

Ken Jones

Chapter 8

The Long Counter-Revolution

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Introduction

The education policy of the Coalition, which is largely the education policy of the Conservative Party, is to an important extent conceived politically. That is to say, its efforts to steer the education system through the various problems presented by economic crisis and social change are always intertwined with the attempt to outmanoeuvre and defeat those who might oppose it. Politics is not only a matter of the day-to-day business of parliamentary affairs; so far as Conservatism is concerned, it is also the attempt to achieve a decisive set of transformations that remove from the scene institutions and social actors which have been central to education for more than a hundred years and to assert new goals, new institutions, new patterns of social relations within the system. Politics in these senses is strongly antagonistic and is pursued with long-term change in mind.

This is why Michael Gove talks so much about the past, insisting that the undead forces of 1980s progressivism must finally be killed off. It is why he is so hyperbolically combative in his utterances, so despotic in his manner of decision-making. Gove is not a traditionalist, if that means that he would want education to return to some idealised former state: he is committed to a school system fit for a neo-liberal world, of sharp social inequalities, and a

stratified labour market. But in other senses, his affinity with conservative tradition is strong. As Corey Robin (2011) points out, conservatism has always been constituted by its struggle against the left; Michael Gove, like Salisbury, or Thatcher, can be understood in this frame. He sees himself as dealing with a mortal threat to principles that Conservatives think are essential to any social order – competition, selectivity, hierarchy and the notions of quality and excellence that legitimate the inequalities that they entail. These principles were placed in danger by the direction of social, political and educational change in the later twentieth century. The 1988 Education Reform Act, and much that has happened since, have held the danger in check, but it has not been completely removed. Teacher trade unions, local councils, university departments of education all retain an influence that affects the ambience of schooling, inflecting it towards values of inclusiveness, child-centredness and creativity that, however weakly embedded, must be removed from the scene. Gove's policies, like his rhetoric, are driven by this purpose: they are aimed at identifying, contesting and defeating ideas and practices which carry the traces of a different educational project. It is in this sense that one can speak of 'counter-revolution' as a defining feature of his programme: it is this that links him to Edmund Burke.

If Gove is a counter-revolutionary, where is the 'revolution' to which he is reacting? Here we encounter one of the peculiarities of neo-liberal society. The enemy that Conservatives attack (and in attacking, justify their own policies) belongs, in an important sense, to the past. It may have an ideological afterlife, but as a political force capable of shaping institutions and practices it is much weaker than it used to be. Moreover, in its present-day manifestation, the Party which oversaw the most energetic years of educational reform has no interest in contesting the offensive that

has been launched against it. Neither Conservatism's historical sense, nor its openly antagonistic policies, are shared by the Labour Party. Along with its acceptance of the ERA framework, Labour has adopted an amnesiac position on the period of reform that followed the 1944 Education Act and reached its peak in the 1970s and 1980s. 1988, for New Labour, was the year zero of educational history (Jones 2004). Nothing before then is useful to retrieve. 'Leave the battles of the past,' Tony Blair told his Party Conference in 1995, and this advice has been followed for nearly two decades. Unwilling to revisit the projects of comprehensive reform and progressive change at classroom level that were pursued before 1988, Labour has no perspective in which to understand Conservative politics, and the stakes that they involve. The speeches of the Shadow Minister, Stephen Twigg, suggest that Conservative policy innovations will be left in place; no fundamental changes are necessary (Twigg 2013). Labour thus has two, equally unappealing, functions in current educational debate: it is the mute object of Conservative misrepresentations of the past; and it is the quiet accompanist of the policy that Conservatives are unrolling into the future.

