

BOOK REVIEWS

Hegemony and Education under Neoliberalism: Insights from Gramsci

by Peter Mayo

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Review by Nick Peim, Birmingham University, UK

This is not I think the kind of book you would read from cover to cover. It seems to have been written with that proviso in mind, in fact. Its chapters have the feeling of being discrete essays on dimensions of Gramsci's thought. For while the book's title indicates a general interest in questions concerning education, neoliberalism and hegemony, it is in effect a series of essays on Gramsci. The author freely admits that the book represents the gathering together of otherwise scattered writings. These disparate pieces are united by the three-way focus—education, neoliberalism and hegemony—that holds it together thematically rather than logically. As such it provides a useful, instructive and well-informed resource.

None of the above is meant to suggest that the book is difficult to digest: it is well-written and readable. The author is a Gramsci scholar who has trawled the works for insights and quotes that are usefully brought together here to give a more or less consistent and fairly exhaustive portrait of Gramsci's thinking on the topics it addresses. Whatever else it may be, however, it is not a book about education, neoliberalism and hegemony that could stand alone as a plausible introduction and reliable statement on those themes independently of the Gramsci dimension.

For anyone tempted to suggest that the moment of Gramsci belongs to another era, this book reminds us that Gramsci's thought is both (relatively) recent and relevant. It is recent in that Gramsci really came to prominence in the Anglophone world in the 1970s decades after his early death in 1937. It is relevant in the way that the author makes us aware of this in the updating of Gramsci's thinking on education. Connections are made between Gramscian ideas and contemporary critical pedagogy, at length and in some detail, beginning with its account of a kind of Gramscian turn in certain sectors of the English speaking educational world. At stake here is the question about what it was that Gramsci wanted or advocated: access to elite education for all or the thoroughgoing reformation of education to eradicate elitism. Mayo in fact walks us, rather briskly, through the literature on Gramsci and education focussing most attention on one of his own areas of special interest, adult education. Above all though, Mayo affirms that Gramsci is a key figure for any perspective dealing with "a radical and socially

transformative approach to education.” With the proliferation of academic departments claiming to represent “Education and Social Justice” the implication is that Gramsci ought to be a key point of reference.

Mayo goes on to explore the question concerning the state in neo-liberal times, arguing that critical theorists have been too keen to argue for the diminution of the nation state. I think it would have to be acknowledged that Mayo’s understanding of the dynamics of globalization are not well theorized or fully thought through, although he is also aware of Gramsci’s thought relating to the colonial legacy.

A major limitation of Mayo’s account of Gramsci’s thought from a contemporary perspective is the account of the state as a relatively autonomous instrument of neo-liberalism. The key move, I think, that he doesn’t make is to equate the state with its apparatuses and in particular with education. He rather claims that the contemporary nation state uses education for its own neoliberal ends, as though education and the state were separable. This move unconsciously lets Mayo off the hook of having to confront the insight that is so unpalatable for the educational “radicals” and advocates of “critical pedagogy”: that education is always already an instrument of the political regime it serves and that to argue for the reformation or even salvation of education means having to forget the ontology of the apparatus and its historical development in modernity and beyond. Of course, this line of thinking is actually unthinkable for those who align themselves with the critical pedagogy movement.

There is another big question hovering over Mayo’s analysis of neoliberalism and the state, the question of the provenance of neoliberalism and its relations with the “social democratic arm of the state.” For Mayo the supervention of the one over the other is a simple matter of fact. It has occurred, although it might be tricky to chart an exact time-line for the process. And this highlights a limitation on the kind of historical thinking that Mayo is capable of engaging in given his avowed dedication to both his themes and his Gramscian perspective. It is impossible from this position, it seems, to reread the meaning of the so-called “social democratic arm of the state” in terms of a continuity with the past order and to rethink its ontological status. To do so would compromise the neoliberalism thesis and all the benefits it carries with it for sustaining what I would call the myth of critical pedagogy.

The book goes on to deal with adult education (two chapters) and with schooling, including a disquisition on Gramsci’s idea of the “Unitarian School” that engages with questions concerning class and culture and the problem of access to cultural capital for the working-class child. In all of this, according to Mayo, Gramsci is clearly addicted to the idea of an essentially “humanistic” education and Mayo includes reference to the various critiques of Gramsci’s position that he at the same time dismisses. So the book wants to stick with Gramsci’s rejection of vocational education as a limiting, class based domain but without seriously addressing the cultural questions that continue to beset questions about giving equal access to the benefits of a broadly humanistic schooling. Mayo tries to acknowledge something of the difficulty he faces when he declares that there are dangers in offering a “scriptural reading” of a writer one draws sustenance from. It is a danger that I am not sure Mayo has successfully negotiated.

Latter portions of the book are dedicated to what is referred to as “the Southern question,” the relations between Gramsci and Freire, Gramsci’s impact on critical pedagogy

BOOK REVIEW *Mayo: Hegemony and Education under Neoliberalism*

and a final summing up chapter closes the book. One is left with a sense of a serious, well-informed engagement with Gramsci and an ongoing dialogue with contemporary ideas in the area of critical pedagogy. For that perhaps rare being who may have thought that the whole business of proposing the redemption of education from the neoliberal state is misguided and fails to see the deep collusion between the two, this book won't cure you of your dark misgivings.

Reviewer details

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