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## Spontaneous Responses to Neoliberalism, and their Significance for Education

### Abstract

This paper is a sequel to the keynote address at the 2017 BCES Conference. The keynote address concluded with the thought that some educationists respond intuitively and spontaneously to neoliberalism and its impact on education whereas others reject neoliberalist precepts and their pedagogical implications on definite principled grounds. This paper deals with the former response; it offers pedagogical insights gleaned from an overview of intuitive, spontaneous reactions to neoliberalism.

Keywords: anti-neoliberalism, neoliberalism, education, education system, globalization, internationalism

### Introduction

In my keynote address to Conference last night I concluded that there are two major categories of responses to neoliberalism and its impact on schools and universities, namely a spontaneous, intuitive reaction, and a response based on pertinent life-conceptual and / or philosophical principles (cf. Van der Walt, 2017). The first response is based on the intuitive “feeling” or perception that there must be “something radically wrong” with neoliberalism’s imposition of business and economic demands on areas of life that only have a peripheral interest in and responsibility regarding business and economy. The purpose of this paper is to outline some of these rather more intuitive and spontaneous reactions to neoliberalism as a possible important turning point in history and to gauge their impact on education.

I intend to show that various responses have risen worldwide but have not yet formed an organised or coherent “movement” against neoliberalism (Mostert, 2017). I do not go as far as Rabe (2016, p. 19) to aver that this movement is on the point of bringing about “a new world order”. Holzapfel’s (2016, p. 7) view about such responses is probably more realistic: he sees the new movement as a worldwide uprising against “Big Government” and against the capitalist elite that has so far dominated the world stage. The concomitant rise of populism is an expression of the frustrations and aspirations of the seemingly powerless “ordinary people” on the ground (Du Plessis, 2016, p. 6). In a sense, the anti-neoliberal “movement” can be regarded as a rebellion against the current dominant capitalist order (Pienaar, 2016, p. 5). Slightly more than a decade ago, Huntington (2005, p. 143) already predicted the emergence of such movements as part of the global rise of subnational identities that would be creating crises of national identity in countries throughout the world. Globalisation and internationalisation had by then already begun generating in people the need to seek identity, support and assurance in smaller groups.

The portrayal of the various spontaneous developments below will show that they form part of an anti-neoliberal groundswell. They do not yet form part of an organised social movement but are nevertheless part of a worldwide response to neoliberalism and how it has impacted on the lives of “ordinary citizens” all over the world and on their education. The various developments are so wide-ranging and so inherently different from one another that it requires some ingenuity to subsume them all under one heading.

## **Background**

Although it is not yet clear how the various responses to neoliberalism and its impact on education came into existence, there are indications that they tend to make use of particular techniques. One of these is to spread “post-truths” and “fake news” (Froneman, 2017, p. 12). The “truth” and the “news” may range from satire to propaganda, and may intend to mislead. Some anti-neoliberals create “echo chambers” by exchanging snippets of unverified facts and news, and allowing such “news” to morph into “viral facts”. Technology helps in this process, among others in the form of “clickbait” on the internet. Terms that have been widely used recently are “alt-right” (referring to a rejection of mainstream politics) and “woke” (meaning that one is wide awake to injustices in a particular society).

The current “political cacophony”, the advent of which was predicted by scholars such as Huntington (2005, p. 138, p. 143, p. 261), Berlant (2011, p. 11), Anderson (2015, p. 747) and others, is further stimulated by the use of the social media and the systematic use of websites in which false information is spread among increasing numbers of people. Political propagandists purposely write fiction and present it as fact (Bezuidenhout, 2016, p. 17). By making use of techniques such as these, the propagandists succeed in bringing about widespread hostility to the political, mainstream media and business establishments that have so far guided people’s thinking. Trust in institutions is thereby being brought to an all-time low and a belief is instilled in “ordinary people” that their country and its system are headed in the wrong direction. With the aid of techniques such as all these, the propagandists instill a potent anti-establishment spirit: they portray the elitist leaders as the representatives of an oppressive status quo and as out of touch with the “man in the street” (Gaughan, 2016). Their message is clear: the elitist approach to politics is out of touch with the interests of the ordinary (middle and lower class) people on the ground (Viljoen, 2016, p. 21).

The rise of populism has created a ready-made outlet for the spread of propaganda with the aid of such mechanisms (Rabe, 2016, p. 19). It helps when “ordinary people” become cynical about whether the “facts” shared with them are credible, true and factual or not. They readily accept the “post-truths” offered to them because the objective facts mean less to them than claims rooted in emotion and personal belief.

