

## Neoliberal Hegemony and the Task for Critical Education

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### Abstract

The starting point for this article is an explication of the essence of Marxism, which is argued as the most efficacious theoretical framework for understanding the current historical conjuncture. I then provide a description of the development of capitalism into its current neoliberal form and its core features. Doing this work is important because while scholars regularly refer to capitalism/neoliberalism, they rarely explicate its fundamentals. Having this specification of neoliberalism will provide a referent for the more sophisticated analysis in the article, which elaborates on the concepts of mystification and feasibility. The discussion revolves around the general question: what mechanisms generate the tendency for most people to acquiesce (or even assent) to neoliberalism, despite the recognition that neoliberalism seems to be creating an environment where flourishing is not possible for the many? To address this question, I suggest the critical importance of the concept of *mystification*, particularly of inequality and inequity; and also, the concept of *feasibility*, which relates to the need for neoliberalism to generate a mass and general consciousness of an impossibility of alternative to itself. Counterposing this, I draw the article to a close by presenting a discussion about the need for critical educators to work for generating a consciousness of the feasibility of an alternative to neoliberalism to emerge.

**Key words:** Neoliberalism, Marxism, Marx, Social Class, Revolution

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## What is Marxism?

Ideas of class struggle along with class formation and class-consciousness can be observed at the core of Marx's writings. Despite the time lapse, these ideas have the power and currency to provide an effective critique of the modern world.

It is unfortunate that Marxism, as a project of critique and emancipation, is fraught partly because of the multiplicity of interpretations of Marx's writings, including three common *misinterpretations*:

- i) the *exclusivity* of social class for analysis;
- ii) that social class is *equally* as importantly other identity, such as a 'race', gender, and so forth,
- iii) or that class was the *point of departure* for Marx in his critical treatment of the development of capitalism. All of these interpretations seem to be at odds with what Marx actually wrote. In relation to i and ii, one needs to look not much further than the critique and articulation of *Rasses* (referring to ethno-racial identities) by Marx and Engels, which are subsumed by capital and class interests for capitalism to triumph as a historical project.

In relation to iii, Marx, *actually* began with a primary concern with the mode of production and the emergence and nature of commodities, *not social class*. Put simply, mode of production is the focus on which group of people in society produces commodities; and importantly for social justice, what happens to the value that is generated through *exchanging* these commodities. It is important to say that these relations of production are not optional, nobody can voluntarily decide to step outside of these relations of production.

Today the dominant mode of production is the neoliberal version of capitalism, and it has encapsulated the entire world through its ubiquitous domineering economic and socio-cultural system. This is about the globalization of the capitalist money system, this means that it is almost impossible to not use a capitalist bank to be paid a salary,

or succumb to a mortgage, or work for an organization that is linked to capitalist sustenance; put simply capitalism entraps, and to overcome it necessitates, at least a basic, understanding of it, for which Marxism provides effective tools.

Over 150 years ago, Marx had predicted the environment where the economics of capitalism would dominate and define all social and cultural life:

In the social production of their life, men *enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will*, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to *which correspond definite forms of social consciousness* (Marx, 1859 [my emphasis]).

The basic point that Marx was making was that the dominant condition of everyday life is created by the mode of production. Importantly, this nature of existence shapes the way that people think and act, in other words human nature would be made to embody capitalism. For instance, human selfishness and greed in a world of plenty would be *learnt*, not biological. Marx was pointing out that capitalism would become more ever more entrenched as part of social, cultural and political spheres of human life. Marx's prediction has materialised, and the modern capitalist system stridently promotes a fetish of commodities, this is development of an insatiable appetite of consumerism - wanting bigger, shinier stuff, and luxury, at any environmental and/or social expense.

Furthermore, in the current neoliberal phase of global capitalism (discussed below and also see Maisuria, 2014), commodities are more than just goods such as tangible products, it can also include services, such as education and more recently knowledge itself (Marmol et al, 2015).

