

EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY IN NEW TIMES: THE POLITICS OF LEARNING AND THE LEARNER IN THE NEW WORLD DISORDER

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INTRODUCTION

In March 2005, western Sydney was in the grip of what the media referred to as a week of riots. According to the press, police were attacked in the suburb of Macquarie Fields by gangs of rioting youths throwing bottles, rocks, and fireworks. The “riots” were reported as a spontaneous response to the death of two youths in a high-speed car that had crashed as a result of being chased by police in “hot pursuit”. The high-speed chase in residential streets, a dangerous and highly controversial police practice, was justified as being necessary as the car was allegedly stolen. The scenes of “mob violence” occurred in a suburb that was typified by high levels of unemployment, crime, and drug abuse, and seemed to represent the climactic eruption of the frustrations of those who lived in the Macquarie Fields area, and suggested that there was a level of desperation that government officials and police had underestimated. There was a growing sense that things were getting out of control when, after four days, the street violence in Macquarie Fields also spread to inner-city Sydney in the tourist area of Darling Harbour, where groups of youths and police clashed.

The failure to understand and predict the response of the community to deaths after pursuit would appear surprising, as this was, in fact, the second major incident of this nature in less than two years. In 2003, riots erupted in Redfern, close to Sydney, after a young, teenage Aboriginal boy, T.J. Hickey, died after being pursued by police. Even after successive enquiries, the community in Redfern remained mystified as to how a boy on a bike could become impaled on a fence when police were in “hot pursuit”. The riots at Redfern in response to Hickey’s death were evidence of continuing poor relations between the Aboriginal community in Redfern, and the police. They were also seen as protests – like those at Macquarie Fields – by those who were clearly fed up with endemic and intergenerational poverty, inadequate government health and

housing services, and the steady erosion of opportunities for employment and education.

Reactions polarised, with the Police Commissioner lamely suggesting that the Macquarie Fields protesters “lacked respect” for police. Predictably, the leader of the Opposition called for “tough measures”, arrests, and long sentences in an escalating auction on law and order between the government and the opposition. The New South Wales (NSW) Premier, Bob Carr, conceded that social disadvantage is “a reality”, and that in the wake of this affair, “I would want to make sure that this money is being spent in the right areas”. The statements suggesting a continuation of the managerialist “value-for-money” approach to welfare and services would hardly trigger optimism in Macquarie Fields, as successive reviews of welfare spending has seen entitlements dwindle and surveillance of welfare recipients increase. Any sense of optimism about change in Macquarie Fields would have been crushed by the stunning response to the Redfern situation by the Minister responsible for Aboriginal housing who claimed that he didn’t want any Aboriginal housing on what was referred to as “The Block”, the historically significant area where the most disadvantaged Aborigines had lived in an Aboriginal-controlled housing area. The response by Frank Sartor, a former Mayor of Sydney, was a “copy cat” tactic in mimicking the opposition’s response to the Redfern situation: that the area should be bulldozed and the inhabitants rehoused elsewhere. The irony tended to escape the media, as Sartor announced an ambitious housing development scheme that would see Aboriginal housing disappear and be replaced by more prestigious general housing. But it did not escape Peter Walker, a director of the Aboriginal Housing Company, who said “I believe the government for whom Mr Sartor speaks are wanting no, to be blunt, no black faces on The Block” (Davies, 2005).

Together, the Macquarie Fields and Redfern riots act as a barometer about how class, race, and opportunity intersect in the urban landscape of contemporary Australia. Australia has

traditionally prided itself on being an egalitarian country where everyone is entitled to a fair go and to “climb the ladder of opportunity”, as the former Federal Opposition leader, Mark Latham, described. This ethos of equal opportunity has been at the heart of many of the myths about an Australian identity, where Australians see themselves as fair and reasonable people who are easy-going and tolerant. Notions such as mateship and the sanctity of the “fair go” are central to this often false and distorted view of Australians and of being Australian.

