

Where has youth radicalism gone? Political participation and democratic pedagogy

An e-dialogue between Alpesh Maisuria and Spyros Themelis

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Abstract

The idea for this e-dialogue came after a stimulating seminar we attended in 2004. This was supposed to be an academically rigorous paper about political participation and critical pedagogy. However, this is not how it has turned out. This final version appears to be more in the style of an alcoholically induced rant. We make no apologies for this!

Context

When Tony Blair and his New Labour Party came into power in 1997, many people in England and elsewhere sighed in relief that the country could leave its Conservative past behind after 18 years. However, the optimism of the early days would be short-lived and it was soon to be followed by disillusionment and alienation.

The continuing deregulation, privatisation and liberalisation of the labour market, the takeover of publicly owned services by corporations running them on contracts for profit, and the increasingly close ties between the economic and the political elites has facilitated and fuelled the deepening of inequalities between rich and poor. Flexible economy, progressive taxation, free market zones, Private Finance Initiative (PFI) and, of course, the so-called 'war on terror' are only some of the current buzzwords that indicate the governing principles of the New Labour government. The foundations of the free-market economy that were laid consistently by Thatcherism are now being fully developed by New Labour. Notions such as quality of life, collective rights and humane working conditions seem to have become obsolete dodos, objects of interest

only to the historians of politics. The result is the dehumanisation of the majority for the sake of a privileged minority.

In such a climate, it is not surprising that some Labour Cabinet members (who then became former Cabinet members), Ministers (who then became ex-Ministers), MPs, and crucially Trade Unionists, distanced themselves from the ruling New Labour clique and its post-97 politics. What is more, and of greater significance in these times, is the increasing abstention from political participation of the majority of the population, as exemplified at the last national elections in May 2005. Thus, slightly over a half of those entitled to vote did not do so, which raises serious questions about the legitimacy of the government let alone its ability to act as a representative of the majority of its electorate. This is the canvass of the discussion that follows.

The conversation

Alpesh: Spyros, Professor Dave Hill, our comrade, respected educationalist, former Labour Leader of East Sussex County Council Labour Group, and one-time Labour Party election candidate, recently announced his retirement from the Labour Party after 44 years of membership. This made me think about my involvement in politics and parliamentary affiliation. In fact, let me rephrase this; the seemingly lack of opportunity to be involved.

With the inextricable historical links the Fabians Society have had with the working class labour movement, in 2003 I joined the Young Fabians with the hope of hooking up with some young leftie-comrades. To say I was disappointed is an understatement. The Young Fabians I found were pin striped suited city bankers, espousing the New Labour rhetoric, whilst in private expressing disgruntlement at reforms that are the ash of Thatcher's cigar – so where have all the young Socialists and Marxists gone?

Spyros: Alpesh, your concerns about the lack of opportunities to get involved in politics are not to be seen as a personal issue: I've been struggling for quite a while to understand where it comes from, if it is a new phenomenon, which groups of people are affected and, as Lenin used to ask, 'who benefits'. From discussions I've been having in Greece (where it is also perceived as a relatively new phenomenon) and in the UK I started thinking that there are, broadly speaking two kinds of reactions to this phenomenon.

Firstly, there's the 'blame-it-all reaction; the 'we-are-all-responsible' kind of attitude. Appealing as this may be it masks the roots of the issue (for some it is not a problem at all, so let me approach it inductively and try to support my case before I call it a 'problem'). This stream of thought lends itself to a pathologisation of society, in that, symptoms are treated as the causes, the recipient of the action (or lack of it) swaps place with the omnipotent and invisible motivator.

The second reaction to the widespread lack of political participation is one that could be encapsulated in the 'blame-the-youth' phrase. The rationale here is easier to follow: proponents adopt an evolutionary idea of society where we are divided into generations of succeeding and preceding occupants of positions in society. Attitudes are distributed according to membership to groups in society which correspond to biological generations. Characteristics are then attached to each one of these groups with easiness, i.e. the older generations 'care' while the young people are disengaged from politics, indifferent to wider social, political, economic, environmental and other issues: "they just don't care, that's their attitude nowadays", "they are all the same; it's a sign of our times" are some of the favourite mottos in this kind of parlance.

