

4. IDEOLOGY AND EDUCATION

➤ LECTURE NOTES

Neoliberal ideology

- The nature of liberalism
- The rise of neoliberalism

Neoconservative ideology

- The nature of conservatism
- The rise of neoconservatism

The effects on education

- Impact of neoliberal ideology
- Impact of neoconservative ideology

➤ KEY READING

- Hicks, D. (2004) [Radical Education](#)
- Rage and Hope, Michael Apple ~ www.perfectfit.org/CT/apple1.html

➤ DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- In what ways has neoliberal ideology influenced your own education?
- In what ways might neoliberal ideology affect images of the future held in society?

➤ LEARNING OUTCOMES

- Critical understanding of some of the influences of neoliberal ideology on society
- Critical understanding of the influences of neoliberal ideology on education

LECTURE NOTES

The nature of ideology

In Session 3 reference was made to the social construction of futures studies, i.e. the fact that no area of human endeavour can ever be neutral or value-free since it is always underpinned by the values and beliefs, both conscious and unconscious, of its proponents. Such sets of beliefs or worldviews are examples of what sociologists call ideologies.

Ideology is defined as a broad interlocked set of ideas and beliefs about the world held by a group of people that they demonstrate in both behaviour and conversation to various audiences. These systems of belief are usually seen as 'the way things really are' by the groups holding them, and they become the taken-for-granted ways of making sense of the world (Meighan et al. 2007: 212).

It is important therefore to understand the political ideologies which underpin the current western worldview and in summarising (if oversimplifying) some of the key features of neoliberal and neoconservative ideology I have drawn particularly on Heywood (2007) and Goodwin's (2007) valuable text *Using Political Ideas*, both of which are well worth consulting. It is important to understand these ideologies because they have shaped so much of education today. Without an understanding of this wider and deeper context any progressive or radical initiatives in education are likely to fail.

1. NEOLIBERAL IDEOLOGY

The nature of liberalism

In Britain liberalism grew out of the ideas of 18th century philosophers such as Hobbes and Locke and now appears as the basis of western 'reality' rather than one ideology amongst others. Whereas in medieval times society was seen as a hierarchical and organic whole Enlightenment thinkers saw the individual as of prime importance and thus stressed the importance of individual liberty. Consequently the rights of the individual and the attainment of human happiness are key goals in liberalism.

Liberalism also assumes that the individual is essentially a rational being and therefore knows his/her own best interests. The pursuit of self-interest is therefore what should guide all human activity. The corollary of this is that liberalism has a 'weak'

notion of society as a whole and of notions of the 'public good.' The role of government, it is argued, is to protect the rights of the individual (whether persons or companies) and not to interfere in the pursuit of their self-interest.

The rise of neoliberalism

The 1970s saw a backlash against the idea that the state should provide services for all and especially for the weaker members of society. The socialist notion of a welfare state which emerged after World War Two in the UK was the opposite of liberalism in that it believed the state should provide a range of services to meet everyone's needs. In the UK this led to the creation of a national health service, the provision of a state pension, and the notion that services such as water, transport and education should be provide for all.

Neo (new) liberals in the UK and the USA, however, believed that the state should be 'weak' and that what is privately owned is always good and what is publicly owned is bad. A central belief is that of 'economic rationality' – everyone should act to maximise their own personal benefits, i.e. the notion of free-enterprise. This means that private businesses competing against each other should result in the greatest good for each individual. The state should therefore not interfere in any way that might hinder business and industry from pursuing the vital goal of capitalism which is to maximise profits for producers and shareholders.

2. NEOCONSERVATIVE IDEOLOGY

The nature of conservatism

This political ideology is based on what is seen as the prime importance of conserving things so that which is perceived as a threat to the existing social order needs to be resisted. What exists is by definition better than any possible alternatives, thus the importance of respecting and honouring tradition. Most conservatives tend to be somewhat pessimistic about human nature and highlight its weakness, selfishness and irrationality (Goodwin, 2007: 162). In order to control such human proclivities government may need to be authoritarian in order to protect the social order. Conservatives tend to stress the importance of the family, moral values, self-restraint, strict punishment, private property and patriotism. Individuals, it is argued, should see to their own needs and not depend on (so-called) 'handouts' offered by a welfare state.

The rise of neoconservatism

In the 1970s neo (new) conservatives in the UK and the USA were also opposed to everything that the welfare state stood for although not necessarily for the same reasons as neoliberals. What they did agree with was their view of economics. Neoconservatives thus prioritise the privatisation of national assets and deregulation of the market in order to encourage business. This has led to a reduction in social services, employment protection and building regulations, for example, because they are seen as impediments to business. People, it is argued, should always be self-reliant. Rather than the state trying to control the economy 'free market' economics is seen as the best foundation for a vibrant economy. From the late 1970s onwards the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher in the UK put these beliefs into practice in a way which profoundly changed the nature of British society. In particular neoliberal and neoconservative beliefs were to drastically change the face of education, as set out below. It is thus vital for educators to understand the critique of these two ideologies and their impact on society. Two of the best sources on this are Gray (2009) and Harvey (2007).

