

Review article**Education for transformation****Four events on educational responses to neoliberalism and colonialism:***World Education Forum, Palestine, October 2010**The Future of Higher Education in Scotland, Edinburgh February 2011**Educational Spaces for Alterity, Nottingham, April 2011**Beyond the Crisis: Learning from each other's struggles, Dublin, May 2011*

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That education has the potential for transformation, despite its obvious potential for repression, is likely to be an important principle for the readers of *Concept*. The institutions of education have been amongst the first targets of the new neoliberal onslaught of the Cameron-Clegg government in Westminster, and put debates about education into a sharper focus. A series of events attended over the last six months was an opportunity to debate with people with a shared commitment to education for social, political and cultural transformation. These four events took place in four different countries, each with their own experiences of the bumpy and uneven development of neoliberal capitalism. They were organised by social movements, trades unions and universities.

The World Education Forum (WEF) is a regular offshoot of the World Social Forum, itself a 'pedagogical space' (Fisher and Ponniah 2003) for the world's civil society and social and people's movements in opposition to neoliberal globalisation, and under the banner of 'another world is possible'. The WEF attracts educationalists – from schools and universities, community education, teachers' unions, cultural workers, students and activists – for whom education plays a part in building, or imagining, this better world.

October 2010 was the first time the WEF was held in Palestine, which was itself a challenge. Palestine's land and people, need we be reminded, are fragmented by a military colonial power driven by the racist ideology of Zionism, with the connivance of much of the world's leaders. The majority of historical Palestine now forms the 'Jewish, democratic state' of Israel, the remainder is divided between the West Bank - occupied by the Israeli military with the collusion of the Palestinian Authority and violated by illegal Israeli settlements – and the Gaza strip - governed by the Islamist, anti-Zionist Hamas which offers a low level of armed resistance against the occupation, and besieged by an economic blockade and regular military attack by Israel. Most Palestinians can't travel between these territories and are often hindered by military checkpoints when travelling within the West Bank. Many Arabs from other countries are prevented from entering Palestine by Israel. Four million Palestinian people are refugees from Israeli ethnic cleansing, in UN run refugee camps within the occupied territories or in neighbouring countries. The fact that the WEF was organised in such a context is itself a feat of resilience and defiance, but not without its costs. A member of the WEF Palestinian National Committee, the community activist Ameer Makhoul, was arrested and imprisoned by the Israelis.

The epicentre of the WEF was in Ramallah in the West Bank, although events took place simultaneously in a number of venues across the West Bank, in Gaza and within the 'green line' – the armistice boundary that forms the de facto border between Israel and the Palestinian territories – as well as in Beirut, home to the largest number of Palestinian refugees outside Palestine. Some venues changed at short notice and promised video links between the West Bank and Gaza didn't materialise. Presentations and seminars mostly had simultaneous translation between Arabic and English and / or French and sometimes Spanish. As such, any participant could only get a sense of a small section of activities. I attended events in Ramallah and one day in Bethlehem.

Essentially there were two conversations going on in the WEF, connected only by thin strands of communication. The first was a debate amongst Palestinians of the state of education in Palestine, with international supporters listening and occasionally adding comments to the debate. The second was an exchange amongst international educators, activists and artists making only tangential reference to the Palestinian situation. The latter could almost have occurred anywhere although the role of education in supporting the call for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions was a significant feature.

Schooling in Palestine has always been colonial, the Israeli occupation replacing that of Jordan, which took over from the British Mandate occupation in 1948. There is an urgent necessity for a curriculum which 'decolonises the mind' of the Palestinian people, and the work of Franz Fanon, the anti-colonial educator was an important source: Fanon's daughter and president of the Frantz Fanon Foundation, Mireille Fanon, was a keynote speaker at several events. What constitutes de-colonising education constituted an important part of the discussion: what is the relative place of Palestine-specific, general arabist and universal knowledge? to what extent is Enlightenment thought universal or western-imperialist? What is the place of Islam in education: as the religion and value base of a majority but not all Palestinians; and as culture and source of resistance to the occupation; and as an epistemological source - Islamic science for example predated and informed the development of western science?

Community, informal and popular education was present in the forum although disappointingly little and distributed throughout venues thus precluding my participation in much of it. Some of this would be familiar to community educators - anti-discriminatory practices of gender awareness - whereas others themes were more specific to Palestine, such as the use of art forms in defending Palestinian culture against imperialism. Of particular interest was the role of popular education during the intifadas, both informally through engagement in the uprising, and more formally in structured classes amongst the thousands of young adults in Israeli prisons – classes which covered political economy through to foreign languages and vocational subjects such as construction trades.

The Israeli occupation has had a damaging impact on formal education, with school children and university students often having to endure the daily humiliation of queuing to show ID to Israeli conscript soldiers at checkpoints (and frequently to suffer sexual harassment, threat of violence or random detention) on their journey to and from their places of learning. Large numbers of girls and young women simply

stopped attending. On the other hand, Palestinians are an educated people and universities provide a small and relatively open space for critique, not just of the Israeli occupation but also of Palestinian and world politics. The university of Birzeit, for example, is a renowned centre of intellectual and political excellence with collaborations and solidarity across the world. The defence of intellectual space, including from the relatively new threat of neoliberalism was seen as a priority for educational activists.