However, there is still a question lurking: who are we looking for? The young Marxists and the young Socialists? The youth, generally speaking, who are interested in politics (or is this same question)?

Alpesh: You make some very pertinent points here, and ask 'who are we looking for?' But should the question not be: 'who is looking (out?) for us and our ideals?'

Spyros: Your question raises issues of identification and partisanship: who is 'us' and who is 'them'? If these are two distinct groups, what sets them apart? What makes 'us' visible and what 'them'? Or, is it the invisibility of youth politics that allows the emergence of the 'us' and the 'them'? Does it matter who sees us and if it does, to whom? To see a group or an individual equals to exist? To exist equals to act? To act equals to act ethically, in solidarity, mindfully?

Ontological questions aside: I'm tempted to say, running the risk of being over-simplistic, that if you don't act (as a member of a group, collectively) ethically, in solidarity, mindfully, and so forth, then you don't exist!! But which act is ethical, in solidarity, mindful and so on?

So let's go back to the identity question. The Greek poet, Odysseas Elitis, said: "I am your place/or I may be nobody/but I can become whatever you want me to become"! The same we could propose as young socialists (the 'us' of the previous dualism): we want to become what society needs us to become, unlike the pin striped suited bankers who know well in advance what they want to become, simply because they know how to play the game of power and have invested heavily in climbing up the greasy pole of social hierarchy.

Alpesh: Wow! Talk about answering a question with a question! You are right to identify issues of identification from the nature of my question. Professor Carrie Paechter talks about language, and simply using the term "us" insinuates that there must be an 'other' – which indirectly marginalises and creates allegiances to causes. It's Bush's and Blair's crazy mantra: "You're either with us or you are *against* us". For them there are the absolutes of: good (of which they are supreme), and evil of which everyone one else must be by default.

I suppose when I talk about 'them' I mean the ruling class and capitalist class, and they are identified quite simply by the visible [e.g. the WTO] and invisible [e.g. the old boys' network in education] hegemonic power relation that exists in all sections of the global society. I'm not implying that all Fabians are part of the ruling class, but they are part of the establishment by toeing the New Labour line – New Labourites *are* part of the ruling class.

On the one hand, I do think it is important to be seen, not in Hollywood heroic terms obviously, but a figurehead that exemplifies resistance and critical consciousness as opposed to those who are unhappy (I would argue that we are all unhappy emotionally and physically in a capitalist society) but continued to subscribe to the status quo. This is the essence of existing.

I do acknowledge your hesitations about overextending your point about acting in solidarity, though. It could be strongly argued that every revolutionary movement needs just one person to carry the flag of dissent manifesting a united discourse of counter-hegemonic action.

I like your point about "playing the game of power and progression". I would strongly put a case forward to suggest that the ruling class actually do not want all young people involved in the political process at Westminster Village. As Paul Willis (1977) has exemplified in his excellent book, *Learning to Labour: how working class kids get working class jobs*, social divisions are a part of the

political elite's ambitions – in fact I would suggest that political divisions are a part of the political agenda of most ministers. Thus, despite espousing the rhetoric that class does not exist, and for example, the racialised gendered fraction of the working class do not have sticky floors and glass ceilings. Discounting class (ruling/capitalist, working class, racialised and gendered working class, or political class) is political masturbation of the highest order!

Spyros: I want to deal with education and the “us” within this field as well as with issues of social class, that you rightly identify as the underpinnings of most of our contemporary social anomalies. To begin with, let's consider the issue of the alleged apathy or disengagement from politics of the youth. Cross-national research showed that 63% of the new and young voters did not vote in the national elections, in May 2005. Furthermore, recent research also demonstrated that it is lack of critical pedagogy that lays behind youth abstention, indeed a very intriguing finding (Ipsos MORI, 2005).

When this finding was presented at the 'Marxism and Education: Renewing Dialogues VII' seminar many participants seemed to be sceptical as it implied, according to them, a critique on those primarily involved in the young people's education (and pedagogy): their teachers!! Two issues are raised here: firstly, at a theoretical level, we moved beyond the old-Marxist concept of alienation to explain abstention. Of course, alienation still has a lot to tell us but I believe that we cannot use blanket concepts to explain social phenomena, unless we have previously exemplified what we mean by them, showed how, when and why they emerge (the historical conditions, in other words) and finally to show in which contemporary cases they can be applied.

