

Disobeying reality: the value of concrete utopia in education

Sarah Amsler*

Is the end of hope a beginning?

Educators in the UK and many other places across the world are now overly familiar with projects of marketisation and the enclosure of learning spaces by capital. Dehumanising logics of economic efficiency, standardisation, competition, social and epistemic hierarchy, and homogenous order capture our imaginations, pedagogical relationships and everyday working lives; energy that could mobilise possibilities for learning and liberation is being funnelled into resisting, or even surviving, repressive systems of institutional control. So many people are so tired.

It is not that things are entirely stuck; in this situation, there is a great deal of movement that matters. People in schools, colleges and universities are working hard to learn, teach and live in ways 'that are at odds with dominant, and dominating, modes of being'. But dismantling the systemic violence that runs through the veins of the Global Education Reform Movement is a next-level problem for which we do not yet have collectively decent solutions. This is not surprising, as we are living in what the sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos has called 'a paradigmatic transition' - a time when our existing knowledge, practices and institutions create problems they cannot help us resolve, but that in failing provide opportunities to imagine more radical changes in ourselves and the ways we live. Yet while this disappointment in familiar possibilities is often experienced as the end of hope, it can also be viewed as a beginning.

Turning our backs on 'the crisis' in education

Changing our lens on reality can help us make new starts. One lens that needs changing in English education is the prevailing analysis of what 'neoliberal' education is and what problems it creates for educators

across all levels. At one level, we now 'know' the details: in finance - defunding, corporate funding, competitive funding, privatisation, debt and dispossession; in pedagogy - the standardisation, instrumentalisation and consumerisation of learning; in knowledge - epistemic and disciplinary hierarchies; in organisation - the creation, normalisation and celebration of separations, divisions and competition among individuals and institutions; in labour - work intensification and exploitation, and the emergence of the post-performative entrepreneurial educator; in governance - de-democratisation and a loss of compassion through authoritarian managerialism and corporate psychopathy; in politics - the diminishment of discursive and material spaces for critical sense-making and critique, and the destruction of intellectual and professional collectivities; in bodies and minds, as Richard Hall describes in his excellent new book *The Alienated Academic* - the expansion of mental and physical illness among students and educators. That we are exhausted not only in this situation but by this narrative is no surprise.

These processes and actions have unjust, harmful and cruel consequences for educators, young people, families and communities, as well as for possible futures. Yet focusing our lens on them does not always allow us to see that there are many realities and possibilities that this dominant variant of reality renders invisible. Focusing only on the proximate causes of everyday harms leaves little room to reconnect with our rich histories of struggle for social justice and struggles for social justice in education. In clinging to familiar narratives of what's wrong and what's possible, we run the risk of centring the power of 'the crisis' rather than strengthening our own capacities for autonomy and invention. As de Sousa Santos put it, it is debilitating if 'the crisis justifies everything. And this current crisis, being structural, seems to have no solution within the horizon of possibilities, which keeps

us from thinking of alternatives. It locks us in and impedes us from thinking about the future. That's why I so often feel that by talking so much about our time of crisis, we stop thinking. The crisis keeps us from talking about what we're missing in our conversations, our debates, our projects'. But if we turn our back on the crisis, what do we face?

Disobeying reality

Released from that lens, we widen our vision of what's wrong, what works and what's possible in ourselves, classrooms, institutions and society, and become able to engage with problems differently, and with different problems. For example, we can see that we are up against a kind of power which requires what Anders Burman calls 'ontological disobedience'. Being ontologically disobedient, or, paraphrasing the Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch, saying 'too bad for these facts!', means making room for other realities, other ways of knowing and experiencing reality, and other dimensions of the real - including its discredited variants and the 'not-yet' domain which contains possibilities that are outside the realm of empirical feasibility.

It is true that the forces of domination in education today are naturalised, institutionalised and hard to resist. But it is also true that the case for neoliberalism's power is aggrandized by a world-making apparatus that has the 'means of making itself true and empirically verifiable' (quoting Bourdieu) without being so. Capitalism is not everything, as J. K. Gibson-Graham nicely illustrate in their work on diverse economies. There thus cannot be a strong enough invitation to accept the capitalist game in education, which itself opens onto possibility. Hence all the current investment in market-oriented discipline, punishment and control. Many educators feel the violence of this compulsion in their bodies, hearts and minds. Yet while we see many reports about 'teachers' stress', there are few attempts to make sense of it as a systemic harm. Of course, overwork, impoverishment, lack of pedagogical and moral autonomy, and interpersonal violence are proximal causes of stress. But if we have accepted that there is no alternative, if this is really the limit of our imagination, from whence comes the allergic reaction to the dominant reality?

Many teachers do not presently experience themselves as actors who can give form to the conditions in which they and their students live and learn. This is often called 'de-professionalisation'. Through a lens of ontological disobedience, however, it is a dispossession of world-making capacity that depletes the materials for cultivating alternatives, producing - as with many monocultures - forms of life that cannot remember being part of an ecosystem. Through this

lens, it looks like ontological injustice. What difference could it make to apply this lens?

Embracing deeper kinds of possibility

In education, we are used to hearing that any action which offends the parameters of the instantiated (and particularly the empirically probabilistic) reality is 'unrealistic' and irresponsible. However, while presented as common sense, this is a 'colonization of reality' in which other realities and nondominant dimensions of reality - 'not yet', disallowed, emergent, queer and adjacent dimensions - are denied. As Anders Burman argues, in imagining possibilities for change within this frame, we can miss 'the fundamental discussion about "what there is" and the mechanisms by which a dominant reality imposes itself on other realities'. How can we do otherwise?

