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Review of *The Rich World and the Impoverishment of Education: Diminishing Democracy, Equity and Workers' Rights* edited by Dave Hill (Routledge, 2009)

Paul Orlowski

[T]he attack on public schools represents a small part of a much larger attack on the public and its role in a liberal, constitutional democracy ... [N]eoliberalism [is] a project aimed at the restoration of class power.
Anijar and Gabbard

The quote above is taken from a very important book that describes the effects of neoliberalism on both public education and higher education in eleven Western nations. Yet it is even much more than that, as the epigraph suggests. The authors of this collection of essays, edited by University of Northampton Professor of Education Policy Dave Hill, identify the strategies and techniques developed by politicians who support a further entrenchment of the corporate agenda into as many aspects of our social lives as possible. By corollary, a transformation of a collective citizenry with rights into individual consumers with "choice" is also part of the game plan.

The Rich World and the Impoverishment of Education is a book that describes neoliberalism's effects on education and education workers. There are some very common policies enacted in major English-speaking nations (i.e., the United States, Canada, Australia, England, and Wales) and to a slightly lesser extent, in Finland, Greece, Israel, Taiwan, Singapore, and Japan. These policies can be seen to varying degrees throughout all eleven of the countries described in this book.

All of the contributors to this book describe the common educational policies that have taken place for the past two to three decades.¹ These policies can best be summed up as the imposition of a top-down business model on the public school system. Related practices include increased accountability, especially of teachers (a group that is also the target of particular venomous attacks in the media), choice of schools (which leads to thinking about students and their parents as "consumers"), and competition on various levels. Competition occurs between schools, as the state-wide exam results are often

published in mainstream newspapers, a practice becoming increasingly popular in the English-speaking countries represented in the book. It also occurs between schools and school districts, as one of the most common strategies to make up for the funding cuts in this neoliberal age is to compete for the lucrative international student market. This practice, in turn, increases existing inequalities, as poor school districts are less likely to attract foreign students. The abilities of parents to raise funds to make up for the shortfall in state funding also drives a wedge between schools and school districts.

Steve McKenna and Julia Richardson, who contributed a chapter about neoliberalism in Singapore, summarize the current hegemonic neoliberal discourses that are working to destabilize public education systems around the world to be “deregulation, privatization, marketization, educational entrepreneurship, commercialization, competition, and commodification” (p. 224). Despite some protest in several countries (*not* in Singapore!), there has yet to be a massive public outcry to the dismantling of one of the great victories of the twentieth century, namely, the public education system.

The question has to be asked: How did this situation come about? After all, Keynesian economics and the social welfare state seemed to be a well-accepted idea in Western nations since the Second World War and the Bretton Woods Conference. Most working- and middle-class families in Western nations have long been well aware of how fortunate they are to have a public education system to educate their children. Perhaps the lack of protest is because of a lack of class consciousness among these classes. Or perhaps the roles of the corporate media and corporate lobbyists have something to do with it.

I read this book during the summer of 2009, which was about a year after the recent economic crisis began to affect the lives of millions of Americans, and shortly after that, millions of other people, too. A strong argument can be made that this economic crisis is a harbinger of things to come for the neoliberal project. In other words, it appears to have begun a seriously collapse. The welfare-for-Wall-Street bailout, which began under President George W. Bush but has been continued under President Obama, fits in with neoliberalism’s emphasis for using public monies for corporate gain rather than for working people.

Another sure sign that the so-called Washington consensus is coming under fire is the fact that for almost a decade most Latin American voters have been eschewing politicians who support neoliberalism in favor of those who support a more leftist ideology (p. 7), a type of socialism that Venezuelan leader Hugo Chavez refers to as the Bolivarian Revolution. This social movement is based upon, among other things, popular democracy, economic independence (especially from the US), and a more equitable distribution of wealth. Might this trend also occur in Western nations? After reading this book, one can only hope that more citizens take their cue from the leftist journey that so many Latin Americans have embarked upon, if only to save their public institutions from being eroded and privatized. So what is neoliberalism anyway?