## Focus on production

In the publication *Capital*, Marx explained that society organized by the capitalist mode of production has the basic feature of two antagonist classes: i) the ruling (capitalist/bourgeois) class, this is the class that *owns* the means of production; ii) and the laboring (working/proletariat) class, those who use their capacity to work to produce commodities for the ruling class (Rikowski, 2001). Crucially the work that is done by the laboring class produces commodities for the capitalist class. The laboring class get paid for their labor and this is used for survival, today this means paying for food, bills, and debt. The commodity produced by the labor of the worker is then exchanged by the capitalist class for more money than the cost of production. Marx put it this way:

Surplus value - profit - is the value produced by worker expenditure of labour-power on the means of production. It is the value determined, ultimately by capitalist class practices in their totality, to be above and beyond ("surplus") the value that the owner must pay in wages to the labourer to ensure she is able to reproduce her labour-power (Marx, 1867).

Marx predicted that the nature of capitalism was that exploitation was inherent, hence he said it was the goal of the ruling class "To extract the greatest possible amount of surplus-value, and consequently to exploit labour-power to the greatest possible extent," this Marx argues, is "the directing motive, the end and aim of capitalist production" (Marx, 1867). Marx was correct in this analysis since the situation today is that money can be converted into more money through investment, expansion, and lowering costs of production – it means that the capitalist system will always benefit the wealthy over and above workers, and the resultant inequality will be exponentially starkly pronounced over time.

Marx foresaw the development of a society under capitalism in which the ruling class would gradually become enormously wealthy through the work of the laboring class. In this historical evolution, the profits of those who own the means of production (see any rich list for names – every year this will include Warren Buffett, Carlos Slim and Bill Gates) will exponentially become greater, while workers' wages will remain

stable, decrease or only marginally increase. The increasingly exploitative relationship between the two classes was described as a continual source of struggle by Marx in the following terms: “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles” (Marx and Engels, 1848). It is important to note that this exploitation is irrespective of identity and personal characteristic of the workers, put another way, capitalism does not care for ethno-racial, sex/gender, and cultural preferences of the individual. At different moments different groups of people will face differing levels of exploitation (a convenient way to create social antagonism within the laboring class taking the focus away from *systemic* exploitation). In this context, production of capital is at the forefront of Marx’s thinking with social class being articulated within the nexus of labor exploitation, commodity exchange and profit.

### **A two-class model in contemporary society**

Critics of Marxism point out that in modern society there are *not* only two classes, and that most people probably self-identify as middle class thus echoing former British Prime Minister Tony Blair who suggested that “We’re all middle class now”. While this statement may be true about self-identification, Marxists would point out that the idea of a working class in neoliberal capitalism is broad and crucially includes the middle class. In this conception of two classes, the so-called middle class are simply a stratum of the laboring class who have more material/financial resources and wellbeing – but crucially, this middle class still need to *work*, hence they are part of the working class, albeit with the possibility to buy more, and more expensive commodities (normally through debt). In this way most academics and even many bankers can be considered to be working class because they need to work in order to sustain themselves (and pay debt) in the capitalism system where the majority of people sell their labor to the ruling capitalist class. It is this context that the recent Occupy Movement’s slogan - the 1% Vs 99% - becomes a descriptor of reality not only a catchy slogan.

In fact, “1%” is not quite accurate, ownership of the means of production, private property and wealth is concentrated in more like the 0.01%. To put into context, there is astronomical differentiation - the gap between the 1% and the 0.01% is greater than

the gap between the 1% and the 99%, in other words wealth increments are exponential. Inequality is measured in various metrics, including wealth distribution and poverty levels, but rarely do they account for concentration in the *ownership* of production, which is a far more accurate way to understand the generative mechanism of inequality and unfairness.

