
PROBLEMATIZATION AS ACTIVISM: DISRUPTING THE NEOLIBERAL EDUCATION PROJECT THROUGH THE “WORK OF THOUGHT”

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INTRODUCTION: NEOLIBERALISM AS COMMON SENSE

The move to position education within a narrow discourse of economic rationality, efficiency, accountability, market logics, and any number of other tenets of neoliberalism has seemingly become commonplace. The concretization of such a discursive framework within daily practices is dangerous, not simply because it situates education as a commodity rather than a social good, but more crucially because it suggests that this logic is not a logic at all, but an ahistorical reality. This is often reflected at my own institution when faculty and administrators discuss new initiatives deemed necessary to make up for the shortfall of state funding in an ongoing budget crisis. We discuss targeting new demographics of students who are less dependent on state aid and how to better collect data on graduation rates/salaries of alumni to meet the growing emphasis on performance-based funding at the state and federal level. We often verbalize this logic by considering ways to “market” programs in new locales to increase enrollment and bring in revenue. Very rarely, if ever, are these discourses and practices problematized by placing them within the larger socio-historical context from which they have emerged. One would think that the idea of marketing education as a commodity for consumers, an investment for financial gain, is all that there is and has ever been.

None of this is to denigrate my or any other institution caught up within the web of neoliberalism. Rather, it is to indicate the extent to which such logics infiltrate ordinary practices and commonsense understandings. The silent, unrecognized way in which neoliberalism operates forms a major part of its base of power. Tomlinson and Lipsitz write that neoliberalism appears “as an apolitical, nonideological, and essentially technical project based on objective principles of efficiency The effect of these campaigns of neoliberal pedagogies is to valorize neoliberalism, to treat it as unassailable, beyond history, beyond criticism, impervious to counter-argument.”¹

It is tempting for activists committed to social democratic ends to meet the manifestations of neoliberalism head on. When neighborhood schools are closed and districts restructured under new charter initiatives, or when faculty are threatened with layoffs or subjected to increasingly managerial reforms, calls for activism to resist these singularities emerge swiftly. However, direct assaults

¹ Barbara Tomlinson and George Lipsitz, “Insubordinate Spaces for Intemperate Times: Countering the Pedagogies of Neoliberalism,” *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 35, no. 1 (2013): 9.

at the surface level often leave the underlying logic unchecked and unchallenged. More specifically, the neoliberal construction of subjectivity, reflected in the redefinition of the individual as *homo oeconomicus*, remains intact.² Thus, a broader project of critical work that challenges these often taken-for-granted assumptions becomes necessary.

My realization of the need for a more robust account of neoliberal logic often occurs in the classroom. Many of the students I teach are public K–12 educators. I often push my students to critique and challenge contemporary education reform, discussing policies that have transformed conceptions of schools from social democratic institutions to those governed by free market principles. I turn their attention to theorists such as Dewey or Freire, who frame learning as experiential, transformative, and a process of organic growth in the service of democratic ideals. Some simply do not agree with such philosophies, but what I find more interesting are those students who ultimately reject them on the basis of possibility. For these students, Deweyans or like-minded educational philosophers offer an ideology incompatible with the pressing realities of schools in an era of standardization. This, of course, is the point, as such philosophies are intended to reconstruct the problematic situation within which critical educators find themselves. The most telling question offered by students who share an affinity for Dewey, Freire, or whoever, is some derivation of “How is this possible?” Indeed, how can it be possible to put into practice such transformative philosophies of education if neoliberal reform remains outside of the scope of critical inquiry; an assumed reality that pervades discourse and practice? As Read notes,

It is not enough to simply oppose neoliberalism as ideology... As Foucault argues, neoliberalism operates less on actions, directly curtailing them, than on the condition and effects of actions, on the sense of possibility . . . It is perhaps no accident that one of the most famous political implementers of neoliberal reforms, Margaret Thatcher, used the slogan, “there is no alternative,” legitimating neoliberalism based on the stark absence of possibilities.³

Thus, any transformative efforts must be paired with a form of analysis that denaturalizes neoliberalism and creates possibilities for thinking otherwise.