Yet, in contemporary Australia, there are numerous examples where this benign image is replaced with angry, mean spirited, and bigoted attitudes. It is many of these attitudes – that are now manifested in policy settings of governments – that generate populist images. These images, which now vilify refugees as “queue jumpers”, portray Aborigines as “rorters enjoying special advantages”, and the unemployed as “dole bludgers”, and the poor – more generally – as “losers”. Such attitudes have also generated a hysterical distrust of foreigners and a view that the activities of leftist politicians, academics, and unionists are suspicious behaviours by “elites” who are “out of touch” and unworthy of challenging the social order.

Events such as the Macquarie Fields and Redfern riots are important reminders about the fracturing of the social consensus that has existed around social policy, and that while neo-conservatives and the financial markets enthusiastically promote the virtues of deregulation and the markets, there are people who have missed the benefit of economic growth. Indeed, much of the rhetoric of both political parties has seen the acceptance of the market economy and the development of an efficient and competitive economy as the core rationale of both the government and the public sphere. This instrumental view has seen attacks on the legitimacy of a comprehensive social welfare system and its erosion to the status of a “safety net”. The notion of social security as an entitlement – a notion that grew out of the despair of rebuilding in post-war Europe and Australia – has had its legitimacy undermined by zealots of the market. The market ideology has portrayed social securities as creating dependency on government welfare and enervating an entrepreneurial spirit. Their criticism has created a situation where a distorted concept of reciprocal obligation now sees an absurd situation where the

“unemployed” are “working for the dole”. This blaming of the victim is one of the central platforms in conservative (both left and right) government responses that questions the legitimacy of the citizenry to claim benefits. Meaningful jobs, and options for training that lead to real jobs, are increasingly more difficult, particularly in those areas like Macquarie Fields and Redfern where poverty is institutionalised and intergenerational.

The riots in Macquarie Fields and Redfern have also reminded Australians that they are not immune to the sort of riots that have occurred in Toxteth and Oldham in Britain, and Los Angeles in the United States. It has also reminded them that inequality is ever present in Australia and also closer to those who have not had to encounter the reality of impoverishment and the reactions to dispossession. The growth of gated communities patrolled by security companies is evidence of the fractures between rich and poor and the way in which the frontiers between classes are being encountered – with barriers being erected. This desire for separation that is both physical and abstract represents an unwillingness to do anything about social justice.

In 2004, I moved to Wollongong, 70 kilometres south of Sydney, which is a steel-milling and mining area. The steelworks used to have 30,000 employees but now, in the face of international competition and global markets, has downsized to a workforce of some 6,000. The university where I now work has a workforce nearly equal to that of the steelworks, and the city of Wollongong markets itself as the “innovation city” that is built on science and knowledge. A few of the old mines operate in the hinterland to fuel the steel furnaces, but the Miner’s League halls and other artefacts of the Illawarra mining heritage are relics of a disappearing era. Nowadays, coal is imported to Wollongong from New Zealand. The region was also one of the major destinations for post-war migrants from Southern Europe who came to work in the steelworks, and their presence is evident in the architecture; the streetscape; and the faces, sounds, and smells of the city.

However, like all cities making the transition from an industrial-era to a post-industrial economy, social differentiation becomes increasingly polarised. New money has arrived in the region as Wollongong has become a desirable and cheap beachside location for

Sydneysiders. The former mining villages overlooking the blue Pacific are now inhabited by the super-rich who occupy million-dollar, seaside villas. The image of the carefree holiday spot is also tarnished by the struggles of green groups and Indigenous organizations, who, concerned about ecological impact of rampant development, fight to retain the natural and cultural heritage of the area.

Not all suburbs are on the “rich list”; there are some at the other extreme of the socio-economic scale. Depressed suburbs with large cohorts of public housing such as Port Kembla, Berkeley, and Warrawong are permanently anchored at the very bottom of the socio-economic indicators in NSW. This manifests itself in large numbers of young people who have few options and who are increasingly locked into a welfare-dependent cycle. The pension day procession sees groups of young people in a pilgrimage to the welfare agencies that operate an increasingly residual welfare system.