3. THE EFFECTS ON EDUCATION

Since the 1980s the impact of neoliberal and neoconservative ideas on education in the UK and USA has been dramatic, in particular see Apple (2004) and his *Educating the 'Right' Way: Markets, standards, God and inequality* (2006). In the UK proponents of these views argued that education had been going in the wrong direction, i.e. it reflected welfare state ideals, and so in the 80s they launched a series of ideological attacks against teachers, schools and the education system itself – a system which had made England famous for the quality of its primary education. From the 1950s to the early 1980s UK teachers were respected because they were professionals in their field, free to engage in all sorts of curriculum innovations, supported by their Local Education Authorities (LEAs), and engaged in a variety of national curriculum projects. During this period schools had both greater autonomy and greater local support than thereafter.

Impact of neoliberal ideas

Money spent on education is seen as a waste of time unless it helps the country compete efficiently and effectively in the global market place. Students become seen as global capital and their value is judged against the extent to which they have gained the skills needed to be effective in the global marketplace. The metaphors applied to education became those of the market place: parents as consumers, business as the model for education, internal and external competition in schools to bring out what is the best in both pupils and schools.

UK teachers in the 1980s, together with their professionalism and unions, their passion for education in its own right, were seen as impediments to this view of education. Schools were thus encouraged to forge greater links with business and industry since economics is seen as the measure of all things. Education has become modelled on the business world and has taken a more technocratic, managerial and performance driven view of teaching and learning.

Impact of neoconservative ideas

In the 1980s the Conservative party under Thatcher launched a major attack against the teaching profession and introduced a mandatory national curriculum in order to gain greater control over what went on in schools. With this came the dismantling of the power of LEAs which, especially in Labour controlled areas, were seen as having a pernicious effect on young people. Conservatives wanted a return to traditional values, a curriculum which was untainted by discussion of local and global issues and one which stressed high moral and educational standards.

The way to achieve these goals, they believed, was to stress the importance of literacy, numeracy, science and information technology as key subject areas, to bring in SATs (standard attainment tasks) in order to raise standards within schools and league tables in order to raise standards nationally. This was based on the belief that competition always brings out the best in people (as the free market is supposed to do in business) and will therefore do the same for both pupils and schools.

By giving parents a choice over the school their children went to (instead of attending the local school which had traditionally been the case) it was argued that good schools would prosper and poor ones would be closed down. This process is seen by neoconservatives as part of the 'natural' (i.e. competitive) order. What the curriculum changes actually led to was a deskilling of teachers since all they had to do was follow a national curriculum already shaped for them by Conservative politicians.

Whilst the arrival of New Labour in the 90s might have challenged many of these educational principles in fact they generally only tinkered with the system having abandoned welfare state principles for neoliberal values themselves. Whilst under New Labour education was still underpinned by these values the curriculum was opened up to include vital issues such as citizenship, education for sustainable development and sustainable schools. For quite different views of the purposes of education consult writers such as Goldstein and Selby (2000), Burke (2003) and Hicks (2004).

The arrival of a Conservative/LibDem coalition in 2010 has naturally seen a resurgence of conservative ideas. Whereas traditionally the state has provided education through the normal network of primary and secondary schools the new Minister

of Education, Michael Gove, believes that parents and other interest groups should be free to set up their own schools (the privatisation of education). How successful or divisive such schools will be remains to be seen. Similarly, since conservatives believe in a 'traditional' (old fashioned?) curriculum, the emphasis is now on 'proper' disciplines so that cross-curriculum concerns such as citizenship and education for sustainability are no longer a focus of official concern.

This session has outlined some of the reasons for needing to understand neoliberal and neoconservative ideologies given the impact they have on the form of education that exists in many countries today. It is important to understand how preconceived ideologies always shape the nature of education. In understanding this it is possible to see how education could be different if it were based on a different value system. Radical initiatives, such as futures education, global education and education for sustainability, if well taught can challenge taken-for-granted notions of education and vitally contribute to longer term educational change.

REFERENCES & KEY READING (*)

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Burke, C. & Grosvenor, I. (2003) *The School I'd Like: Children and young people's reflections on an education for the 21st century*, London: RoutledgeFalmer

Goldstein, T. & Selby, D. (2000) *Weaving Connections: Educating for peace, social and environmental justice*, Toronto: Sumach Press

(*) Goodwin, B. (2007) *Using Political Ideas*, 5th edition, London: John Wiley

Gray, J. (2009) *False Dawn: The delusions of global capitalism*, London: Granta

Harvey, D. (2007) *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

(*) Heywood, A. (2007) *Political Ideologies: An introduction*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

Hicks, D. (2004) Radical education, chapter 12 in: S. Ward (ed) *Education Studies: A student's guide*, London: RoutledgeFalmer

(*) Meighan, R. et al. (2007) *A Sociology of Educating*, London: Continuum

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Whether you are reading this for your own interest, sharing this material with others or using it as an aid to your teaching this session raises questions about promoting futures thinking in the classroom. After checking 'Discussion skills in groups' jot down your response to the following questions:

1. In what ways has neoliberal ideology influenced your own education?
2. In what ways might neoliberal ideology affect images of the future held in society?

After discussing each question (it is useful to agree in advance how long to spend on each) list on a flipchart the main responses arising in the group. What similarities are there, what differences? What might be the possible origins of these? What further reading might be useful?