

*Neoliberalism and the shifting discourse of 'educational fairness'*

This editorial picks up and develops an issue we explored a year ago (Waller *et al.*, 2014), in an editorial on the role of universities in widening participation in education and (generally upward) social mobility in the globalized world. Commentators in the global north have noted a recent shift in both governmental rhetoric and policy direction on the role of education in social change. The movement has essentially been from education policies designed to help the many (e.g. for socially disadvantaged groups to access higher education), to those designed to help a very select (and generally more capable) few; that is, to permit just 'the best and the brightest' from that background to enter a 'top university' and be the beneficiaries of the trappings of career success. We seek here to identify how it came to be that, for much of the developed world in particular, the discourse and policy shift around educational fairness has changed since the turn of the Millennium, and in particular since the global economic crisis of 2008 onwards, from seeking a wide-ranging good of 'social justice' to a narrower target of 'social mobility' for a far smaller number.

A leading writer on education and economic development, Shirley Walters (2014:186), recently suggested 'Learning has become an individualized and increasingly expensive possession' that can be traded in the market place with growing ease. This is true both nationally and internationally as globalization leads to enhanced opportunities to study or gain employment abroad for those unencumbered by family commitments or other constraints. However, this process is not open to all citizens equally, leading to a widening gap between rich and poor, both internationally and within any given economy or society. Most developed societies are becoming economically more polarised despite politicians and commentators paying lip service to notions of greater equality – see the clamour to publicly support if not actually implement policy to advance the ideas of *The Spirit Level* for instance (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010). Individuals with significant levels of initial education are able to pursue opportunities for lifelong learning far more readily than those with little or inadequate formal education. This enhances competition for increasingly scarce resources such as opportunities for educational experiences and qualifications.

Most commentators, and in particular those from the political left, suggest the current world system of exchange is a 'neo-liberal' capitalist one, which Flew (2014:56) characterises as 'a political ideology associated with economic globalization and the rise of financial capitalism.' In offering further clarification, Flew (2014:59) draws upon Brown (2006:694), who suggests 'part of what makes neoliberalism "neo" is that it depicts free markets, free trade, and entrepreneurial rationality as achieved and normative, as promulgated through law and through social and economic policy', with political and social spheres being 'appropriately dominated by market concerns and as themselves organized by market rationality'. It is a 'common sense' system hiding behind a veneer of meritocracy in which the most capable and hardest working are the inevitable beneficiaries; however, the reality is somewhat different.

A distinct shift can be detected in terms of the focus of education policy across much of the globe in the last decade and a half. In the UK for instance, the recommendations of the reports (2009; 2012; 2014; 2015) from the *Independent Reviewer on Social Mobility and Child Poverty* (chaired by ex-MP Alan Milburn), focus on promoting social mobility, rather than moving towards greater equality. Egalitarian ideas such as 'social justice' seem to have slipped from the policy agenda altogether in Britain and other developed nations. Whilst we may consider upward social mobility for some economically and socially disadvantaged individuals a laudable aim, it is inevitably only going to benefit a small number of people, and do precious little for members of the wider society whose income levels and life chances are below average. This disparity between the richest and poorest is growing during times of economic austerity, again both within and between given nation states.

Our editorial last year (Waller *et al.*, 2014) highlighted how, in the UK, in Europe, and across the 34 OECD nations as a whole, the cost of providing post-compulsory education had shifted significantly from the state to the individual, and that, despite a general increase in the numbers of people going on to higher education, people's access to educational opportunities was still determined to a large extent by their access to economic and other forms of capital. To illustrate this phenomenon we can look to recent data published by the English Department for Education (2015) which revealed that only 5 per cent of English teenagers eligible for free school meals (i.e. those from the lowest socio-economic backgrounds) who took A-levels or equivalent qualifications in 2012-13, were admitted to the 24 research-intensive 'Russell Group' of universities (those with the most demanding entry requirements), compared to 12 per cent of all other students. If we were to extend this comparison to the poorest and the wealthiest quartiles accessing the most competitive universities, the gap would be wider still. (This figure also masks the fact that far fewer young people eligible for free school meals stay on at school beyond the minimum school leaving age to take A Levels). Whilst the total numbers attending Russell Group universities has increased in the last few years, the gap between the numbers of the poorest UK students accessing them, and the majority of the population doing so, has widened. (For instance in the 2010-11 cohort, just 3 per cent of students eligible for free school meals gained a place at one of the Russell Group institutions, compared to 9 per cent of students who were not.).