This marked contrast in lifestyle and opportunities provides the backdrop in which learners will be learning. It also frames the way in which the notions and currency of “lifelong learning” are negotiated in various institutional settings. This paper explores the nature of the challenges in the contemporary moment in responding to claims for social justice in education. The paper looks at the shifts in strategies historically adopted by the state in responding to disadvantage. The paper also argues that attempts to develop a community-based response to equity and social justice are undermined and challenged by aspects of a backlash to neo-liberal globalization that has spawned, and given licence to, a white politics and a consumerist greed termed “aspirationalism”.

As a response to the new politics of the state, education and training are now positioned within a punitive framework that blames the learner for the social condition in which they find themselves. “Reciprocal obligation” means that many of the welfare recipients are dragooned into training or education under the threat of losing their welfare payments and being condemned to a life without the safety net. The rhetoric of “learning or earning” exhibits a new level of intolerance to the needs of those who find that the post-industrial economy has passed them by. It situates learning as part of the state functions that are

intended to ensure discipline and legitimacy in a period where hope exists in diminished quantities.

The bleakness of this is termed a “politics of diminished hope” by Henry Giroux (1997) who argues that there is a new harshness that demonises and pathologises young people as undisciplined and lacking in respect, and sees them as menacing and intimidating. Giroux describes the environment in which many young people live:

As the national government dismantles services that have traditionally constituted a safety net for the poor, the children and the aged, the state becomes hollow as most compassionate functions are eliminated. Within the ascendancy of the “hollow state” and the changing economic and political conditions, kids have become the enemy of those in power, and the state apparatuses that address their problems are increasingly reduced to the police, the justice system and the armed forces, the other agencies of military surveillance (Giroux, 1997, pp. 73-74).

In the post-September 11th environment, the monitoring and surveillance capacity of the state has been escalated, and the politics of the contemporary moment has portrayed those at the bottom of the socio economic scale as the most threatening and menacing. It is an environment where the tensions associated with the regimes of control that characterise places such as Macquarie Fields and Redfern are, almost inevitably, going to erupt in explosive and dramatic circumstances. The new politics of the state also sees the welfare system and the education system increasingly integrated into the defence capacity of the state. In the United States, Lockheed Martin, an aeronautic company that manufactures jets and missiles, also holds major contracts for the provision of welfare services. This is a service provider that would not traditionally be associated with welfare. During the Iraq war, the link between education and defence was starkly illustrated in the statements of captured US soldiers who justified their presence in Iraq to their captors on the basis that they were in the Army to “get an education” that they could not otherwise pay for. In the US, a term in the Army provides relatively generous educational entitlements – under the GI Bill – for ex-soldiers on discharge. It is one of the prime reasons that why rural whites, Afro-Americans, Latino Americans, and newly arrived immigrants join the US armed forces and find themselves on the frontline – and often in the body bags.

The link between educational performance in building sustainable and peaceful communities has been explored using the notion of social capital. Putnam's (2000) major study on social capital concluded that "informal" social capital is a more durable predictor of achievement than "formal", institutionalised social capital. This suggests that the level of social trust in any community – evident in the frequency with which people communicate – is more important than formal structures and projects in promoting positive student outcomes. Putnam argues that, even in communities with material advantages, there can be a failure to do a good job of educating children because they don't connect with each other. The relationships between social capital and its explanation of educational achievement is one that has significant popularity with the World Bank, which sees the concept of social capital as important in capacity building to alleviate poverty. Putnam summarises the case for social capital in education as:

In short, parents in states with high levels of social capital are more engaged with their kids' education, and the students in states with high levels of social capital are more likely than students in less civic states to hit the books than each other (Putnam, 2000, p. 302).

