

BOOK REVIEW

Leona M. English and Peter Mayo (2021). *Lifelong Learning, Global Social Justice, and Sustainability*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer Nature. ISBN: 978-3-030-65777-2

The Shakespearian image of the ‘innocent flower’ that hides the ‘serpent under it’, is adopted by English and Mayo to illustrate Machiavellian intentions in the rise of Lifelong Learning (LLL) and decline of Lifelong Education (LLE). The two terms boast different meanings, specifically, LLL promotes a more economically instrumental understanding of learning against the broadly political and educational meanings associated with LLE. The two have been promoted by separate institutions flexing their ideological muscles to impose their goals on the dominant discourse of lifelong learning. In this way, their proponents attempted to affect practices in and budgets dedicated to the field. The earlier version, LLE, was a bandwagon for Third World post-colonial promotion of newly-gained political independence, but also for revolutionary, state-run programmes with social and economic goals. This was Unesco’s baby, with LLE comprising a broad educational space inhabited by, amongst others, indigenous, nonformal, continuing, and comparative education. The intellectual support for such an approach was intense, and this is detailed in the book (pp.4-5 for a list).

Utopian and pragmatist

LLE was popular up to the 1970s. Overall, it was meant to be different from formal schooling, but still a cornerstone of the welfare state and citizen rights. English and Mayo point out two ramifications within the LLE camp, the utopian and pragmatist, with the former addressing a progressive future society and the latter adopting a readiness to work within the limits imposed by the conditions at the time. These conditions were (and remain) tough, as one can imagine when considering the rampant authoritarianism in South America and elsewhere. Nonetheless, these two branches shared the idea of an education that was political and democratic, and clearly addressing

citizenship. Portugal and Greece are proposed as representative cases. It is interesting to note that in some of their comments, the authors appear closer to the utopian than the pragmatist camp as they argue in support of “humanity and the rest of the cosmos in its entirety and diversity” and for “global citizenship” (p.29). This continues in the chapter on SDGs and it is perhaps a price to pay for a title that includes ‘Global Social Justice, and Sustainability’. This utopian optimism sits precariously with the relation between ‘North’ and ‘South’ that, we read, “often remains a colonial one” (p.96).

More optimism is garnered from international organisations. Statistics churned out by these are presented as empirical evidence supporting high-sounding references to progress whereby “if all adults completed secondary school, the global poverty rate would be more than halved”.¹ Since the largest populations of children without schooling are in the global South, then increasing schooling there amounts to a substantial reduction in the poverty rate. Bearing in mind that the North-South divide is not geographic - as exemplified by the US, with low life expectancy and high levels of health disparities, and where access to health care is not guaranteed² -, the promotion of schooling in the South cannot be undervalued. Ultimately, it depends on what school delivers. At the same time, one cannot ignore how the school reflects and even contributes to the dominant economic social relations outside, which, in turn, qualify poverty statistics. Furthermore, as David Harvey warns, there is “systematic bias” in economic analysis when exclusively applying rates without recognising mass.³ Thus, a tiny statistical increment for the dominant classes means increasing massive amounts of wealth and power. Conversely, when you assist people out of poverty (a goal one can only support), it needs to be kept in mind that, “[i]ncreases for the least well-off are as much a reflection of their initial poverty as a measure of real benefit. If the bottom decile has close to zero wealth, then a tiny increment could generate a 100 per cent gain” (ibid.). Ultimately, without structural reform, anti-poverty campaigns will raise hopes but not necessarily deliver solid social justice.

¹ UNESCO Institute for Statistics and the Global Monitoring Report 2017, p.96.

² Joseph Stiglitz, ‘Conquering the Great Divide’. In, IMF, *Finance & Development*, Fall 2020. Retrieved October 10, 2021 from https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/2020/09/COVID19-and-global-inequality-joseph-stiglitz.htm?utm_medium=email&utm_source=govdelivery

³ David Harvey, ‘Rate and Mass: Perspectives from the Grundrisse’ in *New Left Review*, 130 July–August 2021, 73-98, pp.82-3.

If one introduces migration (a well-developed theme in this book) into the discussion, and considers a successful, poverty-reducing schooling campaign, it is possible to predict, (i) migration control from the South, mitigating the harrowing experience of migration but also satisfying anti-immigrant sentiment in the North; and/or, (ii) in terms of those who make it to the North, a potential supply of literate and skilled labour power that reduces costs for northern capital. The latter is essential for dominant manufacturing capital, and can be interspersed within bourgeois calls for increasing schooling worldwide: the schooling and mobilisation of women into the labour force in Latin America, India and Indonesia increased the female percentage of workers and of poverty. While China was forced to suspend the one-child policy to boost industrial social reproduction, Africa remains “the last major untapped labour reserve for capital to exploit” (ibid.).