Secondly, about the implicit criticism on those entrusted the formal education of the young generation. I can understand why those criticised are defensive. Most of those who did put up their guards were educators themselves. They know better than anyone how hard it is to give – day in, day out – their creative energy and passion and yet to have to sustain such criticisms that may be perceived as cancelling out their input.

Richard Sennett, in his *Respect* (2004) book, argues that people configure their worth through work. In our capitalist societies our public 'face' is interwoven if not primarily defined by our occupation: our social standing, self and mutual esteem, recognition, respect and status are all linked to one another and are of immense significance to one's well-being. What is more, all these notions are

underpinned by our place in the division of labour thus they also have a social dimension which supersedes the personal. Inescapably approval, praise, recognition, rewarding and reinforcement or the lack of them seems to valorise or otherwise what educators produce in their daily struggle. Adding up to this the particularity and the difficulty of the role of the educators, since values, socialisation and ethical issues are involved in their daily labour, we can probably start comprehending why it was such a highly debated issue at the said seminar.

Notwithstanding this, we shouldn't ignore that pedagogy is not merely about schooling although this is one of its most important dimensions. Now, returning to my initial point about youth abstention from politics. The lack of pedagogy should not be restricted merely to the educators of the formal educational institutions but it ought to be conceived in its broader sense. After all, it is not an issue merely for the educators to resolve but a much wider social one. This is where I'll throw the ball to you.

Alpesh: Yes, I agree with much of what you have said, but not all. Let me begin by dealing with your first issue and expanding some points. Firstly, we must look at social, cultural and political trends beyond our borders ("our" literally meaning the mass of people existing on the British Isles). Germany is a case study. A hugely exciting place, where the people, especially some youth groups, appear to have awoken from their political hibernation and can be seen coming out to vote in the recent polls for the Left-wing candidates. The same has happened in Mexico. From looking outwards, we must then look inwards, and ask some tempestuous question about aims, ethics values, objectives, and hope.

Paulo Freire's influence does not permeate mainstream political thought, but should do. Drawing from Marx, his work on (critical) consciousness is absolutely fundamental for people to understand the *status quo* and their position in a global capitalist means of production driven by neoliberalism. Similarly, Peter McLaren's fabulous work is widely known to those mainly within academia only. Just imagine if this pedagogy emphasising a critical, rather than deskilling and technicist, approach was adopted by all educators, including those on the political right.

Let me go on. You began your argument by suggesting that the "old" Marxian concept of alienation is perhaps outdated, or we may have gone beyond this "blanket-term". Actually, I am inclined to say that we haven't moved beyond alienation; we haven't arrived at it! Let me return to something I mentioned earlier: the notion that the ruling elite do not want to compromise their status and power

structures by replacing the bourgeoisie democracy with a social democratic one – i.e. a political system where the highest minister in the land doesn't get elected with just 33% of the votes, essentially meaning that 77% of the electorate decided they didn't want him in power. Funny notion of democratic representation, eh! This is why I think the notion of alienation is more than relevant. I don't know how better to answer your question than exemplifying the occurrence of alienation in democracy.

Let me briefly deal with the issue about "entrusted" teachers. Do we trust teachers? I don't think we do. I have argued elsewhere (see Maisuria, 2005) that the gradual standardisation and centralisation of the formal education system, especially in the National Curriculum, is stifling creativity from students and teachers, causing great anxiety amongst pupils and teacher to tick boxes and hit arbitrary targets, and amongst a whole host of other things, essentially education is no longer a place of enrichment where the child is enabled to explore and achieve, it is now a place of training for the knowledge economy. It is the repressive tool of the capitalists that Luis Althusser describes as the "Ideological State Apparatus". It makes me sick to see teachers rote learning for the purposes of SAT's, GCSE's, selection tests at secondary schools. I would not be surprised to see the covert (vocationalised) curriculum for HE be formalised (more) for similar reasons (standards, league tables etc). The best teachers are those who come through courses in higher education that encourage students to critically think about what they are teaching.