The Labour Party's lack of commitment to radical educational change, and its lack of interest in taking the measure of Conservative ambitions, may not be unexpected. But they are nonetheless a problem for the 'world of education', that is for many of the interests which, historically, had looked to the Party to provide a national policy framework that provide an environment in which their concerns and aspirations could flourish. Even without such a framework, there is still much oppositional activity. Parents and local authorities have opposed free schools and the policy of forcing allegedly underperforming schools to become academies. A number of pressure groups – the Local Schools

Network, CASE, the Socialist Education Association – make forceful critiques of the Coalition’s programme and sketch alternatives to it. Educationalists have attacked Gove’s curriculum policies and the testing regime that accompanies them (e.g. Paton 2013). Trade unions have taken action over pay, conditions, pensions and academisation. The student movement of 2010 rose up against the hike in tuition fees. These responses, however, are not strongly inter-related. The mobilisation of thousands of teachers in a campaign over pay and conditions could have provided an occasion to push broader educational issues into the public domain, but this is not an opportunity that has been taken. Conversely, pressure groups are concerned that trade union action will provide Gove with a further justification for policies that rest on central control, and so keep their distance from union-based combativity. Think-tanks of the centre-left, pragmatically calculating the limits of the possible, suggest policy directions that take the achievements of conservatism, such as the hyper-extension of academies, as the starting-points for reform, rather than as obstacles to be removed. The overall picture of the world of education thus certainly includes discontent with the whole range of Coalition policy, but also in its frame is a fragmentation and uncertainty of response that leaves initiative in the hands of the right.

The purpose of this article is to sketch some notes towards an educational strategy that starts from the current impasse of the ‘left’ – a term I use to mean the dispersed collection of organisations and individuals who oppose the fundamental direction of government education policy, in the name of principles of equality, democracy and educational creativity. The brush it uses is a broad one and the sketch it offers is political as much as policy orientated. Its perspective is long-term, considering present-day issues in the light

of education politics since 1945. It tries to focus on education in the context of social and economic change, including change in labour market patterns. It is concerned with the ideologies and agenda of social actors – the groups and movements that try to set the direction of educational change – rather than on the detail of their proposals. Since it aims to be strategic, it tries to indicate issues and locations where the left can most productively apply its energies if it is to turn around the system in which education in England has become embedded. The analysis it offers, which identifies the ways in which austerity and market logic are forces that are restructuring all aspects of education, from early years pedagogy to the work of lecturers in universities, is intended to suggest common themes around which opposition can regroup.

Crisis and Restructuring

The British left in the 1970s was well aware that the onset of recession in the middle of that decade would be utilised not only to justify cuts in social spending but also a restructuring of provision and an attempt to align it with new economic priorities (Weekend Return Group 1980). Thatcherism was the political force that answered to this prediction. It provided Conservatives in the twenty-first century with an example they have been quick to learn from: crisis presents political opportunities to parties that are able to take decisive action. For Marxists, the recession of 2008 was quickly seen as a vindication of their analysis: a system based on debt-fuelled consumption was a crash waiting to happen. For Keynesians, the public bail-outs of the banking sector demonstrated the failings of an unregulated market, and seemed to reassert the state's role as an economic actor (Gamble 2009). But neither of these readings was able to impose itself on the politics of the crisis. The dominant reading came to be that of the right, supported by international financial institutions to be sure, and best articulated by

the post-2010 Conservative-led government, which developed both a discourse and a programme of action that had immediate effects, and long-term consequences.

Clarke and Newman point out that the locus of the crisis has been shifted, discursively, from the private to the public sector, from the financial services industry to public spending:

‘it has been ideologically reworked, at least in the UK, from an economic problem (how to ‘rescue’ the banks and restore market stability) to a political problem (how to allocate blame and responsibility for the crisis): a reworking that has focused on the unwieldy and expensive welfare state and public sector, rather than high risk strategies of banks, as the root cause of the crisis.’ (Clarke and Newman 2012: 303).

On this accepted ground, the government has been able to introduce a programme of cuts and welfare restructuring. Some of the educational consequences are obvious: the loss of the Educational Maintenance Allowance, the cuts to Sure Start. Others will reveal their meaning only over a longer period.