Neoliberalism emanated out of classical liberalism and rose to prominence in most Western countries in the 1980s and 1990s as a reaction to Keynesian economics, which in

turn, arose out of the suffering of millions of people during the Great Depression. In the chapter on the effects of neoliberalism on Australian society, Gregory Martin includes a very informative four-page summary on the evolution of classical liberalism to reformed liberalism and subsequently to neoliberalism (pp. 84-88). This section also points to the poignant observation that neoliberalism is not at all very different from 19th-century laissez faire economics, a concept that has been thoroughly debunked in every ninth grade social studies course across the land. Readers of this book come to understand that “neoliberal thinking has oriented the state away from its commitment to public goods such as education” (p. 85). Even more astounding is the notion put forth by one of neoliberalism’s founding fathers, economist Milton Friedman, that “economic freedom is the essence of democracy” (p. 85). It will be clear to any reader of this book that neoliberalism is actually a major inhibitor of the democratic process.

Democracy has been one of the major cornerstones of classical liberalism. This is because of the hierarchical nature of the systems that preceded classical liberalism, as well as the push for inclusivity on social issues that is so much a part of this ideology. Therefore, it is very ironic that one of the major cornerstones of neoliberalism is the deregulation of industries and financial institutions in order to increase profits for the few. Moreover, the rights of workers have been curtailed, as has transparency around economic policy. Orwellian mega-spin techniques have been taken to new heights (or lows) with corporate lobbyists and journalists working together to confuse the public, effectively making citizens less informed and less inspired to vote in their best interests and protest unfair social and economic policies.² In other words, Friedman’s statement about economic freedom strengthening democracy is simply more Orwellian double-speak.

As is well known by now, the American government started the process of deregulation under Ronald Reagan’s presidency, and put it into overdrive under Presidents Clinton and George W. Bush. There is real reason to be concerned that Americans have yet to learn from these serious mistakes, as President Obama has appointed many neoliberal supporters to his cabinet. These supporters include economic advisor Larry Summers, and a new Secretary of the Treasury, Timothy Geithner, who previously failed in his watchdog role at the New York Fed as Wall Street’s latest bubble first inflated and then burst. (For more on this, see <http://nymag.com/news/business/58094/>.) In fact, the 2008-09 bail-outs of the American financial industry, to the tune of *well over a trillion dollars*, is yet another example of “disaster capitalism.”³ However, if citizens are not vigilant, these politicians and their financial backers will use the current crisis to further their agenda of using public monies to further erode the makings of a civil society. This will only increase the oppression of working-class people, something that has already seriously begun ever since the Fordist-Keynsian Post-WWII policies were abandoned in the late 1970s and 1980s, and replaced by neoliberal economic policies.

The Rich World and the Impoverishment of Education's collection of essays points to the 1970s as the time when the American economic elites formulated strategies that came to fruition in that country in the 1980s and 1990s. Karen Anijar and David Gabbard outline this strategy, one that essentially has as its main objective the gutting of the "public education system along with every aspect of human life and attitudes and thought that involve social solidarity" (Chomsky, cited in Anijar and Gabbard, p. 21). They point out the clever use of language manipulation employed by neoliberals. For example, the voucher system, which is much more prevalent in the US than in any other country, is described in media campaigns as something based on democracy and freedom, rather than what it is – a strategy designed to bring a slow death to the public school system, which neoliberal journalists only refer to as the "government school" system (p. 24).⁴ The authors claim that the entire notion of "failing schools" is nothing but a "manufactured crisis" that has duped many members of the public into believing that vouchers "provide a pragmatic utilitarian solution" to this so-called problem (p. 24). Charter schools have a similar function, with the added "bonus" of profit-making possibilities. Moreover, according to Anijar and Gabbard, charter schools "perform worse than comparable students in traditional public schools" (p. 28). Yet, they "enjoy far more autonomy concerning hiring and firing practices, curricula, and budget spending" (p. 28). Indeed, in the US many of these schools are religious schools that do not have to adhere to the standards and intense accountability imposed on public schools (p. 26).

The chapter by Anijar and Gabbard on neoliberalism in the US, titled "The American Privatization Campaign," also offers a clear explanation about the dissemination of these ideas that are so antithetical to a civil society. First and foremost has been the rise of corporate think tanks. In the United States, this rise apparently began with a secret memorandum written by Lewis F. Powell on behalf of the US Chamber of Commerce in 1971 (p. 38). Powell expressed concern that critiques of the American economic system were becoming commonplace even in "perfectly respectable elements of society" such as the mainstream media and college campuses (p. 39). To counter this trend, Powell urged corporations to "use think tanks to monitor schools and universities, the media, the courts, and politics for anti-business ideas, and aggressively target them for the distribution of pro-business and neoliberal ideas" (p. 40). The proof is in the pudding as think tanks such as the Heritage Foundation, the Brookings Institution, and the American Enterprise Institute have become familiar names to most Americans (and Canadians) who pay attention to such developments.