² For an accessible overview of this concept, see Daniel B. Saunders, “Neoliberal Ideology and Public Higher Education in the United States,” *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies* 8, no. 1 (2010): 47–48. For an overview of its connections within Foucault’s lectures on governmentality, see Thomas Lemke, “The Birth of ‘Bio-Politics’: Michel Foucault’s Lecture at the College de France on Neo-liberal Governmentality,” *Economy and Society* 30, no. 2 (2001): 190–207.

³ Jason Read, “A Genealogy of Homo-Economicus: Neoliberalism and the Production of Subjectivity,” *Foucault Studies* 6 (2009): 36.

In what follows, I center Foucault’s genealogical project and, more specifically, his concept of *problematization*, as an important methodological tool for displacing neoliberalism from its stable perch atop a perceived absence of other possibilities. The genealogical analysis envisaged and practiced by Foucault opens up new avenues by indicating not only that, but also how our present reality is the product of historical contingency rather than logical necessity. After discussing this concept, I highlight Koopman’s recent analysis, who argues that the diagnostic work of *problematization* might be usefully paired with the normative reconstructive work central to pragmatism within a larger framework of critical inquiry.⁴ Applied to the current educational climate, such a project of critical inquiry offers a powerful activist framework for grappling with and reconstructing the present dangers of neoliberal reform.

FOUCAULT, THE WORK OF THOUGHT, AND *PROBLEMATIZATION*

Though Foucault’s ideas shifted in important ways across his academic career, there were central concepts that ran through his entire body of work. One of these central concepts was what he called the history or “work of thought.” Foucault characterizes this work as a process of turning thought into an object of analysis or a problem. He says:

Thought is not what inhabits a certain conduct and gives it its meaning; rather, it is what allows one to step back from this way of acting or reacting, to present it to oneself as an object of thought and to question it as to its meaning, its conditions, and its goals. Thought is freedom in relation to what one does, the motion by which one detaches oneself from it, establishes it as an object, and reflects on it as a problem.⁵

Foucault goes on to explain that specific thought or forms of rationality develop as particular responses to historically situated problems. There are social, economic, and political processes among others that create problems and thus possibilities for different responses. Alluding to his own work, Foucault notes that diverse responses emerged historically as a reaction to difficulties of sexual ethics in the Hellenistic period and of 18th century penal practice and mental illness. The analysis of the conditions of possibility for these problems and responses and the historical/genealogical analysis of these emerging rationalities characterizes the notion of *problematization*, another theme linked to the work of thought. He says:

⁴ Colin Koopman, *Genealogy as Critique: Foucault and the Problems of Modernity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013).

⁵ Michel Foucault, “Polemics, Politics, and Problemizations: An Interview with Michel Foucault,” in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Vintage Books, 2010), 388.

But the work of history of thought would be to rediscover at the root of these diverse solutions the general form of problemization that has made them possible . . . This development of a given into a question, this transformation of a group of obstacles and difficulties into problems to which the diverse solutions will attempt to produce a response, this is what constitutes the point of problemization and the specific work of thought.⁶

Two important points emerge here. First, there is both a nominal and verbal form of problematization in which practices, discourses, and historical responses to difficulties are themselves objects of inquiry, in the nominal sense, while “problematizing,” in the verbal sense, is the act of historicizing these practices as part of critical inquiry into the present.⁷ Second, Foucault’s form of critical inquiry investigates conditions of possibility. It is a form of inquiry that, rather than making surface level subversions or vindications of present practices, genealogically traces present practices, discourses, and subjectivities to destabilize the logics that make them possible. By investigating conditions of possibility, Foucault powerfully illustrates how both past and present discourse and rationality are historically contingent—the product of responses to other problems and difficulties emerging over the course of time and place. The notion of contingency is central to Foucaultian genealogy, as this form of inquiry serves the purpose of problematizing the present. Regardless of how universal the present seems, Foucault’s critical inquiry dislodges practices, discourses, and subjectivities by excavating the historical contingencies that have made them possible. In the interview referenced earlier, Foucault suggests that this is in part what he had tried to do throughout much of his work in relation to madness, discipline, sexuality, and ethics. I propose that a similar project of genealogical problematization is necessary for encountering the contemporary phenomenon of neoliberalism. Problematization challenges unquestioned logical formations, allowing for a “stepping back to make the familiar strange so that thoughtful analysis might engage otherwise unrecognized social processes and practices.”⁸ Recognizing and naming neoliberalism as a contingent response to social and economic difficulties emerging in the process of history might denaturalize it as the only possibility.

