



Transformational Crisis? Thinking Within and Beyond the Limits of Neoliberal Education Policy

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BOOK REVIEW

PETERS, M. A. (2011). *NEOLIBERALISM AND AFTER? EDUCATION, SOCIAL POLICY, AND THE CRISIS OF WESTERN CAPITALISM*. NEW YORK, NY: PETER LANG

Scott Ellison

Transformational Crisis? Thinking Within and Beyond the Limits of Neoliberal Education Policy

Michael A. Peters' *Neoliberalism and After? Education, Social Policy, and the Crisis of Western Capitalism* is an engaging read that situates on-going global trends in social policy and education reform within the intellectual history of neoliberalism, from its emergence at Louis Rougier's 'La Colloque Walter Lippmann' to the global economic crisis of 2007-2009. A collection of essays spanning Peters' prolific career, *Neoliberalism and After?* is a strong piece of scholarship that would be of interest to a wide range of scholars in the fields of international education and education policy studies as a comprehensive analysis of neoliberalism understood as a social policy discourse. In this brief review, I will first discuss what I see as being the strengths of this scholarship, and I will end by sharing my thoughts on the future (and possible demise) of neoliberalism and neoliberal education policy.

I read *Neoliberalism and After?* as a genealogical work that seeks "to restore the conditions for the appearance of" what has become the dominant discourse informing education policy across the globe as "a singularity born out of multiple determining elements" (Foucault p. 64). Peters acknowledges Foucault's influence on his work by describing his approach to the book as "critical historiographies that emphasize different eras, transitions, mutations, and histories," and it is this un-packing of the discourse of neoliberalism that makes *Neoliberalism and After?* a strong piece of scholarship (Peters p. 4). The opening chapters of *Neoliberalism and After?* trace the development of neoliberalism from its emergence as a political project articulated at the first meeting of the Mont Pelerin Society in 1947 through its transmutations into public policy theory (eg. Becker's Public Choice Theory) and economic development theory (eg. Human Capital and Knowledge Capital) and its ascension to political dominance in the era of Third Way politics and globalization. Throughout, Peters skillfully frames these transformations within a fundamental conflict between individualist and commu-

nitarian ideologies and common sense understandings about the relations between individuals and societies. Nowhere does he do this more concretely than when he uses education policy in New Zealand to demonstrate the neoliberal shift in political philosophy and policy formation from viewing education as a welfare right to a consumer model.

Indeed, *Neoliberalism and After?* is at its best in chapters six and seven when Peters uses education policy in New Zealand as a case study of neoliberal education reform. These chapters are effective in providing a concrete example of the shift toward neoliberal education policy by a welfare state and the changing perspective on citizens' rights it implies. More importantly, Peters is able to effectively weave a discussion on human rights with Joseph Stiglitz' work on knowledge as a global public good in a knowledge economy to make a strong argument for re-conceptualizing education as a universal welfare right requiring significant state support, in terms of both funding and in fostering an intellectual culture of exchange and collegiality.

The concluding chapters of *Neoliberalism and After?* address neoliberalism in the context of the global financial crisis of 2007-2009. Peters argues that, in the aftermath of the largest financial crisis since the Great Depression, a global move toward greater financial regulation and a resurgence of neo-Keynsian state intervention is somewhat inevitable, and he raises the question as to whether this might spell the end of neoliberalism. Pointing toward government responses during the crisis, such as the nationalization of Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac and the Obama administration's stimulus policies in 2009, Peters notes a fundamental policy shift reflective of changes taking place in social theory and research. Specifically, Peters points toward the recent emergence of behavioral economics as signaling a broader move toward social theory and research that poses a significant challenge to the crude economic rationality underpinning the discourse of neoliberalism. Whether or not this spells the end of neoliberalism or the beginning of a possible end is of course a speculative enterprise with an unknowable ending. However, as Peters' analysis ably demonstrates, the neoliberal project represents an unsustainable and contradictory system of social policy that, like all such projects, will eventually come to an end.

I must confess that I am less optimistic than Peters on this topic. The self-destructive structural adjustment programs being forced upon the European periphery by the so-called core nations, the 'Grand Bargaining' and structural adjustments taking place in the USA, as well as the financialization and privatization of education systems across Anglo nations lead me to the conclusion that the policy juggernaut of neoliberalism is far from exhausting itself. Indeed, the continued rise of Asian nations and the prospects of a multi-polar world could very well lead to an acceleration in neoliberal social policy not only in West but globally. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that this is not the end of history and that change is inevitable. The task for scholars is not only to challenge the problematic policies associated with neoliberalism but also to produce critiques that begin the

process of establishing a new foundation for its eventual collapse and the societal transformations that will necessarily ensue. In this light, the critical historiographies and critique in *Neoliberalism and After?* and Peters' argument for education to be reinvigorated as a global welfare right can be viewed as a solid contribution to contemporary scholarship worthy of our consideration.

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