The situation in Canada is much the same, as the chapter "Neoliberalism and Education in Canada," by Adam Davidson-Harden, Larry Kuehn, Daniel Schugurensky, and Harry Smaller, so clearly explains. Although neoliberalism came to Canada a decade or so after it swept the US and the UK, it came with a vengeance under the federal liberal governments of the 1990s. The transfer payment cuts implemented by then Finance Minister Paul Martin from 1995 to 1998 meant that approximately \$5 billion was taken away from the provinces annually that were to be spent on public education and public

healthcare (p. 51). Many of the provincial governments of the time, such as the Conservative governments of Ontario and Alberta, used this as an opportunity to make further cuts and open the door to privatization in both spheres. And let's be frank here: strong public education and public healthcare systems provide the foundation for a civil society. The neoliberal assault in Canada has resulted in "tighter controls over, but less funding for, public sector social institutions" (p. 62). The Washington consensus, with its one-two punch of "trade liberalization and social funding cutbacks" provides the solution: privatize (p. 51).

As with all of the chapters, this one on Canada's neoliberalism illuminates the vulnerability of the notion of a civil society, when think tanks like the Fraser Institute and the C. D. Howe Institute use the corporate media to promote corporate intrusion into the public schools. This think tank support has led to the appearance of vending machines and "donated" dollars for advertising space. Further, the neoliberal idea of transforming students and their parents into educational *consumers* has reached Canada, as well. This notion has been made abundantly clear with the publication of school rankings in corporate newspapers in Canada, a practice that is also very common in the US and the UK.

This notion of making public the school rankings based on exam results has led to another feature common to this era, namely, that of teacher bashing. *The Rich World and the Impoverishment of Education* stresses the good work that well-intentioned educators do in both the K-12 school setting and the university. The book also brings to our attention the coordinated assault on these workers who are so much a part of the backbone of a civil society. Everyone should be concerned about this disturbing trend. After all, the rights of teachers are also part of the rights of workers in general. And there can be no denying that workers' rights are completely entwined with civil rights.

Because this book covers the effects of neoliberalism in eleven different countries, space concerns do not allow me to review the devastation wreaked upon common people, especially the working classes, in all of these Western nations. Suffice to say that the vast majority of the citizens in these countries have had to contend with shrinking dollars for almost all of their public institutions, especially public education. In many countries, particularly in the English-speaking ones, there has been an increase in private schools and in the policy of using more and more tax dollars to partially fund these schools. The end result of this is increased social and economic inequities in most spheres of life, especially for working people and their families. Gregory Martin explains:

The ideology of neoliberalism is being interwoven through institutions such as schools into the broader moral fabric of everyday life ... [T]he emphasis is on *the production of ideal citizen-subjects* who are self-regulating, self-interested, and self-calculating for the purposes of capital accumulation in increasingly competitive global markets. (p. 77, my emphasis)

The most frightening aspect of neoliberalism is its attempts to produce ideal citizen-subjects who do not consider themselves to be part of a collective that can organize against the dismantling of public education, higher education, and all aspects of the social welfare state. In the quest to commodify and profit from social life, long-time Australian Prime Minister John Howard emphasized “self-sufficiency and individual responsibility” (p. 79). It appears that no Western leader outside of the US supported neoliberalism more than Australia’s former Prime Minister Howard, in all aspects of Australian social life, but especially so with public education and higher education (p. 81). In fact, the Australian “values debate” sounds very much like the conservative-liberal tensions in the US that are so effectively used by Fox News to stir up common Americans *against* progressive legislation.⁵ Moreover, the Howard government also supported neoconservative ideals, such as patriotism and support for the Church, in its public school curriculum (p. 87).