Thus, we see that problematization represents an underlying current in Foucault’s larger methodological project of genealogy. We also see that, for Foucault, critical inquiry emphasizes a backward-facing investigation into the

⁶ *Ibid.*, 389.

⁷ For an extended analysis of these distinctions, but also their complementarity, see Koopman, *Genealogy as Critique*, 98–102.

⁸ Aaron M. Kuntz, foreword to *Technologies of Government: Politics and Power in the “Information Age”*, by Benjamin Baez (Charlotte: Information Age Publishers, 2014), xi.

conditions of possibility in order to show that and how the present has been constructed. The question of how this form of critical inquiry connects with normative reconstructions is crucial. What does genealogical critique have to do with resistance, activism, and transformation of the present, one might ask? It is to these considerations that I turn next.

PROBLEMATIZATION IN A RECONSTRUCTIVE FRAMEWORK

One question that emerges from considerations of Foucaultian problematization is whether or not this form of inquiry can provide transformative or reconstructive possibilities. To paraphrase an analysis offered by Rorty, perhaps Foucault's genealogical inquiry will not get us anywhere until we dream about the future instead of stopping dead after problematizing the present.⁹ Koopman suggests that this is a bit shortsighted, explaining that the problematization at the heart of Foucaultian genealogy lays the groundwork for reconstructive possibilities. Specifically, because he views Foucault's work as a genealogy of conditions of possibility, rather than to necessarily vindicate or subvert present practices, Koopman suggests that Foucault offers us necessary tools for re-shaping the present by allowing us to think other than how we do. He writes, "For if genealogy helps us see *how* our present was made, it also thereby equips us with some of the tools we would need for beginning the labor of remaking our future differently."¹⁰ Koopman goes further to suggest that Foucault was beginning to trace his own reconstructive projects with his late work on ethics, but died before its completion. Thus, the problematizing character central to genealogical work at least has reconstructive implications by laying the groundwork for more ameliorative purposes.

On the other hand, Koopman recognizes that Foucault did not excel at modes of reconstruction in the same way that he did with genealogical problematization.¹¹ Thus, within a larger network of critical inquiry, the problematization of Foucault's work lays the groundwork for, but also stands in need of, a more robust reconstructive framework better found in traditions like pragmatism. As Koopman writes, "It is not only the case that pragmatism and genealogy stand in need of one another as traditions of critical inquiry. Going even further, we can say that they also positively invite one another."¹² In what follows, I will briefly summarize some historical arguments against such a pairing of traditions and then offer responses from Koopman and others. This will provide a wider scholarly context for my line of argumentation and also provide the basis for the conclusion of the paper which considers implications for education more specifically.

⁹ Richard Rorty, "Beyond Nietzsche and Marx," *London Review of Books* 3, no. 3 (1981): 6.

¹⁰ Koopman, *Genealogy as Critique*, 130.

¹¹ Colin Koopman, "Foucault and Pragmatism: Introductory Notes on Metaphysical Methodology," *Foucault Studies* 11 (2011): 3–10.

¹² *Ibid.*, 6.

