

BOOK REVIEWS

Benign Violence: Education in and Beyond the Age of Reason

By Ansgar Allen

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Review by Stephen Griffin, Newman University

Ansgar Allen's book is a challenge to the reader. It compels us to see beyond the artifice of the modern face of Education to uncover the illusion of meritocracy and the claim that education is an "incontestable social good."

Allen writes deliberately against the grain presenting his ideas as a series of reflections upon Education in its entirety. As such it is a sobering, uncomfortable and relentless read that causes us to examine our own relationships as pedagogues.

Set around the core themes of "Bodies," "Populations" and "Meritocracies" it follows a Foucauldian line of enquiry without ever succumbing to the mere replication of well-worn themes. Foucault himself was uneasy with the idea that his name be synonymous with a method or form of analysis, instead preferring that researchers engaged with genealogies themselves. Allen succeeds on this count. Furthermore he is careful to acknowledge, where many do not, that engaging with Foucault causes us to be "faced with a set of difficulties" not least the cherry picking of concepts and the reticence of researchers to "pinpoint and denounce the power" they observe.

Acknowledging this has allowed Allen to follow a different path. He has produced a book that dissects education and society's preoccupation with standardisation and testing and the obsession of the norm. Furthermore he traces its historical underpinnings charting the rise of modern day schooling and the construction of the "educated body" of the child. The unmasking of power relations and the pursuance of them to their origins is a core component of Allen's book—from the eugenic, bio-political undertones of modern schooling to the more recent obsessions with intelligence testing, through to our obsessions with value added data. Allen suggests to us that the system, the institution of the school, college and university is at its heart violent but that this violence is masked behind our collective good intentions.

When speaking of genealogy Allen suggests that it "refuses to speak to the future, seeking instead to destabilise the present." Here the present of education has indeed been destabilised and yet Allen's ultimate challenge is a call to arms—to "rebel against our educational present" whilst acknowledging that for many of us this will necessarily be a

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painful experience. Consequently this is an important and timely book that makes for essential, and yet uncomfortable reading for anyone who cares about education.

Reviewer details

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