The situation is not much better in England and Wales, according to Christine Lewis, Dave Hill, and Barry Fawcett, who claim that their “[e]ducational services are becoming ‘Americanized’” (p. 106). These authors describe a culture in which past education reforms focused on improving conditions for teachers have been replaced by regressive reforms focused on individual performance-related pay for teachers, in addition to “increases in levels of report writing, testing, accountability, monitoring, and surveillance” (p. 109), all within a context of ubiquitous teacher-bashing discourses. According to these authors, the business model of management has been thrust upon English and Welsh schools so that school administrators must focus on “short-term economic objectives” rather than working to create an ethos of critical thinking and compassionate citizens (p. 113). The levers for neoliberalism in Britain and elsewhere are located within international trade agreements (p. 118).⁶ The chapter on England and Wales was particularly illuminating in highlighting world-wide regressive trends in education and in its treatment of education workers (pp. 121-130).

The chapter on Finland describes how strong support for the “comprehensive school,” which lasted for about 40 years, was based upon “equal educational opportunities for all children, regardless of their place of residence, or the wealth or status of their families, mother tongue, or gender” (p. 149). The authors explain how the common hegemonic discourse in Finland changed from one promoting citizenship to one that encouraged individualism (p. 144). In turn, Finnish educational policy changed to focus on decentralizing decision-making control to the local level, and fostering a culture of “choice.” It is worth noting that only 2% of Finnish students go to private schools (p. 140).

The remaining chapters also describe neoliberal trends in education and other public institutions in Greece, Taiwan, Israel, Singapore, and Japan. All of these countries have implemented neoliberal policies in slightly different ways, depending upon their own unique histories with conservative, liberal, and social democratic ideology. None of these

countries has embraced neoliberalism to the degree that the English-speaking Western nations have.

One thing is for certain for anybody who finishes reading this book, and that is the realization that the economic and education policies that have taken effect in various nations over the past two decades are similar enough that there can be no doubt this has been a strategy long in planning and wide in execution. Neoliberalism did not just come about as a natural “progression” from what was before. It is an ideology that was carefully constructed in the minds of free market economists and the backrooms of international trade deal negotiations.

The Rich World and the Impoverishment of Education makes one thing clear: the erosion of public school systems and other social institutions hurts one group more than any other, and that is the working classes. In fact, this book should be a wake-up call for all education workers, and for all workers in general. It should be read by anyone who thinks that the creation of a world made up of civil societies is possible. All workers should be united in a common goal, namely, to destabilize the neoliberal project so that a much fairer one replaces it, one in which public education and public healthcare systems are fully funded, and workers and their families do not have to suffer any more, at least nowhere near as much as they have under neoliberalism.

The labels that describe the forces that structure social life today, namely, neoliberalism and globalization, are almost synonymous with the forces that structured a time that has come to be seen as an ugly, unjust period for the majority of peoples. These past forces are called laissez faire economics and colonization. We do not need to go back there; indeed, to do so would set back our noble goal for a civil society by at least a century. *The Rich World and the Impoverishment of Education* is a book that makes this perfectly clear.

Notes

¹ It is generally accepted that neoliberal economic policies in the contemporary age began in the US. Hence, it is sometimes referred to as the “Washington Consensus,” which includes a one-two punch of trade liberalization and cutbacks to social funding; hence, the decreased funding for public education across the globe.

² See Orłowski, P. (2006). “Educating in an era of Orwellian spin: Making a case for critical media literacy in the classroom.” *Canadian Journal of Education*. Special issue on *Popular media, education, and resistance*, 29 (1), 176-198.

³ For a clear explanation of this term, see Klein, Naomi. (2007). *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, Alfred A. Knopf: Toronto. Klein makes the case that Friedman’s neoliberal policies were first implemented in Chile after the CIA-backed coup d’état put General Augusto Pinochet in as that country’s leader. As a side note about Friedman’s claim that economic freedom is good for democracy, Chileans did not have another national election until 1990.

⁴ It is interesting to note that opponents to President Obama’s plans to include a public option in healthcare reform used the term “government healthcare” rather than “public healthcare,” as it is referred to throughout the rest of the Western world.

⁵ Also, Rupert Murdoch, the Australian media baron, owns the newspapers that employ “rightist ‘culture warriors’” who write to gain support for the privatization agenda (p. 87). This is the same Rupert Murdoch who also owns the US-based Fox News.

⁶The World Trade Organization’s General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), the North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the OECD have been especially effective in dismantling Britain’s once strong public education system (pp. 117-119).