Concerning the linkages between American pragmatism and French intellectual traditions, Rorty asserts that “James and Dewey were not only waiting at the end of the dialectical road which analytic philosophy traveled, but are waiting at the end of the road which, for example, Foucault and Deleuze are currently traveling.”¹³ One can see within Rorty’s neopragmatic analysis that pragmatism offers a sort of philosophical synthesis between analytical and continental traditions and that he read pragmatism into much of the work of Foucault and others. Rorty also suggests that, while Foucault and Dewey agreed on much concerning critiques of truth, reason, and objectivity, Dewey offered a form of hope in his pragmatic inquiry whereas Foucault jettisoned ideals of hope, democracy, and freedom with his focus on the “dark side of the social sciences.”¹⁴ Where Rorty interpreted pragmatist thinkers as trail blazers for those like Foucault and Deleuze, West understood Foucault at least as a “challenge” to transformative critique.¹⁵ While noting the important insights of Foucault’s work, West argues that his own brand of prophetic pragmatism rejects Foucault’s “antiromanticism” because it is preoccupied with the constitution of subjects, downplays human agency, and devalues moral discourse, respectively. Regarding the last point, and echoing Rorty, West contends that “by failing to articulate and elaborate ideals of democracy, equality, and freedom, Foucault provides solely negative conceptions of critique and resistance.”¹⁶

Colapietro strongly critiques both Rorty and West on a number of points in his analysis of American readings of Foucault. Concerning Rorty’s assertion that Foucault and others are traveling the same road that pragmatists have completed, Colapietro suggests that Rorty reads too much Dewey and James into Foucault, thus neglecting their important differences. Alternatively, Colapietro suggests that while Dewey is not awaiting Foucault anywhere, the paths of these philosophers did cross at important junctures that offer invitations for both to be fruitfully used together.¹⁷ He also rejects both Rorty’s and West’s arguments that Foucault contributes little (and actually acts as an obstacle in West’s case) to transformative critique through a purely negative analysis. Colapietro identifies Foucault as a *meliorist*, as opposed to an optimist or pessimist, or “one who is continuously working to expose contingencies in the cause of facilitating innovations.”¹⁸ Citing Foucault, he writes that the purpose of Foucault’s

¹³ Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), xviii.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 204. For a wider view of this whole argument, see “Method, Social Science, and Social Hope” in *Consequences of Pragmatism* in particular.

¹⁵ Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1989).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 223–26.

¹⁷ Vincent Colapietro, “Situation, Meaning, and Improvisation: An Aesthetics of Existence in Dewey and Foucault,” *Foucault Studies* 11 (2011): 20–40.

¹⁸ Vincent Colapietro, “American Evasions of Foucault,” *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 36 (1998): 332.

diagnostic work is transformative as it can “open up the space of freedom understood as a space of concrete freedom—i.e., of possible transformation.”¹⁹

Colapietro, then, seems to echo Koopman’s call for the effective use of *genealogical pragmatism* with his suggestion that problematization and reconstruction are compatible within decisive junctures of critical inquiry. Another critique of this view, however, is that these traditions (e.g. continental philosophy and American pragmatism) and thinkers (e.g. Foucault and Dewey) do already engage in the work of both diagnosis *and* amelioration, problematization *and* reconstruction and thus have little new to offer each other. Perhaps illustrative of this point is Hickman’s argument that, despite their affinities, post-modern traditions offer little new that was not already covered within American pragmatism. For example, he asks, “what do we find in Foucault’s notion of problematization that we do not get in Dewey’s notion of inquiry?”²⁰ Koopman provides an important response to this line of thought in his support of a genealogical pragmatism. Though he agrees that these traditions do singularly engage elements of both problematization and reconstruction, he suggests that each contributes a particular strength to the overall project of critical inquiry. Arguing that pragmatism has *more to do* with forward-facing reconstruction than genealogical problematization, Koopman writes, “To achieve the latter, those of us immersed in the works of Dewey would do well to turn to Foucault for lessons about how to construct a historical problematization of the present.”²¹

In this section, I have attempted to provide a brief scholarly context concerning critiques and rejoinders to understanding Foucaultian problematization as part of a larger framework of reconstruction. The final point made by Koopman grounds the concerns introducing this paper—namely the question of how educators committed to transformative education approach the challenge of neoliberal reform. I suggest that any critical and potentially reconstructive project aimed at neoliberalism must incorporate the diagnostic and destabilizing work illustrated by Foucaultian problematization. In the final section, I turn to what such a project might look like by highlighting several authors whose work illustrates that of “problematizing neoliberalism.”