Responses to neoliberalism was a major theme of the other events in this review, as it has been of the student protests which have taken to the streets, occupied universities and vandalised the corporations and parties which promote it. The neoliberal development has taken a different shape in England, Scotland and Ireland but educational activists in all these places have been mobilising to respond to the crisis. These events give a sense of what is going on, especially amongst university radicals who are largely working in and with community activists and social movements.

In Ireland, the collapse of the ‘Celtic Tiger’ economy was followed by an IMF/EU bailout with accompanying economic austerity. The Greens, who had been propping up the Fianna Fail led neoliberal government, pulled out of the coalition leading to the collapse of government and the subsequent election of Fine Gael, which is continuing neoliberal policies. In this context, radical social movements are going through a period of reflection on where the opportunities for challenge now lie, and the National University of Ireland, Maynooth, responded by organising this seminar: *Beyond the Crisis: Learning from each other’s struggles*.

This is exactly the role which a university should be playing, and in this case was facilitated through two postgraduate programmes: ‘Anthropology and Development’ and ‘Community Education, Equality and Social Activism’. Some of the activists who attended were students on these courses but many were not and attracted by the potential for critical intellectual reflection on the day-to-day struggles against the impacts of cuts and privatisation and the abuses of multinational corporations. The principle draw was John Holloway whose theme of ‘Rage against the Rule of Money’ continued in his increasingly well known arguments in *Crack Capitalism* – in which revolutionary action builds from the spaces where our lives resist the inundation of the logic of capital accumulation. The prominence of Holloway, and the location of the seminar in Seomra Spraoi autonomous centre, reflected the largely anarchist leanings of the activists, although Marxist and other left ideologies were also present and the seminar succeeded in bringing together at least some people from diverse traditions and both middle class and working class radicals.

In England, the impact of the Cameron-Clegg coalition’s £9000 tuition fee decision is already having such a commercialising impact on student and academic practice to the extent that many people who are committed to critical, relevant education are increasingly working outwith the university sector. The Social Science Centre in Nottingham, the Free University of Liverpool, the So We Stand and Trapeze Collectives and the Really Open University in Leeds are all examples of initiatives semi- or fully detached from universities and which provide academically-informed, critical education targeted especially at communities and movements engaged in struggle (see <http://roundhousejournal.org/>). Other initiatives are taking place within universities but the most relevant having partnerships with NGOs or movement organisations. All these were represented at the *Educational Spaces for Alterity* seminar hosted by the Centre for Social and Global Justice in Nottingham. Many

speakers saw their work within a tradition of radical and alternative universities, largely, perhaps of the autonomous variety which emerged in the 1960s, but also the socialist versions in the Workers Educational Association and the Labour Colleges.

An issue which emerged in the debates here is the distinction between critical education and popular education. Some practitioners saw their objective as facilitating critical reflection in their learners, whether they be community activists, university students or school teachers, and tended to draw on those aspects of Freire's thought which emphasised critical consciousness, albeit largely interpreted in an individualised way. I suspect that this is a form of practice which many of us working in the constraints of higher or community education rely on, or even aspire to, and we need to be reminded how much of a distortion of Freire and collusion with liberal ideology it is. Critical individuals may be more inclined to analyse their contexts more politically and may become more effective activists. But Freire's philosophy is more collective and ideologically partial, and the politically engagement comes epistemologically, and often practically, prior to the education. Amongst the most convincing examples of education in response to neoliberalism were those which started from points of conflict, whether in local communities fighting cuts, amongst low paid migrants and asylum seekers, or indeed in the occupied campus buildings in the resistance to tuition fees.

The student protests made a considerable contribution to the SNP's election commitment not to introduce fees in Scotland, a message which also came through in responses to the Green Paper on a Scottish solution to funding higher education, early in 2011. The commitment to public funding, which still needs to be defended, enhances the possibilities amongst radical educators for ensuring that relevant education can occur within the university sector. Within this context, the trades unions who organise academics in Scotland jointly held a conference in February on *The Future for Higher Education in Scotland*. The implications of what a Scottish solution might look like – and the opportunities which this holds for both critical education and engagement with communities of struggle – was the subject of critical debate amongst those who both teach and organise politically in the sector.

The logic of a publicly funded university sector is that it is a service to all citizens, not just those who attend classes. In England narratives of education, even on the left, have often emphasised the economic benefit to graduates which a degree confers, as if a university education is nothing more than a financial investment to enable individuals to buy competitive advantage. In Scotland the possibilities for resisting this consumerist narrative is greater simply from the commitment to public funding, and the opportunities therefore for academics to engage with community struggles and social movements for social benefit greater. That is not to be complacent and this is still a space to be fought for: and this is what is provided by events such as this, and its followup discussions on futures for a democratic intellect. That it is organised by trades unions moreover provides the opportunity for the critical reflection on the role of universities in society to be connected to the struggles over the universities' political economy.

Reference

Fisher, William & Ponniah, Thomas (eds) 2003 *Another World Is Possible: Popular Alternatives To Globalization At The World Social Forum*., London: Zed Books.