## **Some of the recent anti-neoliberal developments all over the world**

There are signs of growing populism all over the world. The opposition to capitalist elites has given impetus to populist political views (Reuters, 2017, p. 11), as can be observed in for instance Britain’s Brexit from the European Union,

Trump's election as US President and a variety of other incidents. Donald Trump's unexpected election occurred shortly after the unexpectedness of the Brexit referendum result on 23 June 2016 (Viljoen, 2016, p. 21). In some respects, Brexit embodies the "ordinary people" in Britain's dissatisfaction with the status quo, among others the fact that their own fate as Britons is being determined in Brussels.

In January 2017, Oxfam brought to the attention of the World Economic Forum's (WEF) gathering in Davos, Switzerland, the fact that large inequalities existed in the world. Oxfam mentioned that in 2016 only eight people possessed more wealth than the poorest half of the world population (around 3.6 billion people). According to Oxfam, the wealth of the super-rich has increased at a rate of 11% per annum whereas the wages of many workers have stagnated. Inequality has increasingly come under the spotlight with among others the head of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the Pope speaking out against the deleterious effect of this unequal spread of wealth and resources (Reuters, 2017, p. 11). There are indications that the WEF is taking utterances by new US President Trump seriously: it has decided to hold a special summit later in 2017 in Washington to discuss some of the issues raised by Trump during his election campaign (Bloomberg, 2017, p. 12).

These are interesting developments in view of Harvard Professor and former chief economist of the International Monetary Fund Kenneth Rogoff's conclusion that the conventional wisdom of the WEF capitalist elite gathered at Davos annually so far always "had it wrong" in that its consensus about globalisation, free markets, the free movement of products and resources has not been in the interest of the "ordinary people" on the ground, i.e. those without education or money. Very little has been done since the 2008 recession to improve the lives of the middle and lower classes.

What we are now seeing in the world is a reaction to this neglect. The capitalist elite are beginning to understand that they will have to change their approach if they intend creating wealth for all (Bloomberg, 2017b, p. 12). It is in view of this that International Monetary Fund Executive Director Christine Lagarde stated that globalisation has to get "a new face" so that fewer people will feel excluded. Having said this, however, she hoped that there would be no more moves towards "deglobalisation". She also expressed concern about Trump's policy of protectionism, the economic effects of Brexit and the growing right-wing sentiment in Europe. She feared that political tensions about globalisation and trade would lead to slow or negative economic growth (Bloomberg, 2016, p. 13).

Donald Trump became United States of America President on 20 January 2017. At the time of writing this paper, there was not much clarity about how his opposition to globalisation and internationalism would play out during his term. There are indications that his administration would be more protectionist in view of his speeches about economic nationalism, the building of walls, the tearing up of international trade agreements, "America first" (Bloomberg, 2017, p. 12), mercantilism, free trade only to the advantage of America, relationships that would bring financial gain to America, and relationships with leaders that could be advantageous for America (Schreiber, 2016, p. 9). Trump clearly read the sentiments of "ordinary Americans" accurately: their resistance to the status quo, their distrust of the capitalist elite in Washington, and the general neglect of the interests of the

working class (Viljoen, 2016, p. 21). He heard them saying that they felt betrayed by globalisation and the uncontrolled influx of immigrants (Holzapfel, 2016, p. 7).

In 2005, Huntington (2005, p. 138) had already detected signs of such a future anti-neoliberal groundswell. The erosion of national identity in the later decades of the twentieth century had four principle manifestations: the popularity of the doctrines of multiculturalism and diversity among some elite elements; special interests that elevated racial, ethnic, gender, and other subnational identities over national identity; the weakness or absence of the factors that previously promoted immigrant assimilation combined with the increased tendency of immigrants to maintain dual identities, loyalties and citizenships; the dominance among immigrants of speakers, largely Mexican, of a single non-English language; and the denationalisation of important segments of America's elites. Trump took the gap that began opening between the government elite's cosmopolitan and transnational (i.e. neoliberal) commitments and the still highly nationalist and patriotic values of the "ordinary American public".

Trump followed up on the views of among others Joe Stiglitz, one of the most influential economists of our time, who is known for his critical view of the management of globalisation and of the "free market fundamentalists" (neoliberals), the IMF and the World Bank. Stiglitz is convinced that unfettered markets often do not lead to social justice and also not always to efficient outcomes. Market fundamentalism nevertheless continues to exert enormous influence, among others by creating great inequalities (Stiglitz, 2013).