Although access to elite UK universities is only a modest – albeit high-profile – component of the wider debate around fair access to limited educational resources, it is a reasonable if somewhat crude proxy for the wider issue. As Thrupp and Tomlinson (2005) point out, selective education policies which facilitate limited upward and effectively prevent downward social mobility (e.g. see Waller, 2011; Waller *et al.* 2014; Milburn 2015 for a wider discussion of this point) do not encourage cohesive and socially just societies. As such, whilst we may welcome national and international initiatives to enhance participation in higher education, this does little to address bigger issues of social inequality within the UK or between the UK and other, poorer, nations. What is more, this policy direction has masked the shift away from helping individuals across society at large towards helping a relatively small number of talented but economically disadvantaged individuals.

In terms of how to tackle inequality and make a fairer society and international system of economic interdependence and exchange, we need to look beyond individual states to how the whole world economy is structured and seek to influence that – even if we acknowledge that our influence is inevitably limited, and that progress may be slow. In Thrupp and Tomlinson's (2005:549) terms, we must support a notion of social justice against policies 'which will maintain or intensify injustices and [argue] for policies and practices which could have *some* impact on reducing them' (emphasis in original).

In her writing on the role of education in economic development, Walters (2014) draws upon the work of world systems analyst Immanuel Wallerstein who suggested there are two oppositional intellectual 'camps' vying for supremacy in terms of replacing the economically and intellectually discredited globalised capitalist economic system. Wallerstein characterises the first of these two ideological strands as representing the World Bank, the International Development Fund and larger transnational financial interests; he refers to this camp as 'the spirit of Davos' (after the Swiss venue where the World Economic Forum began meeting in 1971). The second he characterises as being 'the spirit of Porto Alegre' (the southern Brazilian city where the anti-neoliberal World Social Forum first met in 2001), representing the interests of social movements and social justice activists. As Walters suggests, this demarcation in proposed solutions to economic problems is akin to the ideological divide between the hegemonic 'top-down' form of economic development, 'competitive globalisation', and the 'bottom-up' approach of 'cooperative globalisation'. The former, Walters argues, has as its internal logic the accumulation of capital and is akin to 'the spirit of Davos'; the latter has 'the accumulation of human capacities as its internal logic, and

human development as its primary motivating force' (p.186), aligning it with 'the spirit of Porto Alegre'.

We can apply this analysis to educational policy in a given setting. Wallerstein uses a 'core and periphery' model of developed and non-developed economies both between and within societies – the societies have individual members who are 'core' or 'peripheral' to economic activity as the societies themselves are on the wider stage. For instance, in a damning critique of contemporary neo-liberal British society, Owen Jones (2011) highlights how media discourse in the UK – and we can apply that more widely across the developed world – refers to people being at the bottom of the socio-economic system (i.e. those considered economically 'peripheral') as a consequence of their failure to take the opportunities for self-advancement presented to them; that they 'only had themselves to blame' (p. 249). Just as the financial burden of higher education in particular has shifted from the public to the private purse, the responsibility for *failing to succeed* is now that of individuals themselves, rather than the consequence of any systemic failure or unfairness. Flew (2014:52) draws upon the work of radical educationalist theorist Giroux (2010:1) in outlining how, under one dominant understanding of neo-liberalism, '...the welfare state is dismantled...and social protections and either eliminated or fatally weakened'. And the reality is that societies have largely closed down the avenues of support for people seeking such advancement through education.

In terms of a local solution to the issues identified here, on a national level Jones (2011: 258) suggests that 'the new aspiration must be about improving people's communities and bettering the conditions of the working class as a whole, rather than simply lifting able individuals up the ladder'. Jones refers to the 'strip[ping] out from the notion of aspiration any communitarian element', and the deliberate destruction of 'any sense of duty, obligation, any something that unites people'. A consequence of this, he argues, is the unbridled promotion of 'this dominant, atomized, consuming, acquisitive self (p.258)'; the archetypal neo-liberal subject, free floating in their wider social setting, and buffeted by the whims and vagaries of economic forces and wider social policies.

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