Spyros: I'll start from your point regarding alienation: I think you illustrate in the most lucid manner how alienation occurs in the context of contemporary parliamentarism in the UK by picking up on youth abstention from the recent national elections. Quite eloquently you articulate the mechanism through which alienation occurs and this was the crux of my main scepticism in respect to the usage of the term: its centrality and relevance shouldn't be lost nor its meaning and analytical prominence denigrated or abducted as other concepts, such as accountability or respect, that have been hijacked in the parlance and practice of New Labourite politicians and policy makers. Provided we show the way alienation occurs, we cannot effectively speak about it: otherwise it becomes a buzzword of the many employed by pundits and TV commentators nowadays. And yet all this can be linked to democracy and pedagogy, or rather we can think of it as another dimension of the symbiotic relationship between democracy and pedagogy and their broken ties, as they are embodied, experienced and lived in our every day lives. Fischman and McLaren (2005) define democratic pedagogies as:

...those that motivate teachers and students, schools and communities to deliberate and shape the choices that they make with the overarching purpose of contributing to increased social justice, equality, and improvement in the quality of life for all constituencies within the larger society.

I believe that we cannot have democratic pedagogy where democracy is missing!

At the same we should not restrict democratic pedagogy to the domain of schooling or education. It should encompass all social relations and all fields and spheres of human action and thought. School selection and standardisation of knowledge, the 'ala carte' mentality (in respect to knowledge) that we witness in the UK, apart from treating us (learners and educators) as clients in a 'supermarketised' arena, renders the field of education as a bull-ring where the fittest survives and progresses while the weaker stays behind. This neo-Darwinian/neo-evolutionist way of thinking (and designing policies) resonates, theoretically, in the Parsonian thinking and his 'functional structuralism': everything has to have a practical usage and only when we envision such a usage is it worthwhile to mobilise our resources for its achievement. If you transfer this into education and educational policymaking, it becomes rather obvious that notions such as 'meritocracy', 'equal access', and so on, have become void of meaning or at least with no universal acceptance. The sociologist John Goldthorpe has consistently shown through extensive empirical research how and why meritocracy through education does not actually exist in the UK. For him, the belief in a meritocratic educational system is a fallacy (what he coins as the 'meritocratic fallacy'), since not all students have the same opportunities to progress in education and from there to get a fair share in the labour market.

But now let me return to Fischman and McLaren (2005). For them:

...democratic pedagogies are embedded in a web of social relations, where the rights and duties of the learners and educators are evaluated not only for the transmission of knowledge (these days most often reduced to the results of standardized tests) but also for the possible consequences of the participants' actions (those of teachers, administrators, students, and communities) in the ongoing democratisation of the larger society.

Well, I don't know if you have seen this text, but if you put it next to the one written by you above, quite a lot of similarities emerge: this does not strike me as a surprise: the language of democratic pedagogy is the same regardless of where it is written and for which context. Although it is able to demarcate society from its institutions and the agents from the structures surrounding them, it does not

adopt a separationist/partitionist logic about them: while it can see their interaction and their interface it does not aim to cut off one from another in order to control the individuals and institutions such as education. This is a process so much favoured in advanced capitalism; that by living your life as a critical being sets you apart from its very logic!

Alpesh: '[W]e cannot have democratic pedagogies where democracy is missing!' is a superb phrase that should be etched in ink on the forehead of all Ministers involved with education!

I do concur with Fischman and McLaren, and I do think we have a real problem in education which is two fold: preparation of teachers, and classroom pedagogy. Although the two are intertwined in a complex matrix of interconnections, let me deal with them one at a time.

Teacher training (once it was teacher *education*) routes are actually de-skilling teachers, who are becoming (perhaps unconsciously) servants of policy initiatives – a top down approach. Training teachers on some courses are being denied a rigorous holistic education (remember it is now training) underpinned with sociology, politics and social science. Teachers are now being drilled on how to deal with disruptive children (this means children who require effort!), by initiatives and strategies rather than human understanding, empathy and time. I do not lay the blame on teachers themselves, they are the messengers after all, and to be cavalier and maverick requires risking pay rises, promotions and good relations with management, it's all about conformity. As alluded to earlier, it is no coincidence that the most effective teachers come from academic backgrounds that critique policies initiatives of equal opportunities. These are the teachers who make a difference.