When Marx was developing his theory of capital, exchange and markets – he was writing in a time of new individual landowners (emerging post-feudalism). In current neoliberal times, markets have been monopolized by global transnational corporations. This means that the two-class model is reconfigured in two ways: i) From individual landowning class (capitalist) to transnational companies and ii) From manual labouring class, to a working class that including skilled and service sector employees. While companies are in competition with each other, they are actually linked in a web of interconnected companies. In a unique piece of scholarship, Systems Theory scholars at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich analyzed a database listing 37 million share ownerships linking them (Vitali, Glattfelder, Battiston, 2011). This mapping exercise has been the first of its kind and there is need for more research given that they reported that just 147 transnational companies own all commodity production. The 2008 economic crises that triggered a *global* capitalist recession makes more sense when markets are conceived of as a domino effect. Incredibly according to Forbes, reported that these 147 transnational companies are themselves controlled by “economic super-entity” core of comprising of just 4 that own the entire system of commodity production (Forbes, 2011). It tells its own story of mystification (discussed below) that most people would never have heard of the following companies: Northwestern Mutual, which owns Russell Investments, the index arm of which runs the benchmark Russell 1,000 and Russell 3,000; CME Group, which owns 90% of Dow Jones Indexes; Barclay’s which took over Lehman Brothers and its Lehman Aggregate Bond Index, the dominant world bond fund index, McGraw-Hill, which owns Standard & Poors, who deal with financial market indicators and investment. These are the companies that own world production – they are the material symbols of modern capitalism – neoliberalism, which is about driving profit margins by ever increasing expansion.

It is only with this understanding of the basics of Marxism and the emphasis on commodity production, the idea and attention to class struggle, articulated with class consciousness; inequality is fully understandable and profound. In neoliberal global capitalism it is clear that a tiny minority are the winners of opportunity, wealth and a good-life, and many more are exploited and alienated despite claims of, and a prevailing belief in, meritocracy and social mobility among the masses. It is important to recognize that these claims of the existence of meritocracy and mobility are important to pacify resistance and generate acquiescence to a grossly unfair and unequal system, and they are mechanisms in which people cannot even conceive of a feasible alternative system to be possible. Within this dominant hegemony the need for class consciousness to be continuously developed is crucial, thus to mobilise class action struggling for a different kind of world, beyond neoliberalism, where the many can flourish. But there remains the ambiguity about what neoliberalism exactly is.

### **Neoliberalism**

Professor Mike Cole and I have summarized neoliberalism (see Maisuria and Cole, 2017). Taking the cue from Milton Friedman and Friedrich Hayek who follow Adam Smith's economic modeling, economists in the USA known as the Chicago Boys developed a fundamentalist free market ideology that was first experimented with on 11 September 1973 in Chile. A US-backed military coup resulted in the death of democratically elected socialist Salvador Allende, which was a suspected murder. His replacement was the military General Augusto Pinochet, who would impose a brutal dictatorship in the interests of capital. Within a five-year period (1970–1975), the Chilean economy shifted from State-controlled major industries to a system that centered on market forces, self-interest, and laissez faire regulatory governance (Maisuria, 2014). As Barton explains, the military junta was crucial in this process, with harsh repression and the banning of trade unions, making labor power very flexible with respect to wages and discipline (Barton, 1999, p. 66, cited in Lawton, 2012). As such, Chile became a haven for multi/trans-national companies eager to exploit the country for capital accumulation. Subsequently, wealth disparities between rich and poor increased dramatically. Clark (2012) remarks, the neoliberal experiment

in Chile began the future imposition of right-wing military dictatorships, and financial support to impose neoliberal reforms became unofficial US foreign policy.

The neoliberal ideology was given ballast and began globalizing when Margaret Thatcher was elected in the UK in 1979. Neoliberalism would become global when Ronald Reagan was elected a few years after in the US. Both Thatcher and Reagan set about stridently introducing neoliberal reforms, such as the complete withdrawal of capital controls instigated by UK Conservative Chancellor Geoffrey Howe, and the deregulation of the US financial markets – euphemistically termed the Big Bang of Regulation. By 1989, the ideology of neoliberalism was globally enshrined as the economic orthodoxy. From the beginning, the global financial Washington-based institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and also the US Department of the Treasury, signed up to a 10-point economic plan. This plan was about trade liberalization, privatization, financial sector deregulation, and tax cuts for the wealthiest (Clark, 2012). As Clark concludes, ‘this agreement between non-elected and shady organizations is misleadingly referred to as “The Washington Consensus”’ (Clark, 2012). The signing of the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) in 1994 gave global neoliberalism a major boost by removing restrictions and internal government regulations in the area of service delivery that were considered ‘barriers to trade’ (GATS, 1994). The word *neoliberal* itself, however, seemingly did not enter the common vocabulary until November 1999 with the symbolic protest against the World Trade Organization (WTO) in Seattle. This meant that Thatcher and Reagan were not known by the electorate as neoliberals, nor were they associated with the free-market experiment in Chile that became termed neoliberalism, had this been the case history may have been different and it remains the case that Thatcher and Reagan are largely disassociated with this history.