In his classic book *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*, Gøsta Esping-Andersen discussed the role of welfare states, particularly in the post-war period, in creating a space of ‘decommodification’. Relatively generous social security arrangements, along with publicly provided housing, health and childcare meant that in some countries the pressure on workers to accept low wages and make short-term employment choices was reduced. As a result, the economic bargaining power of workers, as individuals, and as a class, was increased. Decommodification, it could be argued, was also a feature of the way that social provision was organised. Schools, for instance, were in some ways distanced

from immediate labour market demands, developing cultures where other objectives than economic ones could be pursued. The changes brought about by Thatcherism reduced the space of decommodification by means of a market logic of competitiveness between and within institutions. The development under New Labour of management cultures that drove schools towards higher levels of performance on the basis of narrowly defined indicators consolidated the idea that schools should operate as if they were businesses, with values that in their acceptance of competitive pressures, were strongly commodified. Thus, between 1988 and 2010, the decommodified space identified by Esping-Andersen was greatly reduced. Coalition policies reduce it further.

Three themes of Conservative policy

Conservatives note that there has been no strong challenge to their argument that economic necessity demands cuts in social spending. They go on, therefore, to apply the same logic to social and educational restructuring. The reforms of the Coalition government are intended to push education further along the road to a situation where market logic presses even more heavily on teachers' work and students' learning. This pressure takes three forms.

The first, discussed in Richard Hatcher's chapter in this book, is to multiply the number of schools that are run outside local authority influence, by autonomous managements accountable to central government and to the quasi-market of parental choice. From a Conservative point of view, a school 'system' based on autonomy does not need a workforce that is paid on a nationally-determined basis that school managements cannot control. Though the Labour governments of 1997-2010 made incremental salary progression conditional upon successful passage through a threshold assessment, they left intact the national pay structure,

which set out a pattern of incremental progression that all teachers would follow. Michael Gove regards this structure as a relic of the collectivist period. He proposes that individual school managements should be able to set differential pay levels for each teacher, and that, in the case of some categories of schools, they should be able to recruit unqualified teachers. This would have several linked effects on teachers. The recruitment of unqualified staff would downgrade the status of educational knowledge: teachers would be employed for their subject expertise; as for ‘the rest’ – pedagogy, for instance – this could be picked up on the job. The further reduction in the importance of the pay structure would tend to reduce whatever element of individual professional autonomy teachers still possessed, as well as reducing the element of common ground between teachers in a school. The resulting decollectivisation of the workforce would make it a more effective instrument for the transmission of official educational agenda: the more fragmented the teaching force, the more malleable.

The third kind of pressure falls on students. Gove stands for an educational order that is based on competition between students for a restricted number of prizes. In a speech at Cambridge in 2011 he illustrated what this principle meant in practice:

‘In Burlington Danes, an Academy run by the charity ARK in White City, academic excellence is recognised with a rank order system for every pupil in every year, allocating a place to every child in every term based on their performance subject by subject. So at half term the children are examined, given their scores from 1 to 120. That’s kept private. Then they have the opportunity in the remaining half term to improve their scores and at the end of it every student in every year is ranked, in every subject and for effort, and also artistic and sporting achievement. When I encountered this

the first time I thought – that’s a bit hard core, must be unpopular with some of the parents and some of the students. But actually I was told that this had been the single most popular change that had been initiated. The children were now so anxious to do well in this competitive process, which rewards the acquisition of knowledge, that they petition the head to have them transferred out of classes where teachers are weak into those where teaching is strong.’ (Gove 2011)

Thatcher, famously, said that the purpose of her policies was to ‘change the soul’ (Thatcher 1981). We can see in Gove’s description how this project works: not so much through exhortation, as through the setting up of a system whose logic induces conformity to market-shaped systems of action. Success in this system is measured positionally, in terms of rank order, with ‘excellence’ in terms of test results, being a by-product of competitiveness.

In Gove’s policies for assessment and public exams, we can see how ‘intra-school’ processes of this kind are geared to market logics in the world outside the school. As Nico Hirtt has noted (2013), the analyses of CEDEFOP – the EU organisation that focuses on vocational education – confirm what theorists like Castells (2000) were claiming more than a decade ago. The labour-market is sharply divided: ‘most job growth will be in higher- and lower-skill occupations with slower growth in occupations requiring medium-level qualifications.’ (CEDEFOP 2012, 29) The DfE has introduced a number of changes that point in the direction of a selectivity which matches this pattern of job distribution. Their effect will be to identify at a relatively early stage students capable of competing for higher-skilled jobs, while insisting that passage

through formal examination systems at all age levels of schooling, including early years provision (Paton *ibid*), is essential for participation in the labour market. Thus, it is no surprise that a kind of norm-referenced assessment has been introduced in post-16 exams, recreating a *numerus clausus* system so far as the highest grades are concerned (Mansell 2012). At 18+ end-of-term examination has been revived, at the expense of a modular system, and is likely to have similar class-linked effects. The DfE's requirement that schools report their success in terms of the number of their students who gain places at a small group of elite universities (Parr 2013) also encourages a focusing of resources on a privileged layer.