Secondly, critical and revolutionary pedagogy as advocated by Peter McLaren is fantastic, and we need teachers to buy into these concepts, and through teacher education, not training, is how we can do it. We can't sit back and allow the dehumanising and corrupting influence of capitalism to seep into education further than its current rot. Theories of reformism, as espoused by proponents such as Eduard Bernstien, are not urgent enough; we need action underpinned by Revolutionary Marxism – and the time is ripe now.

What I want, what we need, is a genuine social democracy – a socially, economically and politically just society. This is impossible whilst the Prime Minister is a virile young courtier of neo-liberalism

and neo-Conservatism. The 2005 education White Paper was no reprise: education is being privatised. And make no mistake, New-Labour have set the foundations to privatise education through the backdoor, this is no less than subterfuge at the highest level. Glenn Rikowski (2005), an international authority on the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), explains on a BBC 4 radio programme how the White paper is opening the provision of education to the globalised trading:

Now, if you have a situation where state schools and private schools are intermingling, however you want to put it, and working with each other, that opens the whole of the state system more fully to the General Agreement on Trade in Services, which is about transforming educational services into internationally tradable commodities. The key point is that there are some local education authorities being run by companies, and some individual schools being run by companies on contract, and profits are made by providing the service at less than contract price, which impinges on staff pay, conditions, the type of labour that is used.

Spyros: Unfortunately, we live in such a conjuncture in history that the issues that you raise above, as well as Rikowski's remarks, are more apropos than ever. Few other moments have signalled such a deep turn in education that also encompasses all its dimensions: from curriculum to admissions, from school segregation to the buy-out of schools, from the crisis in teacher education to the bankruptcy of values in education.

A few weeks ago I was reading Peter McLaren's paper about the invasion of big corporations in the domain of education, what he terms the 'MacDonaldisation' of education. Although it seemed a purely American phenomenon, the internationalisation and globalisation of capital traversed the Atlantic and reached our doorstep more rapidly than we had imagined. Of course, this didn't happen in a few weeks' time: it was already in the pipeline and after the elite democracy that is imposed onto us sanctioned a 'majority' government that was voted by a small minority of the electorate, the commands of the capital owners and its appropriators have started being executed.

Having set the political environment that surrounds education, the question of 'who educates the educators' bounces back and is seeking for an answer. The easy way to go about it is to say that educators are educated by those who provide them with the specialised knowledge they possess: i.e. Universities, teachers' colleges, educational establishments etc. However, this leaves aside the issue of ideology: are all these institutions free to shape their curriculum without external influences (i.e. from the market); are they exempted from competition, administrative and teaching costs;

are they free to exit the system of inspection, assessment (which is accompanied with rewards or otherwise) and so on? Obviously not. Therefore they operate within a given framework and set of values that is consigned upon by each Government. The Government ensures that all teacher-‘training’ institutions receive some of their income according to their performance and results and that all such institutions comply with and act in accordance with the legislation pertaining their function and operation and so on.

Despite their relative (and limited) autonomy, teacher-‘training’ institutions are entrenched into the ideology of the Government. This is the ideology of the ruling class as Althusser has shown us. Althusser (1970) maintained that all the institutions that operate within the State, such as education, are steeped into this ruling ideology, while he argued that the role of the capitalist educational system is to reproduce the diversified division of labour. That is, to transmit ‘know-how’ and ‘rules’ of good behaviour since the reproduction of the labour force requires a dual reproduction: of its skills and that of the submission to the ruling class, i.e. to the bourgeoisie.

Nowadays, the ruling ideology is no other than that of the capital and the free market. Insofar as the Government is distinct from the State it appropriates its institutions in order to secure its own unity and reproduction. Educational ideology therefore functions as the unitary of the political forces in power, which do not have a human face but they can be recognised in the form of the various political parties.