Because neoliberalism has had an organic rather than prescribed evolution across the globe, it is important to identify some defining features. Adapting Martinez and Garcia (2000), there are three inter-related core mechanisms that necessitate the neoliberalization processes. Firstly, the predominance of the rule of the market in

policy making. This incurs liberating private enterprise from most bonds imposed by the government and other State institutions. Greater openness to international trade and investment, as in the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Essential reducing of wages and facilitating greater exploitative industrial relation for capital by disallowing unionisation or significantly curtailing their power. Deregulating is important for marketisation, for example few price controls to enable freedom of movement for capital, goods, and services. The claim is that an unregulated market is the best way to increase economic growth, which will ultimately benefit everyone, this is akin to Reagan's supply-side and "trickle-down" economics. However, we have witnessed that over 40 years that wealth trickling downwards is minimal, compared with the wealth being syphoned up, especially when capital and increasing profits are wanted by the ruling class.

Secondly, marketization necessitates commodification and privatization. This entails cutting public expenditure on public services and welfare. Education and health care provision are first to be euphemistically 'reformed', 'streamlined', and in need to be more 'efficient'. This means that potentially financially profitable public services and common goods are commodified, to be sold to the private sector. In the world of business, this is called asset stripping and recent examples include, State banks, and key industries: railroads, toll highways, electricity, schools, hospitals and even water supply. Often this is through quasi-privatization in the form public-private contracts, such as those in Sweden with Free Schools and England with the Academy Schools Program. The effect has been poorer and/or inaccessible services because of the introduction of fees and also concentrating wealth and power even more in private sector. The irony of free markets, which are supposed to be about competition and choice, is that they have created monopolies, such as the rail transportation in England where fares are high and ever increasing while services are declining. Thus free markets have actually reduced the competition and choice that they were designed to facilitate. Notably, neoliberals claim that commodification introduces choice, and it creates power for the consumer, for instance leveraging parental power/choice in education, but the reality is that those with financial capital are the winner because they can afford a wider selection of choices. The result is social class reproduction.

Thirdly, for its survival and expansion, there is a socio-cultural narrative that is needed to be created by neoliberals. This narrative is to promote self-interest, individualization, and personal investment for personal gain. To sustain expanding neoliberalism, the masses need to buy into its rhetoric. Neoliberalism nefariously focuses on winning the masses hearts and minds. The relative (though not hermetically sealed) success of dichotomies such as (hard) workers vs (lazy) shirkers/scroungers since 1979 after Thatcher's election continues. This narrative has resulted in a devaluing of the concepts of building social society, unity, compassion, and solidarity. The replacement is individual-responsibility, entrepreneurialism, dog-eat-dog, cut-throat competition. In this situation, the worker becomes alienated believing a lack of flourishing to be their own fault, and believing this, ultimately the agent of their own oppression.