The discursive shift

The reference above to statistics projects a world in which LLL has become ubiquitous. Schooling that reduces poverty is increasingly becoming one that spreads the work-related, skills-based doctrine. This is not disagreeable in itself; what makes it a problem is both an exaggerated optimism, and when skills on the learning agenda are exclusively applied to work in depoliticised capitalist labour markets. Instead of LLE with its own skills programmes (self-learning included), and predominantly meant to form sovereign citizens, LLL has become the trend-setter. In the process it has engulfed obligatory schooling as its tenets are imposed in the struggle for space and attention in heavily-funded school budgets.

The discussion about critical literacy is an eye-opener of what was being lost in the process with LLL overcoming LLE. Critical literacy began to lose ground following the “discursive shift” (p.19 *et seq*) towards the promotion of individualism, employability, and technological breakthroughs, all claiming and acquiring a central place in the revised curricula against the earlier promotion of more collective, social responsibility interests (p.7). In a discussion about the measurement of literacy, in chapter 5, the authors correctly point out the struggle amongst literacies, and specifically argue, “The issue is not only how literacy is measured but what is measured as literacy” (p.68). The choice amongst literacies decides what sort of participation is intended including its relation to leadership in society (p.67). At this point, one can recall the image of the serpent hidden by the beautiful flower: whilst critical literacy assists individuals struggling against their internal contradictions, “the

oppressor within" (p.82), today's literacies add to the internal contradictions created by the "trojan horse" of labour market skills penetrating further the educational sector. It is noted that today, the need to 'hide' is less evident; the serpent is let loose.

Institutionally, the goal of the novel approach is not only to penetrate the system but to sustain it. In part, this is carried out by international assessment instruments - PISA, PIAAC, - performing a crucial role in consolidating the coherence and balance of the system. Thus, in vocational education and training, RVA (recognise - validate - accredit) or PLAR (prior learning and assessment and recognition) ease educational transfer. At university level, ECTSs standardise the assessment of academic studies. These are presented as technical concerns when, in effect, if they work, they assist to attract the most promising students toward the universities in the Centre. One adds, the political decision taken at the top of EU institutions has been sustained by the readiness of peripheral universities to comply. Instead of asking how peripheral territories will fight the brain drain, the challenge is to achieve success and work at equivalencies guaranteeing the sustainability of the system and its foundational principle, mobility.

The discursive shift had further institutional support. It gained from the Soviet demise and the setting up of the European Union. Along with the OECD, the EU has been strongly behind the agenda of lifelong learning's westernisation and its distancing away from the likes of Freire but also the Faure Report (p.81). Within this context, the EU's knowledge-based economy remains a powerful myth. R&D potential, mental over manual jobs, global competitiveness, intellectual property rights, etc. make it a dynamic myth, originating from the world of industry rather than from that of educators. Here, we are referring to policy agendas, even on a global scale, and their dedicated international institutions. Nonetheless, the authors do give hints of how one can side-track the institution, in this case the EU, and get away with it; throughout the book the EU is described as not monolithic. The Maltese adult education scene, described in chapter 4 (pp.55-56) and drawn from material recalled from earlier work by Mayo, is a case study of how, at the realisation stage, actual developments are made to differ from policy prescriptions. Whilst policymaking is surrendered to EU bodies, it is possible to work "in and around" (p.42), or "in and against" (p.88) the system. This is a sign of hope (ibid). What matters, of course, is the nature of the alternative development. Notwithstanding, the power imbalance between a small state and the

Commission is increasingly confirmed: a small state depends on EU funding and the margin of manoeuvre is limited even in the area of education where member-states enjoy autonomous initiative.

The book presents a selection of intellectuals who have critically engaged with the discursive shift. Chapter 3 is entirely dedicated to Gelpi, a privilege shared in this book with Freire, in chapter 6. Both chapters are reproductions with modifications of previous work by Mayo. We are reminded by Gelpi that within the tsunami of employment-oriented discourse, there was still room for an employability focus that was not a synonym for employment. However, a central point in chapter 3 is that the labour market remains the force towards which 'employability' is attracted. It is associated with Lyotard's performativity notion, attributed to Wain who, in this and up to a certain extent in chapters 1 and 2 (also based on an earlier publication by Mayo dedicated to Wain), has a strong presence. The 'shift' means that education loses its status as a public good and increasingly becomes a consumer product. Responsibility for learning is placed on the individual who has to learn how to marketize measurable competences. Whilst it does not render human beings 'commodities' (as suggested by the text on p.22), since it is their labour power that is transformed into a commodity, the authors appositely capture the transformation of use values into exchange values with a paraphrased question from Schied "How did humans become resources?" (p.38).

