecturers, housed in temporary tents in London), the latter being part of “Occupy London” (see Stanistreet, 2012). Activities such as these revive in some way the old notion of independent working class education, a kind of university education rendered

“Teaching separated from research is dangerous.”



gratis to the popular classes with certification endorsed internationally by a number of academics, even if dismissed by the relevant state apparatuses. This alternative university education is based on the principles of critical pedagogy where knowledge is shared not for instrumental reasons (i.e. for work) but for the social end of helping in the formation of politically engaged social actors.

One hopes that the scope of knowledge focused upon, as a result of epistemological curiosity, is broad enough to incorporate insights derived from South and North, East and West. It would be a body of knowledge that foregrounds subaltern views, including the best from feminisms, critical racism theory, independent working class education, indigenous knowledge, environmental studies and social movements' learning (including subaltern social movements' learning). This would constitute the grist for a critically engaged pedagogy serving as an alternative to that of the mainstream one that favours technical rationality.

*This article draws from the author's forthcoming book, Politics of Indignation (Mayo, 2012).*

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