Political effects of restructuring

When Gove took office in 2010, he took over a system that, even if it had been inflected under Labour towards concerns for social inclusion, had been ordered for more than two decades according to an original Conservative plan. He has been able to build on this, strengthening existing tendencies, rather than bringing new ones into being. The cumulative effect of successive policy developments, with the earlier stages providing the grounds for the success of later policies, has made Conservatism a dominant force. Moreover, the balance of power in the political field of education allowed Gove great scope for initiative. After 2010, Labour continued to think within the parameters of neo-liberal orthodoxy and did not see its role as to present an opposition to Gove of any comprehensive sort. Local authorities had lost political authority as well as control over day-to-day policy. A generation of teachers had grown up knowing only the procedures and objectives of the post-1988 system. Parents and students, in social conditions of ever-greater insecurity, were focused on issues of school choice

and examination success (Jones 2014a). In this landscape of preoccupation, regulation and political setback, Conservatism was the decisive political force.

From the point of view of the left, this situation represents a defeat of historical significance. In *The Long Revolution* (1961) Raymond Williams showed that the achievements and potential of the socialist movement in Britain depended on interlinked actions and struggles in several different fields. The first was economic. The development of an industrial economy, in the context of working-class struggles that forced it into a welfarist shape, improved the condition of the majority of people – their material prosperity, security, dignity and power. The second revolution was political. Williams, as Michael Rustin emphasises, ‘saw the rise of democracy as primarily the practical achievement of the working-class movement’ and ‘thus linked the struggle for democratisation to a profound change in the balance of power of social classes’ (2007, 16). The third aspect of the long revolution was cultural: Williams had a vision of a ‘common culture’ in which all could participate, a culture enabled in part by a democratised education system, with a curriculum reshaped to match this new task. The three facets of the long-revolutionary process were not, Williams insisted, idealised construction, but had already been actualised in the work of social movements. His book was an attempt to give a name and a meaning to this work, and in doing so extend it.

It is sobering to consider how these processes have fared in the neo-liberal era and dismaying to think about the wreckage of the political projects that were connected to them. Working-class power at the economic level, which set limits to what the capitalist class thought politically feasible, has been severely reduced. Democratic institutions created or shaped by working-class and

social movement activity – trade unions and local government; the diverse projects associated with feminism, and black and community movements after 1968 – have been hollowed out or swept away.

In education, likewise, the processes that Williams associated with the long revolution have been checked. For nearly a hundred years, educators concerned with issues of social justice and self-realisation were able to develop these commitments within a state education that to some extent accommodated them. The landmark government reports of the twentieth century register the impact of this engagement. From Hadow in 1926, to Bullock in 1975 – even in later products such as the 1999 report on culture and creativity, *All Our Futures* – policy yoked together a concern for social control and economic productiveness with a different sort of emphasis, from which issues of social justice, equality and individual self-realisation were not absent. At grassroots level, the attempt to establish elements of a common culture was especially strong from the later sixties onwards, when the selection-based insufficiencies of the 1944 Act were criticised, and alternatives developed. Movements for educational change existed on several levels, from the classroom and the school to the local authority and national politics. Owing much to earlier, progressive traditions, they were refuelled by the energies that sprang from political movements in the late sixties. In terms of public debate, it was here that the readiest answers were found to questions of educational practice and purpose. The answers, of course, were ambivalent: it was claimed that a progressivist approach to curriculum reform was not only necessitated by social justice but demanded by a modern economy, as if both forces pulled in the same direction: ‘we can afford free men, and we need them’ wrote one educationalist (James 1973). Nevertheless, the effect of such ambivalence was

that tensions between the economic and the educational were deferred. This for a period allowed space to projects whose objectives and procedures were far from being economic and which enabled a connection between education and other elements in the long revolutionary process that Williams identified. One way of reading James Callaghan's famous 1976 Ruskin speech is to see it as a call to reassert the primacy of education's economic role, against the practices and ideologies that schooling had become home to.