The current neoliberal phase of global capitalism is expansive (see Maisuria, 2014), commodities can be taken to mean more than just goods such as products, it can also include services too, such as education and more recently knowledge itself (Marmol et al, 2015). An example of the latter is McGraw-Hill, who until recently was one of largest companies in the world trading in publishing, more recently they have tapped into selling knowledge itself, which they call 'learning science'. McGraw-Hill as a learning sciences company is an edu-business that makes a series of questionable claims on its website, here are four examples. First, that it is a Learning Sciences Company – to “help people learn”, but it does not specify what is learnt? Second, it claims to “bring that content or deliver that content”, but what is the content? Third, they claim “we're focussed on outcomes”, but whose outcomes are these and for what purpose? Fourth, McGraw-Hill “measure those results”, but measure results against what and to achieve what? These questions are important because the influence of capitalist rationality is ubiquitous and it's reach extends in to public services and social entitlements, transforming the commons into commodities. Ultimately, the global capitalist ruling class are the beneficiaries and their stake in wealth and power increases, but this consequence is mystified – meaning made ambiguous.

## **Mystification of neoliberal capitalist mode of production**

The British comedian and activist, Russell Brand with his firebrand use of satirical comedy in his film *The Emperor's New Clothes*, exposes astronomical level of income inequality between workers and the capitalist class. For instance, in the film he shows that, such was the level of income inequality in 2015, it would take 300 years for an average cleaner, cleaning the office of a capitalist, to earn the same as that capitalist. These are powerful demystifying facts to disseminate explication of inequality and exploitation, invoking questions about ethics, morals, and civility itself in the epoch of neoliberal capitalism. However and crucially, what Brand does not do is address the key question about generative mechanisms: with so much inequality how does the status quo remain and continue to gain acquiesce (meaning consent that is also critical) and even assent (enthusiastic consent) from the masses of the exploited class? This neat trick is what sustains, maintains, and aids expanding the neoliberal capitalist mode of production.

To address this question, the concept of *mystification* becomes powerfully useful. It can be used to descriptively understand a condition in which there is prevailing perceptions that masks and obscures a deep reality of the way that capitalism operates on exploitation. Put simply, the laboring class do not, are encouraged not to, connect neoliberal global capitalism with inequality and unfairness. This conditioning happens in several overlapping ways and forms.

The masses are conditioned to believe it is too much of a difficult subject to discuss political-economy and ideology and to leave it to the experts – it just so happens that the experts are the beneficiaries of an uncritical public. Or people are told their politics is about pragmatism and difficult choices, politicians often assert that their policies are about what works and what's 'right' not ideological dogmas. As the director Adam Curtis shows in his film *Bitter Lake*, the ruling class across neoliberal nations have adopted the same strategy to govern with the aim to confuse the masses – mystification. This allows the program of deepening neoliberalism through expanding markets and privatization, despite these being the mechanisms that gave the catalyst for austerity, inequality and inequity that the ruling class claim to oppose.

Mystification of capitalism and neoliberalism is not the work of serendipity, it is a purposeful strategy deployed by the capitalist class to promote, manufacture and disseminate a particular culture and popular common sense to condition mass consciousness. In essence, this is to emerge in a dominant belief that inequality is result of some people being deserving rich, which is the basis of meritocracy (strivers) and equally there is a deserving poor (skivers) – who have not tried hard enough, been: ambitious, aspiring and motivated. This is about promoting a focus that diverts attention away from the capitalist *system* that works for the interests of the few at the expense of the many, and to the encouraging a culture of demonization of each other, which spawn *individualism and self-interest*. The popular representation of the super-rich people (the 1%) is that they deserve their wealth and to critique it is a distasteful politics of envy or even worse a lack of ambition. These wealthy and powerful individuals are the products of the system that they have created manipulated to have their riches, and for the sake of progress and civilisation critical educators must propose the question: how neoliberalism can be fair and moral when these people have so much while there are so many in the world who can scarcely afford food and water (see Choonara and Robinson, 2008).