The State (and migration)

There is nothing innocent or neutral in the 'service' rendered by education to the forces ruling over the labour market. The formation of subjectivities has been at the heart of critical discourse but presenting 'employability' as an attractive pull factor under the generic and marketable title of 'well-being', as the authors retort (p.25), is certainly generous. The insecurity and despair arising from flexibility without security, austerity, precarity, inability for long-term planning, new slavery, etc. are assuaged. The worst thing about it is that you get used to it since you can do very little about it. The post-war welfarist model of the State, guarantor of social coherence and integration, is revised and the terrain increasingly left to NGO's, charitable religious institutions, richly-endowed private foundations, or individual benefactors to provide well-being. Rights talk makes little sense in this world characterised by political state abdication.

Abdication is never full or universal. In the book, migrants are credited for their resilience (which isn't rebellion); they adapt by providing themselves with the means for survival even if marginalised and acting outside the law. Nonetheless, migrants end up in what Zygmunt Bauman defines as the "human waste disposal industry" (p.106). Their resistance ignites the threat of deportation; this is where the state leaves the ground to charity and bare exploitation or else does not abdicate and steps in enforcing expulsion.

Paradoxes emerge. In chapter 7, a reproduction of a paper co-written by the two authors, they report the systemic racism of migrant de-skilling by institutions that claim they are supporting the integration of migrants, offering them certification. In Canada, they are under-certified and under-skilled. Consequently, as Bonnie Slade points out, migrant-receiving economies suffer because they are under-utilising their workforce and its skills (p.104). If host economies appear to lose, one would have to contextualise this in the labour theory of value and in specific social sectors to discover what employers gain. Therein, one can appreciate what migrants suffer. However, it's never merely a matter of production; there is social reproduction. Even in adult education, a colonial mind-frame imposes not just assimilation but also an identity crisis for migrants to prove they want to be assimilated and a responsibility for them as individuals to bear the costs of their presence. This is also a shared experience for native workers in working class history; similar to migrants, indeed there are noteworthy cases of internal migrants, these were not spared the heavy or soft hand of the state.

The state is active in social reproduction as the political society running the state decides about assimilation, integration or repulsion, but what remains clear, and was very much clear to Gramsci and his elaboration of 'Fordism' and 'Americanism', is how managerial leaders of private capital increasingly dictate such issues (and the private life of individuals) to suit employment and consumer markets. More than Gramsci's civil society, briefly mentioned in the text and treated as a separate unit from the state, one proposes the extended concept of the integral state by Gramsci when political and civil society are enmeshed. The state becomes an 'educator', wrote Gramsci, referring to the bourgeoisie's revolutionary state formation when compared to aristocratic 'caste' regimes. Civil society becomes the locus for the state to educate. This grants the freedom to challenge and contest with regular eruptions of popular protests, even massive ones, but instead of a consolidated democratic

consciousness we get the social reproduction of two-dimensional man – producer and consumer (p.28).

At the same time, since the argument about the state was introduced in the discussion about migration, it would have been interesting to follow up more broadly, the fortunes of the state on a global scale, the scale where the title of the book directs our attention, and where justice and sustainability agendas face the quandary of geo-political and geo-economic interests and friction.

The economy

Although they do refer to, without developing it as a main theme, the contradictions of a system propelled by economic goals that problematise the links between production and reproduction, Mayo and English are clear in their goals – the LLL concept needs to be cleansed from crass employability and other post-1990 serpentine poisons (pp.11-12). Instead, they propose a world “as it can and should be” (p.14) associated with a vision characterised by dignified living. Such a vision requires some reflection on the necessary economic conditions for its realisation. The authors refer to Nancy Fraser’s (p.65) conceptual elaboration of redistribution and recognition in order to present a combined economic and socio-cultural perspective. Besides defending against cultural reductionism, always a threat when dealing with education in general, redistribution sets the stage for concrete social justice action that targets social transformation, rather than settle for squabbles with identity.