Current circumstances are different. The difference has partly to do with a reassertion of education's economic purpose and partly to do with a reduction in the autonomy of educational practice. At the same time the lines of connection – intellectual and practical – between education and those spaces in which a democratic common culture might be generated have become more tenuous. To borrow from Gramsci – in a way that I have done in other recent work – much more has occurred here than a mere turnaround of policy; it is not only educational programmes that have been changed, but the entire 'social complex' of relationships and institutions through which such programmes can be imagined, elaborated and realised (Gramsci 1971, 36; Jones 2013).

Responding

There is much to be learned from the right: from Hayek and the Mont Pèlerin Society about the long-term development of alternative ideas and programmes; from the Black Papers and the think-tanks of the 70s and 80s about simplicity and concreteness of argument; from Kenneth Baker and Michael Gove about adversarial politics and decisiveness in action. Conservatives have been good at finding points of intervention – issues, real and imaginary, in which the problems of a system are dramatised and

condensed. The image of the red teacher, or the negligent local authority, was used to good effect in the long prologue of mediatised scandal that led up to the ERA (School Without Walls 1978). But there are other things the left has to learn for itself. Unlike the right, it cannot rely on an endlessly supportive media. Nor does it expect or want to achieve change through capture of the existing state apparatus: it cannot managerialise its way to a democratic education and a common culture. Trying to open up the education system to new possibilities is something to be achieved through mobilisation, as well as through legislation and policy change. For the left, therefore, things are harder. Moving people to action is more difficult than constructing a media event. Even so, there are points at which campaigns against immediate injustices give an opportunity to probe longer-term problems of the post-1988 system, on all of the fronts sketched by Williams.

Durkheim suggested that culture and politics are closely related in the work of the school, as subjectivities are linked to a social order. Likewise, economic life, in the form of the social division of labour, has a formative effect on curricula, assessment and selection. To call into question educational practices is thus, in some circumstances, to head in the direction of criticising more general principles of social organisation. The ongoing debate about creativity and its suppression in the post-1988 school has the potential to do this. In the debate's latest phase, specialists in Early Education have counted the cost to children of incessant high stakes testing. Responding to their concerns, Gove has been characteristically dismissive. The under-fives, like everyone else, should be exposed to a:

‘system that aims to prepare pupils to solve hard problems in calculus or be a poet or engineer – a system freed from the grip of those who bleat bogus pop-psychology about “self

image”, which is an excuse for not teaching poor children how to add up.’ (Paton 2013)

But this kind of aggressive apologia encounters increasing opposition, particularly in nursery and primary schools. It is a site of conflict that is also a point of vulnerability. The Labour government tried in some sort to defuse the conflict, through a part-espousal of a ‘creativity agenda’. Conservatism appears to have no such intention, and is vulnerable for this reason. It should be possible to mobilise against it an alliance of teachers, educationalists and parents that draws strength from a humanist, constructivist tradition with a more generous vision of educational possibility. Beyond confrontations over immediate issues of curriculum and assessment lies the potential for a long-term war of position around education’s purposes and practice.

A second area of potential weakness is the government’s policy towards teachers, who are still regarded as a threat to educational progress. Inspection, performance management, differential pay and limited autonomy create grounds for conflict between government, school managers and teachers. This conflict is likely to be enduring, since the entire model of school change that government has worked with since the 1990s implies a teaching force that is made pliant by managerialism – a strategy that cuts against teachers’ sense of their own professionalism and dignity. The experience of teachers, in this sense, could be constructed, though it isn’t currently, as typical of a wider working population, confined within the discipline imposed by neo-liberalism. To present the politics of the educational workplace in these terms, could raise questions of democracy of the sort that Williams raised, but have since been silenced.