The mystification discussed above partly emerges as a condition that circumscribes class consciousness because neoliberals do not want, and indeed see it as a threat, to discuss and critically educate about neoliberalism. Furthermore because of the absence of education that include critique of neoliberalism, mystification is also serviced by the occurrence of *miracles*. These miracles are instances of when individuals ‘make it’ against the odds of success, and these are promoted as being suggestive of their being an absence of a glass ceiling/sticky floor for the worse-off in society. There is a concerted attempt to create a mass belief in the existence of meritocracy and social mobility. The success of this narrative generates justification of staggering inequality (see any annual Oxfam Inequality report), i.e. those people who are poor are deemed to have not tried hard enough and taken opportunities to succeed and therefore *deserve* their lot – neoliberalism has nothing to do with it. With the consciousness of a *deserving poor*, also comes the idea of a deserving stratum of

people who have worked hard to become prosperous, privileged, and powerful. This consciousness is cultivated by the capitalist ruling elite on a regular basis, and the media central plays a part in normalizing it. A good example is a recent article in the UK newspaper London Evening Standard with the headline: *Migrant's son swaps the East End for Eton after winning scholarship*. The central argument in the article was that anybody could *make-it* with hard work, and this working class boy, the son of immigrants, can join the likes of the future King of England at Britain's most elite school (Eton). A notable segment of the article discussed the boy's view of his father and his struggle to make work pay: "My dad has a lot of injuries, shattered knee and slipped disc, but has instilled morals and ethics that you have to work. . . . He is always at work trying to make life better for his family. He is my hero" (Barnes, 2017). Crucially, the article shifts the emphasis on *individual* endeavor (the immigrant boy) and away from the capitalist *system* that is unequal and unfair, and reproduces this injustice through the very fact that a private school exists at all charging charges circa £40k (Euro 45k) tuition fees annually, for five years. Moreover, implicitly, the article dismisses the fact that there are potentially hundreds of pupils in London's poor East End who will never have the opportunity to study at Eton. The one boy who did progress was an anomaly, and his fortune was largely an accident of time and moment. The common sense being promoted, to solidify the dominant hegemony of meritocracy, is that if one boy can make it to Eton then everybody can – this is mystification.

Working against mystification and promoting a belief in the feasibility of alternatives to the neoliberal class-based status quo is probably the greatest task for critical educators and activists for social justice. In Western and economically developed countries, the struggle is hard because neoliberal capitalism is deeply established in the ideological, political, social and cultural realms that are enmeshed in creating the conditions in which a mass *common sense* is manufactured. This *common sense* that has prevailed, since the fall of the Berlin Wall, emerges through some identifiable mechanisms. These are oscillating in degrees of intra-dependency between:

- i) Neoliberalism best serves the economy through talented individuals being rewarded:

- a. Self-interest is key for us all to individually prosper.
- b. The investment in the concept of *society*, rather than *self*, promotes social loafing and laziness. Selfishness is good because it incentivises and motivates.
- ii) *There is no alternative* (TINA) to the status quo.
- iii) The alternatives to neoliberal capitalism that may/do exist are not feasible because:
  - a. They are less desirable because they promote reliance on welfare – those who scrounge from the State or rely on others to be productive,
  - b. on balance, the status quo is *as good as it gets*. The problems of inequality are outweighed by the good stuffs (i.e. the availability of commodities),
  - c. In the end, the communist/socialist alternative is not feasible because it is idealist and utopian, not practically realistic and end with brutality and barbarism.
- iv) Inequality is natural. It has always existed in human relations, and always will. It is nature and part of the history of past, and will be the history of the future.
- v) We are genetically wired to be competitive and neoliberalism facilitates this most inner urge. Self-interest promoted in political economy and socio-culture (i.e. education policy that focuses on personal investment and return in the labor market) aligns with our nature.
- vi) Neoliberalism advances civilization through advancement in productive technologies.

These messages are spread ubiquitously and they are the mechanisms that generate the *appearance* of the narrative that a) nothing *needs* to be done b) nothing *can* be done for serious change. This latter point is effectively symbolized in the popular British cultural slogan: *keep calm and carry on* with suffixes such as *shopping*, *drinking tea*, and so forth. While these narratives and slogans may seem benign, they represent a deep mechanism that generates mystification that in turn generates a tendency for the maintenance neoliberalism in every auspice of lived reality that is almost inescapable. The point here is that the dominant hegemonic ideology cannot exist without the apparatus that support it in lived reality. For example, neoliberalism