The Putnam thesis has several dangers as it suggests a return to nostalgic views of an authentic community. This fails to account for the class-based and racial perspectives that typify community formation. It also suggests that the social capital will make up for deficiencies emerging from impoverishment, and that the role of the state and its redistribution capacities can be substituted by better social capital. It is a position that supports the increased privatisation of the public sphere and the normalisation of the residual state. Nevertheless, Putnam's position suggests a challenge for achieving equitable outcomes and is not simply advocating programs but is related to the nature and character of the communities that kids, parents, and students live in. In some ways, Putnam's thesis on social capital identified some of the flaws apparent in state intervention strategies designed to respond to inequalities, i.e., that they have failed to respond to broader community contexts, preferring to focus internally on schools and curriculum.

In the post 1939-45 war years, responses to social justice and equity in education and training have largely sought to uncouple the educational and institutional settings from the social and economic forces that were

responsible for inequality. This has, historically, seen a reformist approach based on compensatory programs operating within the schooling and educational system to meet the needs of those groups and individuals who have been identified as "disadvantaged". In the post-war era, the social-justice effort revolved around increasing participation rates of all students in achieving post-secondary outcomes. This was firstly attempted in the introduction of comprehensive education throughout the 1950s. A part of this challenge was to abolish the sort of streaming that saw working class kids go into technical high schools and then take up low-paid – and often-dangerous – blue-collar jobs, while middle and upper class kids went to high school then to university and then to highly paid white-collar jobs (Jackson and Marsden, 1972). The promise of equity and prosperity from the comprehensive system did not eventuate as the inequalities of the long post-war boom became starkly evident. From the 1960s, inequality was expressed as meeting the needs of "disadvantaged groups" such as women, Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, non-English Speaking Background (NESB) people, and disabled students, and was aimed at increasing participation levels (Connell, White, and Johnston, 1992).

Any failures in both participation and achievement were attributed to ethnocentric perspectives about "cultural deprivation" that somehow saw the linguistic and intellectual capacities of certain groups as inadequate and deficient. These interventions contained paternalistic assumptions based on the simplistic and mistaken notion of needing to "assimilate". These programs assigned blame on the individuals, identified them as incapable, and vilified them for being different to the ambiguous notions about a mythical, collective Australian identity. The recognition of the multicultural composition of Australian society saw the paternalism of these positions challenged by notions of self-determination in the case of indigenous education, and the processes and nature of participation were increasingly subject to negotiation. This challenge saw the growth of "needs-based" approaches, and involved greater control and participation of "disadvantaged" groups, including the development of peak bodies representing such groups (Connell et al., 1992). However great the achievements in lifting participation rates, there were differentiated outcomes that characterised the system into the 1980s and led to the realisation that working

with groups and individuals was futile if the inequalities are institutionally and structurally perpetuated.

As a consequence, equity initiatives in the late 20th century sought to develop “whole school approaches” and featured attempts at developing curriculum reforms that favoured pluralistic responses and perspectives (McCrae, 1988; Connell, et al., 1992). While certain initiatives recognised the links between “community disadvantage” and school performance, the paradigm associated with social justice favoured state intervention on behalf of groups with “special needs programs”. In large part, the system remained unreformed, and the social arrangements that created inequality – such as the message systems of classification, “hidden curriculum”, pedagogy, and evaluation that were observed by critics such as Basil Bernstein – remained unchallenged (Bernstein, 1975).

The advent of managerialist discourses in education in the 1980s also saw the replacement of the term, “special needs groups”, with the unfortunate terminology of “target groups”, and the instrumental nature of managerialism also specified the importance of “outcomes” as measures of the validity of such programs. The existence of compensatory programs, regardless of how effective or ineffective they were in meeting their objectives, was highly controversial, with a backlash against such initiatives arguing for the “mainstreaming” of such programs and their participants. Responses by managerialists included claims that self-managed schools, freed of bureaucratic restraints, would be able to respond to the needs of all children better. These claims neglected the historic tendencies and structural inequalities that were exacerbated by unrestrained management in a climate of scarce resources (Walford, 1993).