Having said this, a contradiction emerges: how is it that a neo-liberal government such as New Labour uses the state in order to maintain its power? Why does it need the state institutions such as education in order to disseminate its ideology? The contradiction is lurking because neo-liberalism is about less state (in opposition to neo-conservatism which is about more state), yet the state and its institutions are focal in this function.

Alpesh: You make some excellent points that I want to pick up, Spyros. The ‘Macdonaldisation’ of public services does sometimes seem like a notion far removed from British society – make no mistake it is here. Capitalisation is manifesting itself in every service that was traditionally state owned. Through the exercise of deregulation, liberalisation, and privatisation - capital has found its way into state education, the National Health Service, and the British transport infrastructure. In fact, Professor Dave Hill has done some excellent work on this very issue for the International Labour Organisation (ILO) recently. Through a Marxist analysis it is clear to

see how capitalisation, assisted by the government and the World Trade Organisation (WTO), is now firmly entrenched in the fabric of public services. "So what's wrong with this?" is a common response. Well, the consequences are crippling is the short answer. People just do not see, and are not shown, how capitalisation spells the increase in exploitation (of the 'raced' and gendered working class), erosion of working conditions, decrease of pay but more hours and less benefits. Here is just one example: Sweden has a relatively social democratic government with restricted capitalisation of the state sector. Sweden's levels of inequality has barely increased (from a relatively low baseline) in the last 30 years, and also remarkably, the UK has levels of inequality commensurate with that of Sweden 30 years ago.

A second point I want to comment on is your point about the seemingly dichotomous relationship between neo-conservatism and neo-liberalism. I don't believe that such a distinction exists in practice. You are right, neo-liberalism, in theory, is about less state intervention. However, if the state is accommodating (through the WTO, GATS, and a neo-liberal agenda) to a free-market, then it makes no difference to neo-liberals whether the government espouses neo-conservative views as long as it creates the climate for freer trade through deregulation, liberalisation, and privatisation. New Labour is a case and example of this. David Cameron, the leader of the Conservative Party, can only applaud New Labour's policies, such as those contained in the education White Paper of October 2005. The Private Finance Initiative dovetails neatly with Conservative ideals incepted by Norman Lamont's Compulsory Competitive Tendering (CCT) policies. The upshot is that New Labour's ideological anchorage is more conservative than the Conservatives! In sum then, if a government, no matter how neo-conservative, poses no threat to the neo-liberal juggernaut, they can not only live with it, but also harness their neo-liberalism.

There is really a problem now with the fact that all the mainstream political parties are right of the centre (notice how talk of the Giddens inspired Third Way approach has disappeared?). This means that people have no real alternatives, and are forced to extremist factions such as the BNP, often on single issues such as immigration. As David Cameron enthuses, "vote Blue get Green". The lines are becoming blurred between traditional demarcated policies camps.

I want to move on, Spyros. How do you think notions of 'democracy', political representation/participation and young people's share in all that are impacted?

Spyros: Although we live at a time when society is increasingly driven by consumption, market values, the irrational 'logic' of capital, and we are daily witnessing the totalising effects of global capitalism, this has not yet become the target of collective struggle. The paradox is that despite the fact that the vast majority of people live and experience the huge range of injustices and inequalities global capitalism has brought and is still bringing about, we still fall short from acquiring the collective consciousness to fight against it. Although social movements exist – from Seattle to Genoa and from Brazil to France, we have many such testimonies – the proletariat has not been united towards a common goal: the replacement of capitalism with a socialist order. Notwithstanding that we realise we are all on the same boat sailing to disaster we have not managed yet to overtake the wheel from the few who possess it, namely the neo-liberals and the capitalists. Modern 'democratic' institutions, such as the political parties, do nothing else but consolidate bourgeoisie democracy. The radical elements within the parties and outside them are being kept away from real action and dynamic groups such as young, critical people are given no space to act. However, this is where a future can begin. The proletariat can be mobilised so that we develop collective consciousness which is steeped in revolutionary and critical pedagogy, and eventually we can capsize the boat of global capitalism. This has to be the first moment of a new socialist order for all.

Alpesh: I agree, Spyros. We have a choice as offered by Rosa Luxemburg: the choice between a capitalist endorsed barbarism on the one hand, or, on the other, socialism. I know which one we have chosen.

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