CONCLUSION: PROBLEMATIZING NEOLIBERALISM

I began by suggesting that neoliberalism exists as a dominant framework that influences discursive formations and practical engagements. More than this, the tenets of neoliberalism have become commonsensical, manifesting in the ways we discuss and practice education. In conclusion, I draw upon a few examples of scholarship that, in my view, work back against the unquestioned logic of neoliberalism through problematization of its core

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Larry Hickman, “Dewey, Foucault, Rabinow: Comments on the 2012 Coss Lecture,” *The Pluralist* 7, no.3 (2012): 41.

²¹ Koopman, “Foucault and Pragmatism,” 9.

assumptions to create new conditions of possibility. Though it is beyond the scope of this paper to chart what an entire project of this kind would entail, I do offer some implications for the disruption of neoliberal logic in the study of education and schools.

First, Harvey's work charts not only the historical development of neoliberalism, but also the cooptation of central concepts by neoliberal logic.²² In particular, Harvey examines how the concept of "freedom" has been appropriated within neoliberalism to mean a limited view of economic independence for the accumulation of wealth. Citing Karl Polanyi, Harvey illustrates how neoliberal freedom has come to mean simple advocacy for free enterprise that must be maintained through power and compulsion. He uses this investigation of neoliberal freedom to explain President Bush's assertions that America had an obligation to "help the spread of freedom" during the second Iraq War, which meant the spread of free enterprise into new locations.²³ In his conclusion, Harvey calls for public appraisal of these narrow understandings of freedom, offering alternative and expanded freedoms that move beyond those defined by privatization and capital. He writes, "The task is to initiate dialogue . . . and thereby to deepen collective understandings and define more adequate lines of action."²⁴ Thus, a key task is not simple resistance of surface-level manifestations of neoliberalism, but the problematization of neoliberal values (e.g., freedom) that have become commonsensical.

In a similar fashion, Brown assesses the revolutionary undoing of democratic principles by neoliberalism.²⁵ She argues that neoliberalism has been effective by identifying capitalism, and its tenets of privatization and self-entrepreneurial rationality, with democracy. Thus, democracy understood as the people coordinating their common existence degenerates into an "economization" which is "what can finally kill it."²⁶ To chart an alternative future to the neoliberal regime, Brown suggests collective action and the possibility of "shared sacrifice" where "the whole community is called to sacrifice in order to save particular elements within it."²⁷ In this sense, collective struggle against neoliberalism acts as a restorative action for true democratic principles. Central to this restorative project is the unraveling, or problematization, of the link between democracy and capitalism—a fundamental shift in logic from *homo oeconomicus* to *homo politicus*.

²² David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

²³ *Ibid.*, 37.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 199.

²⁵ Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 209.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 217.

The critiques offered by Harvey and Brown provide crucial implications for the work of disrupting neoliberalism within our analysis of education/schools. First, both Harvey and Brown work to displace neoliberalism through historical problematization. These authors do not simply reject neoliberalism or point to its dangers but indicate its historical development as a particular logic that makes practices intelligible and possible. For critically-minded educators, similar historical and genealogical inquiries of commonsense logic in educational policy are necessary in order to both challenge, but first disrupt, the ubiquitous logic of neoliberalism. Second, both Harvey and Brown take aim at how neoliberalism recasts core principles and, thus, becomes nearly uncontested. At a broad level, individuals would hardly be taken seriously in most American contexts if they challenged “freedom” or “democracy.” Thus, as neoliberalism recasts freedom and democracy as synonymous with free enterprise, privatization, and capital, the struggle against it becomes all the more difficult.