cannot be maintained by the ruling class without their supporting organs, which includes schools and popular culture that seek to establish the consciousness for its *consent*. The strategy for struggle needs to include educating about class relations and neoliberalism. Along with the belief in social mobility and meritocracy, people have been conditioned to get-on with life with the message *be a striver rather than a moaning skiver*. In addition, very few people would want to risk themselves against the very powerful State apparatus for fear of reprisal and negative consequences. The continued successes of these apparatuses mean that there is relative stability – an equilibrium despite some knowledge of injustice. A question that critical education needs to grapple with is, what is the masses' tolerance level of injustice and what are the conditions that create this level? The answers to this dual question can be the pressure point in strategic thinking about change. Even in the state of general and mass acquiescence, spaces always exist for struggle because appearances are difficult to maintain while gross inequalities and inequities are very evident.

### **Feasibility of Alternatives**

The Italian communist Antonio Gramsci viewed that it was necessary for the masses to have a new *conception of the world*, thus meaning that people must be convinced to believe that history is open to new ways of being, and this could be facilitated by revolutionary thinking and action (Gramsci, 1971, p.465; Forgacs, 2000, p.429). In recent times it seems that a renewed mass consciousness is emerging amongst the working class. This is a consciousness of the way that democracy is used as a mechanism of appeasement, as well as a rendering of alternatives to the status quo as being unfeasible. For many years, the ruling capitalist class hegemony that has created an *appearance* of equity and social mobility and meritocracy; but this appearance is being unveiled and demystified, especially during socio-economic crises. The prevailing mass consciousness has been that democracy is what differentiates the free (neoliberal) world from the (non-neoliberal) unfree world but this appearance is wearing thin. The ruling capitalist class have continually reproduced their hegemony via (i) mass apathy to politics and also by (ii) people actually participating in parliamentary politics voting for a mainstream (and centrist) Party, the function of both practices results in maintaining the status quo of neoliberal

capitalism – it is a catch-22. The emerging problem for the capitalist ruling class is that the previously apathetic masses are seemingly more aware of their inaction, and apathy is being channeled into more class conscious practices. The massive support of comedian turned political activist Russell Brand, Podemos and other examples such as the Occupy and Uncut movements’ are demonstrative of the embryo of a people’s class consciousness emerging as part of hegemonic struggle.

Parliamentary *democracy* is now under scrutiny like it has never been before. The cultural apathy and acquiescence that maintained and reproduced class relations is being questioned because voting is perceived to be an impotent way of getting change to inequality, thus claims of political representation through voting have been debunked. The mentality that Brand describes as “Stick your X into this box and congratulate yourself on being free” (Brand, 2014, p.78) is no longer cultivating consent as it has historically. However, things may be about to change with the symbolic leadership of the likes of Corbyn, Sanders, Obrado – all of whom created a consciousness that alternatives to the last 40 years of marketisation and privatisation of education and other public provision were feasible. The popularity of these sentiments about change being necessary and possible is a radical departure from just a few year ago. Brand effectively points out the way in which this type of oppositional consciousness that is mainstream was situated as culturally deviant and/or dealt with, by ad hominem:

When I was poor and complained about inequality they said I was bitter; now I’m rich and I complain about inequality they say I’m a hypocrite. I’m beginning to think they don’t want me to talk about inequality (Brand, 2014, p.113).

Brand is being used as an illustration here because he represents something interesting from a Marxist perspective. As a global celebrity who came from a troubled and humble background, he represents the ultimate Hollywood dream. His story can effectively be used to show that in neoliberalism people can make it against the odds. The story seemingly represents social mobility and meritocracy in materiality with the

message – talent will not be held back by background and class. But what is interesting is that Brand has turned his back on capitalizing maximally on the trappings of celebrity fame and fortune and subsequently devoted his time, money and energy on acting against the very system that brought him financial prosperity. This life history opens-up the valuable idea that beyond basic needs financial reward is: vacuous, superficial, unfulfilling and unsatisfactory. Put simply, there is more to life than the language of money and consumption. More importantly, his life represents the emergence of a revolutionary consciousness that exists within neoliberalism itself (Marx and Engels, 1848; Mayo, 2015). In the case of Brand, he had taken neoliberalism to its limits, and it was during this neoliberal journey *itself* that he became conscious of the way that neoliberalism does not work for the many. The point is that the lived world in neoliberal times incorporates social transformation within itself, revolutionary ideas are generated within this materialism and not outside of lived reality. Class consciousness and desires of personal and political change are not separate from the world that is experienced. Brand’s journey is demonstrative of the Gramscian idea that “all men [sic] are intellectuals” (1971, p.9). He is somebody who had lived the *common sense* of neoliberalism, and came through this with *good sense*.