Criticisms of equity programs also claimed that special advantage was given to groups, and that equity meant “people getting the same things”. It is the same sort of logic used in claims that spending money on hospitals discriminates against well people. Such backlashes were motivated by some of the factors discussed in the next section – they were against “mainstreaming” of programs for special-needs and/or target groups, and they revived the idea of assimilation and eroded much of the headway made in the last part of the 20th century.

The backlash has been against both the concept of multiculturalism and many of the gains made

by groups and individuals such as Aborigines, migrants, the disabled, the unemployed, and the poor. It has been replaced by notions of “inclusion” that suggest that the needs of all children or learners need to be met on an individualised basis. Inclusion suggests the cultural, linguistic, and learning needs of all students should be treated equally and incorporated in the processes, programs, and practices of learning. However, inclusion assumes that individuals can independently negotiate and secure responses when the evidence of their own alienation and marginalisation suggests that this process has in fact not happened. While inclusive strategies contain worthy and laudable aims in developing a pluralistic response in diverse settings, such objectives cannot be seen as independent from social, political, and cultural forces that challenge community and school-based attempts at equity. It is important to understand the social context of learning in the contemporary moment and the interrelationships between race, class, and status that define the boundaries of how equality and opportunity are defined and developed in the 21st century.

POLITICS OF WHITENESS AND BACKLASH POLITICS

The nature of “backlash” politics is not simply the expression of pleadings to restore a balance, but a more complex expression of racial identity and a call for the preservation of privilege and advantage over “others”. Backlash politics invokes the politics of “whiteness”, where racial identity becomes a signifier of resistance to the encroachment of minority rights. Giroux argues that a new politics arises as a new discourse of race – one that aims at appeasing “white anxiety and undermining the legacy of racial and social justice” (Giroux, 1997, p. 93). This discourse of whiteness is seen as an ambivalent signifier of resentment that gives expression to a mass of whites who feel victimized and who are bitter and resentful of the current social order. Anxieties are triggered by the omnipresence of gay, black, indigenous, immigrant, and non-Anglo ethnics and – in particular – by illegal, non-white immigration.

In Australia, this has been exploited by the popularisation of the term “the battler” which operates as a code for the white working class. In America, the sense of embattlement and alienation is represented in the notion of “white trash”, who author Dorothy Allison refers to as “all the working class poor who fall out of the middle class – the middle class boys gone bad”

and suggests that the white trash label is “the difference between thinking your life is hopeless and *knowing* that it is”. Cult figures lacking sophistication who have been labelled white trash elites include, in the US, Heidi Fleisch (ex-prostitute and consort to US political figures), Tanya Harding (ex-US ice skating champion who conspired in the assault on a rival skater), and John Wayne Bobbitt (notable only for having his penis severed by his ex-wife). In Australia, such people include Chopper Reid (ex-criminal and bike gang member turned best selling author) and Sam Newman (football and TV personality). Together, they represent a backlash against what are seen as comfortable elites. The mix of celebrity bad-boy and bad-girl stunts, and their unselfconscious, loser images, all combine to resonate with a resentful and dispossessed and powerless “white trailer park trash” (Friend, 1994).

The politics of whiteness seeks to erode and delegitimise the progressive gains made by minority groups and others who are outside a right wing political spectrum, and argues for “equal treatment”. The justification of these claims of unfavourable treatment and discrimination of whites in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary is given licence by claims of “political correctness”. Political correctness challenges both the language and intent of social justice and equality, and challenges attempts to change the way issues are expressed. Those challenging the cause of equality have trivialised the language – concentrating on “smaller parts of the larger project of changing culture” (Kalantzis and Cope, 1997, p. 34). It is this climate that saw critics who are obsessed with the use of terms such as “chairperson”, – a non-gender-specific term that was replacing the term “chairman”. In other examples, these changes challenge many long-held assumptions, such as Australia Day being termed Invasion Day by indigenous people. The Commissioner for Equal Opportunity, Chris Puplick, saw political correctness as “a retreat by an entire society from fundamental notions of tolerance” (Kalantzis and Cope, 1997, p. 36). The impact of this was clearly an attempt by conservative forces to undermine and question the legitimacy of the language of change and, also, of those proposing and supporting change.