A clear example of this in educational policy is the overwhelming emphasis on “school choice.” Whether it is Betsy DeVos making statements before Congress or a well-intentioned mother and father wanting the best education for their child, the privileging of school choice for individuals pervades discussions of school policy and funding. Rather than simply challenging some of the particular manifestations of this logic, such as the growth of charter schools and voucher programs, critically-minded educators might engage students in historical problematization of the logic of choice itself. We might ask students: how did the notion of private choice and consumerism become so ensconced within public education? What historical formations and, to use Foucault’s phrase, “difficulties” gave rise to the bipartisan view that school choice aligns with principles of freedom and democracy? How have these assumptions shaped the historical trajectory of schooling in America and what assumptions or beliefs about freedom and democracy run counter to notions of school choice as we think of it today? Perhaps such inquiries can better disrupt and denaturalize the logic of something like school choice by illustrating its historical development, thus indicating the possibilities for thinking otherwise.

As an example that speaks more directly to the problematization of education, Baez analyzes the workings of neoliberal logic within the context of higher education.²⁸ Baez examines several distinct “technologies,” such as information, statistics, and databases, that have become central to the neoliberal logic of accountability and management. Importantly, however, he does not simply critique these systems, but attempts to illustrate how these technologies are historical entities that shape who we are and how we know. He writes, “Contrary to most social and political analyses . . . I do not take the notions of information, statistics, the database, the economy, or accountability as given, as reflecting empirical realities independent of the ways they are put into

²⁸ Benjamin Baez, *Technologies of Government: Politics and Power in the “Information Age”* (Charlotte: Information Age Publishing, 2014).

discourse.”²⁹ Working from this problematization of neoliberal logic and forms, Baez suggests that educators might conceive of alternatives by refusing to calculate themselves according to neoliberal technologies.³⁰

The refusal to be calculated by these technologies may not be entirely possible within the ever-increasing neoliberal academy, as faculty members often gain status by these very mechanisms (e.g., teacher evaluations, accreditation reports, formulas for scholarly production). This should make it all the more urgent that educators consider how they may use their faculty work to problematize the very logics that make these technologies intelligible. Perhaps there are pockets where critically-minded educators can work together to problematize, for example, the seemingly commonplace notion that all instruction can and should be subjected to a consistent process of assessment and reverse-engineering of learning outcomes. In my experience, this notion goes basically unquestioned at my own institution, especially when it is linked to impending accreditation reviews. Of course, the strict development of ends that exist outside of the educational experience was a major concern for Dewey and a point of contestation within curriculum theory.³¹

Finally, it seems crucial to problematize the logic of the technologies that Baez describes for our students who are or will become educators themselves. In my own teaching, I have found that teachers and administrators alike are quite quick to critique some of the standardized practices of their profession. However, after they point out the flaws and dangers of the newest teacher evaluation tool, for example, they often go on to explain how a new method of standardized evaluation ought to be constructed. In other words, their critiques remain rested on the continued logic of standardization, accountability, and management. The analysis offered by Baez and others takes the very logic of these technologies to task and opens up new avenues for inquiry. Indeed, in my own classroom at least, it was only after reading Davies’s critique, and I might say “problematization,” of evidence-based practice that some of my students began to realize the possibilities for thinking outside of standardized practices of teaching and evaluation.³²

These scholarly examples connect in their refusal to accord natural status to the logics of neoliberalism. Consequently, they provide some important applications for how we might attempt to disrupt neoliberal education reform in our own academic spaces. Thus, entangled in a deeply troubling time of neoliberal reform, critical educators might find the starting point for forward-looking activist work, oddly enough, in the backward-looking activity of

²⁹ *Ibid.*, xviii.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 140.

³¹ As an example, see Herbert Kliebard, “The Tyler Rationale,” *The School Review* 78, no. 2 (1970): 259–72.

³² Bronwyn Davies, “Death to Critique and Dissent? The Politics and Practices of New Managerialism and of ‘Evidence-Based Practice,’” *Gender and Education* 15, no. 1 (2003): 91–103.

problematization. Engaging in scholarship, dialogue, and historical inquiry that seeks to problematize neoliberalism, charting its historical development and exposing its logical contingency, makes for a useful response to its “there is no alternative” undercurrent. As I argued earlier, this form of inquiry stands firmly within the more pragmatic work of transformation and reconstruction. Though taking the time to look backward, this “work of thought” is usefully linked to the reconstruction of the present as it galvanizes us to think otherwise and to begin the work of constructing new and better educational futures.