In terms of critical education teaching and scholarship, for criticism to be effective in contextualizing the need for change, it needs to be accompanied by visions of utopia as feasible. Utopia is deployed here not to mean a fantastically perfect paradise but rather an alternative where wealth and power can be massively redistributed, and social justice, equality, equity, and political representation take priority over markets, commodities and privatization. Many neoliberals, especially of the free market Milton Friedman and Friedrich Hayek type (see the Adam Smith Institute), argue that there are no feasible alternatives any longer (as discussed earlier). However, historic examples show that democratic socialism or even Left Social Democracy has benefitted the masses far more than capitalism has (and can do). Earlier the issue of participation in parliamentary democracy was discussed, recent history shows that democracy works better in socialism than in capitalism, in the latter very few people actually turn out to vote. Contrastingly, in the last two decades, presidential elections in countries where there is a socialist candidate receive a turnout of up to 80%, giving a genuine mandate to the victor, as was the case with the late President Hugo Chavez

of Venezuela. The case of Cuba arises continually as a point that critics use to dismiss claims of a feasible radical-Left alternative and democracy existing simultaneously. The term dictatorship is often casually deployed by neoliberal-advocate/apologists in these discussions about Cuba. However, the case of Cuba shows that democracy can be more representative and in the interest of people when democracy is about socialism and solidarity.

In Cuba, bottom-up political representation is alive and thriving, it is *designed* to be integral to the governing system. The principle behind Committee for the Defence of the Revolution (CDR), the Organs of Popular Power (OPP), and the mass organisations (including: Municipal Delegates, Provincial/National Assemblies, Work Commissions, Popular Councils) is about enabling people to have a voice for direct democracy. The word democracy etymologically is a combination of *demos* meaning [common] people and *kratos* meaning power, thereby constructed as people-power this seems to be the case in Cuba. Similar principles to those applied in Cuba were also established as part of the then Chavez-led re-writing of the Venezuelan constitution, and subsequently where people were permitted to recall and remove their President before the end of their term. One must question the fate of Tony Blair and George Bush if this principle for democracy had been in place in the UK/USA on the issue of the invasion of Iraq, and on the issue of austerity in Spain and many parts of the capitalist 'democratic' world.

Being educated in the tools to do critical thinking is fundamental for feasibility of an alternative to generate, and it could be speculated that the ruling class are making higher education unaffordable in many countries and making access to a critical and creative curriculum unobtainable (for by example cutting funding for social science and humanities funding) because it opens the way for workers and the working class to be educated about neoliberalism, mystification, and feasibility.

The work of critical education for class struggle at the level of culture that, for example, Brand and other organic intellectuals' practice, represents the necessary negation of the claims of the capitalist ruling class. This kind of negation of negation – a sidestepping of the mystification and creating a feasibility of an alternative to be possible represents a crisis moment in terms of what Thomas has described as placing the “very foundations of bourgeois hegemony in doubt” (2009, p.145). The role of critical education *inside of* and *beyond* formal State institutions is crucial here. This “doubt” must also be accompanied by effective strategizing that takes seriously questions of class as the basis of cultural forms. These classed cultural forms create the conditions for consent, the importance of agential action of organic intellectuals, and also the unpredictable but conceivable tendencies of history to materialize in different ways. Struggle for demystification and for alternatives to be feasible must be part of critical education in all its forms, thus to raise consciousness, only then can a momentum as an organized laboring class be established against the neoliberal status quo (Marx, 1847).

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