ASPIRATIONALISM: THE POLITICS OF FETISH AND CONSUMERISM

In Australia, new class lines are being forged around consumption. This is a shift from earlier perspectives on class that were based on background, education, and employment. A new set of informal criteria have been established around how people spend their money and what they buy. These new class arrangements are characterised by an emphasis on new contemporary notions of style and chic. This obsession with style has seen a new hierarchy established around brand labels and product logos as markers of class. This is a contrived hierarchy and is part of a “hard sell” by the corporate sector that markets a linkage between high status and the possession and consumption of certain goods and services. It is also aligned with an increasing preoccupation with celebrity status and the notion of “lifestyle” options. While not everyone is motivated by what the stars dress in, eat, and do, there is an increasing shift towards materialism and private consumption evident in the public discourse.

Justified by the rubric of public choice theory, this shift sees a concentration on personalised and individualised notions of achievement and advancement collapsing the purpose of life into taken-for-granted notions such as “getting on” and “advancing up the ladder of opportunity”. The metaphors of this new “Aspirationalism” are focused on achievement and advancement through material gain, and the accumulation of commodities that are recognised as markers of prestige. The extension of the boundaries of what constitutes the private sphere are colonising and undermining what constitutes the state’s responsibility to the collective and public sphere. Fuelled by uncertainty over government and state provision, and a perspective that sees issues as matters of individual entitlements, traditional redistributive approaches are challenged. Aspirationalism in real terms means both an increased privatisation of functions of the state, with use-pays options, and a diminishing amount of direct state services. Increasingly, the state functions are centred on the provision of schemes such as “tax credits”, “rebates”, “vouchers”, and “one-off contributions” that amount to payments to individuals rather than to programs. These schemes have questionable relevance to those who most need government support, and tend to be contrived around the need to build political loyalty rather than meet the needs of the most needy. Indeed, in an environment that is increasingly driven by individualism, the

legitimacy of entitlement is under question and is challenged. A backlash politics of envy sees the entitlements of some of the poorest and most powerless under challenge. It is a climate that sees single mothers, some unemployed, and Aborigines conspiring to make false and unnecessary claims on the social welfare budget, and entitlements are viewed as a “safety net” or last option for the really impoverished and desperate. Paradoxically, it is a climate where the white politics described by Giroux has justified the stripping of support programs from state welfare in order to rectify what is mistakenly seen as the special advantages given to the “poor” through the welfare system. This realigning of the balance is now enshrined as public policy under the guise of assisting the “battler”, but sees increasing amounts of the state resources being directed to “middle class” welfare. It also sees growth in private schooling, private health, private superannuation, and all manner of private “optional extras”. These all represent an increasing privatisation of the public sphere.

In education, this sees a transfer of resources out of the public sector and into the private sector. In Australia, the federal government sees its role as “looking after” private schooling, and it has shifted funds to private schooling in amounts that have seen overall outlays on private schools exceeding all expenditure on universities. In the US, this has seen state government such as South Carolina, Arizona, Minnesota, Iowa, Florida, Pennsylvania, and Illinois introduce tax credits for private education that is seen by teacher unions and civil rights groups as an attempt to re-introduce racial segregation by promoting “white flight” to wealthy private schools. At the very least, these “voucher line states” have contributed to a segmented system where the poor are reliant on an under resourced sector (Shades of the past, 2004).