Still, there is one controversial choice made by the authors when considered in terms of a combined economic and socio-cultural approach. They refer to the political figure of Hillary Clinton. This presents a dilemma. Quoting favourably Hillary Clinton, a women’s rights supporter in a book about global social justice deserves attention. She is a neoliberal supporter and “Wall Street candidate” (economist Michael Roberts)⁴. The gender issue remains central: women have not fully claimed education, housing, and active democratic participation rights. It’s just that a migrant, working class woman belonging to a minority race suffers more and deserves more attention. This also cuts through race; the argument about Clinton and gender can be transferred to

⁴ Michael Roberts, *Donald Trump and Capitalism's Next Crisis* (March 9 2017). Retrieved October 31, 2021 from <https://www.haymarketbooks.org/blogs/30-donald-trump-and-capitalism-s-next-crisis>

Harris, Obama and the 'race' issue. The presence of these political leaders might suggest a rethink derived from rights talk but as the authors rightly point out, "even in supposed Western democracies", the privileged (including Hillary Clinton) build upon their educational and economic capital (p.70).

The pandemic

Finally, preceded by sporadic comments in the previous chapters, the promise of a "sustained discussion of the Corona virus" (p.8) is taken up in chapter 8. This is an extended version of a previous presentation by Mayo on higher education in times of pandemic. The argument sets off with the silver lining (an image used by the authors) of how the pandemic boosted literacy campaigns and is also a sign that rich corporations need not be alone in exploiting a crisis. These conditions have, for example, enabled Maltese children to teach their parents just as the Nicaraguan peasants had taught their voluntary literacy workers in Nicaragua. As for the comparatively darker clouds, one would add, in Malta it became clear how the Learning Outcomes Framework straitjacket organisation of the curriculum perfectly fitted the introduction of online data transmission for consumption, so popular during the pandemic. Arguably accompanied by the deskilling of teachers' classroom competences, it is indicative that corporations will not let the crisis go to waste.

The authors' intent in chapter 8, based on an earlier paper by Mayo, is to focus on higher education and the pandemic. It is important to come to terms with how Zoom entered homes, collected data that is highly private, tracked employees, etc. and how state institutions tried their best to normalise events transforming, with the imposed help of practitioners, coercion into contentment. It is not amiss to compare this to algorithmic systems already adopted by corporations to organise their workforce and work processes. The authors are correct in not interpreting this as exclusively an employer-employee matter; they refer to the privilege of higher education teachers as stay-at-home employees against other sectors of exposed employees. What requires pointing out is that privilege was already present before the pandemic; the pandemic increased the factors of injustice with the threats to life and health becoming more immediate. In addition, it should be claimed, once again, how economic factors were decisive. Colleagues of higher education teachers in the secondary and primary sectors were in fact doing front-line work in classrooms with unvaccinated pupils and this was imperative to get the workers out of their homes and keep the economy going. Thus, it would have been better if the focus was on the "realm of necessity" (p.119). This would have assisted

better the argument about structural constraints on various sectors of workers who need to work all the time, being forced by the unceasing struggle to catch up with the better off.

Amongst the initial comments about this stimulating book, we spoke about utopian and pragmatic ramifications of LLE. Whilst this is not the place to discuss utopia, we end up with what the pandemic exposed as ‘techno-utopian promises’ (Higdon & Huff, 2020).⁵ The mandated use of Zoom, amongst others, fits within an economic model and related practices that “raise serious questions for educational institutions in general, and those that purport to value principles of equity in particular” (ibid.). Once again, here we challenge the decision, this time in accordance with the authors, of combining a commitment for social justice with biographies, models and practices that go against. It is not necessarily the technology. In a neoliberal context, one still has to be careful to capture the serpent hidden beneath a beautiful flower: buried beneath the familiar jargon of opportunity, entrepreneurialism, growth, flexibility, etc, English and Mayo describe the “terrible and unequal world out there that needs to be confronted”, words that capture the spirit in the title of Derek Boothman’s editing and translation of Gramsci’s pre-prison letters - ‘A great and terrible world’.⁶ This not only suggests the permanence of crises (internal and external to the capitalist system) but also the need to find ways to respond to the injustice and suffering they create with “eyes wide open” in the words of the authors (p.71) or, as Eschenbacher and Fleming (2020) advise, to “remain wide awake”.⁷

Joseph Gravina

University of Malta

joseph.gravina@um.edu.mt

⁵ Nolan Higdon & Mickey Huff, *Zooming Past Equity in Higher Education: Technocratic Pedagogy Fails Social Justice Test*. May 22, 2020 <https://academeblog.org/2020/05/22/zooming-past-equity-in-higher-education-technocratic-pedagogy-fails-social-justice-test/>

⁶ Derek Boothman (Ed. & Trans) (2014). *Antonio Gramsci: A great & terrible world: The Pre-Prison Letters, 1908-1926*. Lawrence & Wishart.

⁷ Saskia Eschenbacher & Ted Fleming, ‘Transformative dimensions of lifelong learning: Mezirow, Rorty and COVID-19’, in, *International Review of Education* (2020) 66: 657–672; p.670