Being ontologically disobedient can help us inject possibility into the ongoing production of capitalist realism in educational settings. As Bloch argued in his 1959 work *The Principle of Hope*, we often have impoverished relationships with reality and use only a limited range of our available sensibilities. This prevents us from 'throwing [our]selves actively into what is becoming' and confines us to what he called a world 'without Front'. A world without Front is one in which our relationship to reality is locked within what is 'given as possible' according to the logic of the powerful. This is a situation of what Michel Foucault once called 'domination' - a power relation so asymmetrical that 'the subordinated . . . have little room for manoeuvre'. In world with Front, on the other hand, multiple possibilities are in a state of play, even though they may be unequally powered.

Here possibility is not 'given', but layered, with each layer or mode enabling different kinds of action. The first mode of possibility is conceptual, wishful thinking. Here something is possible because it can be imagined, regardless of its relationship to present realities. The second mode, 'what is according to possibility', refers to empirically probabilistic knowledge. Here something is possible because it can be known using sanctioned methods for producing knowledge about reality. Possible futures are those that can be extrapolated, albeit contingently, from present knowledge of present conditions. The third mode, what is 'in possibility', extends to dimensions of reality that are not captured by imagination, reasoning or empirical probability. It includes what people and things can be, do and become. We cannot know this definitively, not because our knowledge of things is limited, but because in this mode, reality is a process rather than a state. The fourth mode of possibility in Bloch's framework is what he called the 'objectively real possible'. In it, possibilities are not

found in imagination, empirical or rational reason, or in the contingently emergent properties of beings and things. They are generated through interventions into reality as it is being formed; in other words, through entanglements and praxis.

A theory for hopeful practice

How can a philosophical framework like this inform practical action? Let's think through an example. One compass question for this conference was, 'is there still space for innovative and empowering practice in post-compulsory education?' If by this we mean permission, encouragement and material support for anti-hegemonic and change-oriented learning, and if we answer this question only in the first two modes of possibility that conflate what is possible with what is feasible or predictable, then the answer will often be 'no'. But if we answer this question in a different mode of possibility, then the question becomes more generative - 'what there is' becomes a matter of concern rather than a matter of fact, and potentially, therefore, a site of struggle.

We can think about this concretely. Over many years, there have been criticisms that the removal of common rooms in educational institutions has diminished possibilities for intergenerational learning, power analysis and collective organisation. This has sometimes had explicit political motivations, but has also been a consequence of defunding, restructuring, outsourcing, and so on. The agency of power, in this case, is to enclose this common space. *Not-meeting-up*, however, is our contribution to the space. If we meet up in different places and times, the common room exists in different forms, and the things that can go on there - self-valorisation, complaint, power-mapping, mutual aid and so on - become what Doreen Massey calls the 'stories-so-far' that shape what space is and does. And if, as in some colleges, teachers are forbidden from gathering collectively with each other and students at work, then common spaces can materialise outside. This is harder to organise. It takes more time and effort, and is more fruitfully complicated. There has to be more decision about whose space it is, who will look after the children, where and when it can exist. In other words, looking for contingent possibilities in limit-situations generates new needs for being and becoming different kinds of agents. The enclosure of common space is a problem - but the failure to reconstruct it otherwise is not a logical conclusion.

Refusing dominant realities takes a lot of learning which does not necessarily coincide with acceptable versions of professional practice. Yet it is possible to gesture towards ontological disobedience in formal educational settings through experimenting with

'concrete utopias' - as Ana Dinerstein describes them, 'permanent and contradictory collective movements towards the opening and organizing of new horizons, in the here and now', which strive to exist before they are entirely possible in common sense terms, and address the contradictions that emerge from this effort along the way. The notion of 'concrete utopia' was introduced by Ernst Bloch and is currently being developed by Ana Dinerstein and others. Making concrete utopia does not bring an end to struggle, and often intensifies it in certain ways. It does not deny the 'forces that may work to undermine, constrain, destroy, or sideline our attempts to reshape economic futures', as J. K. Gibson-Graham put it, but brings us into closer encounter with them. Concrete utopias are always disappointable but always generate 'surplus possibility'. We have only to pick up a copy of Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* to remind us of the value of learning through disappointment; he wrote the book while in exile. The interesting question we might ask Freire today is not whether problem-posing education is possible, but how he continued his revolutionary work long after it was declared impossible.

References

Anders Burman (2016) 'Damned realities and ontological disobedience: notes on the coloniality of reality in higher education in the Bolivian Andes and beyond' in R. Grosfoguel, R. Hernandez, E. Rosen Velasquez, *Decolonizing the Westernized University: Interventions in Philosophy of Education from Within and Without*, Lanham: Lexington Books.

Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014) *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against Epistemicide*, NY: Routledge.

Ana Dinerstein (2017) 'Concrete utopia', *Public Seminar*, 7 December, <http://www.publicseminar.org/2017/12/concrete-utopia/>.

J. K. Gibson-Graham (2006) *A Postcapitalist Politics*, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Doreen Massey (2005) *For Space*, London: Sage.

*** This is an abridged version of a talk called 'We do not have the luxury of being hopeless: the optics and ontics of concrete utopia in educational reform', presented at 'Transitions, Challenges, Threats and Opportunities across the Post-compulsory Sector', a conference organised by the British Educational Research Association's Higher Education and Post-Compulsory and Lifelong Learning Special Interest Groups at Liverpool John Moores University on 8th November 2018.**