In his new book, *The Falling Rate of Learning and the Neoliberal Endgame*, David Blacker analyzes the philosophy underpinning education reform in the United States. In a narrative that many readers will find simultaneously witty and chilling, Blacker argues that Marx’s idea of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall is seen playing out in the ever more desperate global search for cheaper sources of labour and the next technological fix. Based on this analysis, he concludes for the vast majority of humanity “no longer do (the elites) want to exploit you; they want you gone” (p.95). Moreover, in the process of “escaping from the rest of humanity” (p.93), they are destroying the planet. Late stage capitalism is strapped to a suicide vest.

Blacker’s book explains how the history of public education has been inextricably bound up with capitalism. As capitalism grew and flourished, so did the press for compulsory and free schooling. Universal literacy allowed the capitalist class to extract ever more surplus value from its workforce. Moreover, schools instilled the necessary discipline to make workers more quiescent in their exploitation. But now, Blacker argues, as millions of people become economically useless for its...
purposes, schools have become little more than holding centers for children, or as he describes contemporary schooling “testing factories, military recruitment centres and in-processing operations for the penal system” (p.117). Elites are now profiting from these holding centres. Or as Blacker puts it, “the time has come to grab the education sector, hold it upside down and shake until whatever change falls out of its hapless pockets” (p.84).

Blacker disputes that education can bring about equality, rejecting the ideological assumption key to neoliberal reform. In this he concurs with Ball (2012) and many others (Karp, 2008; Saltman, 2005). Blacker argues that liberation depends on development of a broader social movement that contests economic and political policy. For example, in discussing the crushing debt students now incur in paying for higher education, Blacker advocates students refuse to pay back their debts. In Blacker’s words, “The solution is, as always, revolution. In this case the revolutionary act would be to repudiate educational debt as illegitimate. All of it” (p.145).

However when Blacker considers possibilities about how the broad social movement he advocates might develop, he not only ignores possibilities of teacher agency but rejects this possibility explicitly: “Their failure is fated . . . they are straitjacketed and unable to escape, no matter how hard they struggle. So insofar as they are inside the assemblage they might as well relax. And try to find some other way. When I say “relax”, I mean it” (p.223).

I see two problems with Blacker’s conclusion. First, it contradicts considerable empirical evidence about teachers’ global resistance to the neoliberal project, aided by the rebirth of teacher unionism, called variously “social justice” or “social movement” teacher unionism (Weiner, 2012). While he identifies a glimmer of hope in the efforts of U.K. independent school Summerhill, he fails to mention effective resistance that has been organized by U.K. teachers in the National Union of Teachers (NUT), which represents teachers in England and Wales (Courtney & Little, 2014). We have much to learn from teachers in Mexico and
Brazil who are struggling against corporate education reform to develop a pedagogy, which is rooted in local communities and cultures (Compton & Weiner, 2008). Across the world, public schools are sites of great significance to local communities, and centers of struggle against school closures, cuts, privatization and neoliberal reform. Schools do indeed reproduce capitalist ideology and purpose. But in fighting against privatization and the loss of democratic control of schooling, as they are in many parts of the world, teachers do become part of a “broader and enveloping social movement,” which contains the hope of a more democratic world.

Teachers in the Global North are increasingly subject to attacks on their tenure and conditions, strict accountability regimes and intensification of work (Galton & MacBeath, 2008). Those in the South are subject to the same pressures, along with class sizes of 60 to 200, below subsistence wages and minimal facilities (De Siqueira, 2012). Teachers who are subject to these conditions are not likely to want to “relax” as Blacker advocates, accepting their conditions and the de-professionalization of their work.

Blacker's book should be read by education activists, if only to make them face more squarely the task ahead. But there is danger in underestimating teachers' potential to resist.

References


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