Increasingly, these shifts are also evidence of fracturing along religious lines, with private education being an important vehicle for both mainstream religions and new popular charismatic and evangelical movements, as well as for religions such as Islam and Buddhism. There are key questions about the role the state occupies in sponsoring religious schooling and the extent to which this contributes to the segmentation of communities – and the way in which religious values impinge on and contradict civic norms. Mostly, this charge of not sponsoring secular “civic values and undermining national unity” is directed at non-Christian schools such as Islamic schools, with

most Christian schools escaping scrutiny on these claims. Nevertheless, in countries such as Australia these sensitive issues have not been confronted, and the public and private dilemmas have been expressed as a need for governance that enables private and public partnerships (Caldwell and Keating, 2004). This position fails to respond to the increasing shift of state resources into the hands of the better off and aspiring middle classes.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

The temptation to negativity – when neo-conservative George W. Bush and his Australian partner John Howard commence terms with big majorities – is overwhelming, but there is an urgent need to re-energise and revitalise debates around education to respond to the developments in class and identity formation that are outlined in this paper. Too often debates in education are about the merits of testing, which method of literacy teaching is better, and whether schools should be ranked on performance. These issues are important and should not be underestimated. However, the issue about social justice and equity are equally, if no more, important in establishing the nature and character of any system and the sort of society we all want to live in.

Education has progressively been uncoupled and depoliticised and collapsed into an individual action of consumer choice without consideration of the collective social and cultural responsibilities. It is part of a global trend and there needs to be interventions that promote the (re)politicisation of education and training beyond the considerations of efficiency that have dominated the reform agenda. It can start with a level of disobedience and contest at the corporate level. The development of simple local action can promote a “bottom up” alternative to some of the social outcomes of globalization.

This might include some steps that are outlined by Kell, Shore, and Singh (2005):

- The depoliticised nature of education needs to be challenged, and questions about the purpose and rationale of the system need to be questioned. There needs to be a more rigorous questioning of the past, and explorations of policy and practice. This might mean challenging and reclaiming the language of such terms as “innovation”, “change”, “equity”, “equality”, and “social justice”. It will mean re-looking at what we

mean by “being equal” and what “special needs” might mean. This also means that civic values need to be promoted rather than corporate imperatives that identify “target groups” but forget the structural inequalities that are inbuilt with the systems.

- A key challenge is the civil rights of students and workers in the context of post-September 11th, where the polarisation and demonising has created opportunities for the stripping of human rights and the removal of access to basic international law. This is important in an environment where white politics, aspirationalism, and backlash politics – in an environment of global uncertainty about education – combine to affirm the marginalisation of groups such as Muslims, refugees, Aborigines and other indigenous peoples, as well as migratory and unskilled workers. Consumerism contradicts a rights-based approach because interaction is collapsed into an exchange value, and this prevents the development of equitable and enduring relationships based on reciprocity rather than exploitation.
- There needs to be critical engagement with the “whiteness” of education systems and society generally and the way it privileges certain power elites, viewpoints, and orientations of the world. This means dismantling the euro-centric approaches that dominate market-based knowledge production. It means replacing the “low” mono-cultural products with the “high” multicultural products emerging from indigenous and minority communities as well across borders in the region.
- Inclusion needs to be situated in the processes of globalization and it needs to be understood that it is the global forces that create the situation where everyone will need the intervention and help of the state. It means that, in the climate of neo-conservatism, nobody is immune from the forces that contribute to disempowerment, alienation, and impoverishment. Recent protest by the wealthy and privileged in England about fox hunting suggest that rank is no protection in the face of the globalization of rural occupations. To cite Marx, “You mightn’t be interested in the war but its interested in you!”.

Finally, there needs to be a sense of global optimism that encounters the neo-conservative

agenda and forges partnerships across borders and develops local initiatives to explore the opportunities for a globally connected community and politically informed local community engaged in the process of activism and dissent.

The challenge of achieving social justice with education and training is one that merges aspects of human rights and re-distributive justice in economic terms, as well as responding to the tensions around race and identity that have emerged in response to aspects of globalization. This is the new environment in which learning and the learner is being imagined, and one that requires a vigorous and systematic response by teachers, learners, workers, and citizens.

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