Bezuidenhout (2016, p. 17), in his discussion of post-truth, "alt-right" and "woke", mentions the possibility that dissatisfied individuals and groups in the Middle East and North Africa also availed themselves of the social media and the systematic use of websites to spread rumours and false news among the "ordinary people". This might have contributed to the Arab Spring in 2011.

In India, according to Roy (2014, pp. 95-96), the "ordinary people" have also "had enough" of the perpetrations of the capitalist elite. The "Occupy Movement" has joined thousands of other resistance movements all over the world "in which the poorest of people are standing up and stopping the rich corporations in their tracks". The struggle has awakened their imagination: they begin to see that capitalism "has reduced the idea of justice to mean just 'human rights' and the idea of dreaming of equality has become blasphemous". Roy goes on to say: "We are not fighting to tinker with reforming a system that needs to be replaced".

I would finally like to draw attention to the situation in South Africa. Cele and Koen (2003, §35), after examining student politics in the period 1960 to 1990, came to the conclusion that student organisations had changed from protest oriented structures to structures focusing on economic rather than political issues. Students were inclined to protest against current social, political and economic conditions. Based on their studies, they predicted that "this could lead to mass protests as many student leaders (in 2003 already) express(ed) open dissatisfaction with the limited role they play(ed) in addressing political, as opposed to economic concerns". In Cloete's (2016) opinion, the student activism in 2015-2016 should not be ascribed only to conditions on university campuses; it is part of a wider groundswell among the "ordinary citizenry" of the country. Universities are merely useful platforms on which to express general dissatisfaction with the status quo. Whereas the student

disobedience originally found expression within the neoliberal frame of mind, it has in recent years changed to a movement outside of the neoliberal agenda. Students have begun to realise that they would never enjoy free higher education and that they will therefore remain locked in an “endless system of debt” and of “financial exclusion”. The students have begun to realise that their situation has deteriorated under the neoliberal policies that the current Government has adopted. According to Naidoo (2009, p. 167), “the spirit of disobedience, refusal and rebellion embodied in the struggles of the youth against apartheid no longer finds resonance within the (neoliberal) movement”.

South Africa’s (and Burundi’s) intended withdrawal from the Rome Statute and thereby from the International Criminal Court can also be construed as a step towards a rejection of globalisation and internationalisation, two pillars of neoliberalism (cf. Huntington, 2005, p. 271).

## **Discussion**

It would be fair to conclude that all the movements mentioned in this paper could be just a number of unconnected incidents. One could also argue, on the other hand, that they are all part of a worldwide social movement, though as yet uncoordinated and disparate. A golden thread seems to run through all of them, namely an aversion to the precepts of neoliberalism. This conclusion raises the question: *What could be the significance of the rise of such social movements for education worldwide?* The following are a few thoughts in this regard.

Firstly, education should be tailored according to the pedagogical and career needs of all people, including those in the middle and working classes. The interests of the “ordinary people on the ground” should be taken into account. Education systems should be planned in such a manner that they can embrace the interests and career preparation of all citizens, not only those of the wealthy and governing elite.

Secondly, education systems should adopt a value system that is in line with the first point. Instead of supporting and advancing capitalist and neoliberal values, education systems should be tailored to promote values that would be advantageous to all the people within a country, including the inculcation of a sense of justice and equality. Schools and education systems should not be managed like business corporations but as institutions of teaching and learning.

Thirdly, a new approach to citizenship education should be adopted. Instead of focusing on internationalism and globalism, educators could consider inculcating values pertaining to national identity, appreciation of what is typical of their own country and culture, and concentrate on helping immigrants to adopt the new national identity.

Finally, educators should guard against the proliferation of post-truth and fake news. Classrooms should never deteriorate into echo-chambers for spreading falsehoods and half-truths. Educators should guide learners to be prudent users of the internet and the social media.

## **Conclusion**

The contents of this paper are tentative and provisional; the responses to the neoliberalist orientation to education outlined have not yet run their course. Final

conclusions about the various social movements cannot be drawn as yet, but one thing seems clear: they all seem to be responses to the current domination of the neoliberal value orientation (in education). The contents of this paper embody a wakeup call to all involved in education: educators and educationists will soon be called upon to take a stance regarding the challenges flowing from an anti-neoliberalist orientation, particularly regarding education.

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