The third area of potential weakness concerns the relationship between education and the labour market. Across Europe, youth unemployment is high, and is likely to remain so even when recession ends. Precarity, in the form of low-wage, short-term, part-time employment, is likewise endemic (Standing 2011). The linkage between an education system that demands high performance from all and a labour market that can promise only uncertain rewards is not a stable one. The mobilisation of precarious youth, in part provoked by tensions between education and labour markets, has been a feature of politics across Europe, as well as being strikingly evident in Britain at the start of the Coalition period in 2010-11. It is a mobilisation that is likely to recur; any serious attempt to develop an educational programme of the left will want to relate to it.

Both the analysis offered earlier in this chapter, and the potential areas of conflict listed above, imply that the various different interests in the world of education face problems whose common origin is the neo-liberal turn in education policy that began in the 1980s and which has shaped the experience of parents, students, teachers and educationalists alike. It is essential that a left political programme recognises this and does not proceed on the basis of segregating the apparently separate grievances of different sectors. To do so would be to perpetuate precisely the kinds of division and conflict on which the politics of the right have thrived. A programme that attempts to begin a long revolution must start from a different point, that identifies the afflictions of different sectors and traces them to a common origin. It must also try to identify the themes that can express a shared interest. In this case, it is the development of practices and policies that can so far as possible insulate – ‘decommodify’ – education, here and now, from market

logic, while pointing forward to what can be achieved in the future. Insulation can take the form of strengthened trade unionism, of achieving the abolition of a particular layer of the testing system, of maintaining unstreamed classes and establishing school admissions policies that do not discriminate in favour of already privileged groups. A left programme would insist on the mutual compatibility of such measures; in particular, it would regard trade union action, not as an anachronistic embarrassment, but an essential part of the defence of educational space. Conversely, it would regard as inadequate any trade unionism that did not place the wider politics of education high on its agenda.

Gramsci writes that to be productive the development of a programme – in this context, a set of policies – must be accompanied by a sense of the ‘institutions and relationships’ that are a necessary part of the programme’s realisation. This is likewise the emphasis of *The Long Revolution*: the common culture and the democratic economic and political forms that Williams envisages can only be a collective achievement, an example of mass creativity. For this reason, those attempting to suggest a way forward after a long period of defeat need to think about the social actors whose energies might contribute to reconstruction. In this context, it is impossible not to be struck by the fact that the most creative educational initiatives – those which most squarely address neo-liberal agenda, and try to embody in their practice as well as the content of their discussions, an alternative to it – have arisen outside the formal sector. The ‘educational turn’ among art workers is one such instance (Rogoff 2010). The post-2010 student movement provides others, about which I have written elsewhere (Jones 2014b). The declaration of the Birmingham Free University exemplifies a more general stand:

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‘We ... seek to work collectively against the principles that now shape the so-called public university;
‘Central to the educational experiences we want to create is the idea that students and teachers have much to learn from one another;
‘Thus all who participate in the Birmingham Free University are scholars: student-scholars and teacher-scholars;
‘On our courses learning and teaching entail processes of continuous negotiation to ensure the fullest participation of all, recognising, respecting and celebrating human diversity;
‘All learning and teaching will be critical – questioning the world as it is to explore how it could be otherwise;
‘We believe that in order for all learning and teaching to be critical and democratic, dialogue is essential.
‘All critical, democratic dialogue amongst student-scholars and teacher-scholars should, when possible, not just remain in the classroom;
‘Thus our ultimate classroom is the wider world; we seek to develop educational processes aiming to build a more socially just and sustainable world.’ (Birmingham Free University 2012, original punctuation.)

To read this kind of declaration, and to participate in discussions around it, is to be struck by the thought that the long revolution about which Williams wrote must have had near its beginning statements like this, that looked hard at a situation that had become intolerable and tried to work out a very different way of organising essential human functions, learning and teaching among them. A similar kind of rethinking and (re)discovery has to go into a programme of the left, so that educational ideas and senses of political possibility which have been formed in harsh and depressing contexts can be enriched by other kinds of

understanding and commitment. Such an attempt at political alliance, and intellectual synthesis, is essential to confronting a situation whose logic is institutionally embedded, and opponents who, despite the conflicts and tensions of their own programme, remain politically resourceful and ideologically fluent.

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