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"We have never been public:" Continuity and change in the policy production of "the public" in education in England

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Abstract

Recent educational reforms in England have sought to reshape public education by extending central government control of curriculum and assessment, while replacing local government control of schools with a quasi-private system of academies and multi academy trusts. In this paper, we resist reading this as the latest iteration of the debate between "traditional" and "progressive" education. Instead, we note how, despite the mobilisation of the rhetoric of the public and public education, schooling in England has never been public in any deeply meaningful sense. We develop a genealogical reading of public education in England, in which ideas of British universalism – "the public" – and inequality and exclusion in education and society have not been opposed but have gone hand-in-hand. This raises the question whether it is possible to envisage and enact another form of collective – one that is based on action rather than fantasy and that is co-authored by, comprising, and exists for, the people. The final part of this paper seeks to grapple with this challenge, in the context of past, present and future potential developments in education, and to consider possibilities for the imaginary reconstitution of public education in England in the twenty-first century.

Keywords

Public education, academisation, neoliberalism, social justice, equality

Introduction

Bruno Latour, in his book, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Latour, 1993), problematised the distinction between "nature" and "science" articulated by eighteenth century modernist thinkers, such as

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Boyle and Hobbes. These thinkers, he argued, deployed a process of purification and separation in relation to the discourses of nature and society so that all traces of one was removed from the other. For Latour, this mutual separation, and the consequent distinctness of the discourses of nature and society, is definitive of modernity. Yet the co-production of nature and society continued in modernity, as it always did and always will (think climate emergency and the global COVID-19 pandemic), the strenuous efforts at denial and disavowal on the part of the discourses and practices of modernity notwithstanding. As Latour puts it, "We have never been modern", despite our insistence that we are.

In this paper, we adopt a similar line in relation to the discourse of public education in England. Specifically, we argue that the "public" in English public education is more an artefact of ideologically driven policy production processes than it is, or has been, a fully realised reality. We also suggest that the former policy production process serves to divert attention from the latter unrealised nature of public education in England. In making our arguments we foreground a historical perspective in order to highlight the entanglements of education, politics and society.

In other words, our approach in this paper is to foreground how the notion of "the public" in England has a long history of mobilisation in the interests of various ideological developments and political philosophies. This focus on how "the public" is mobilised draws on work that has sought to deconstruct the term (for example, Clarke and Newman, 1997), but is distinct from it in that our concern is with its deployment, particularly in relation to education. This mobilisation can be traced back to financialised conceptions of the state and its subjects emerging from the "glorious revolution" of 1688 (Westall and Gardiner, 2014). More recently, this history has continued through the post-war welfare state, with its "debilitating realist assumptions" of common ownership that serve(d) "to fortify and rationalise the inequalities it claims are being opposed" (Westall and Gardiner, 2014: 122). This history can be traced on into the neoliberal reorganisation of education and society, characteristics of which include: pervasive "corporate welfare;" endless reflexivity in the form of audit, conducted in the name of public value yet serving as a substitute for meaningful political action; and obsessive concerns with the competitive performance of the national education system in international league tables. This history can also be tracked through the melancholic strains of neo-conservatism, with its nationalist-inflected yearning to recover and reinstate the fantasmatically reassuring days when Britain was celebrated, confident and "great." As part of this reading, our paper seeks to grapple with the ever-changing nature and context of "public" education in England through past and present political and economic developments in wider society. Against this background, we also attempt to consider possibilities for the imaginary reconstitution of public education in England in the twenty-first century.

Historicising the "public"

> Always historicize.
> (Frederic Jameson, 1981: 9)

The recent academisation agenda, removing schools from the control of locally elected councils and bringing them under the direct purview of the Secretary of State for Education and the United Kingdom parliament, has generated a lot of commentary in mainstream and social media. But this agenda is but one of a number of policy developments that have reshaped the landscape of public education in England. Other developments include the mandating of a prescriptive national curriculum, the imposition on teachers and schools of a punitive audit and inspection regime, and the fragmentation of teacher education provision. Indeed, so rapid and so radical has this change been, that the very nature of "public education" can be said to be in crisis (Maisuria, 2019; Nelson and

Jones, 2007; Wilkinson et al., 2019). This crisis is the result of a more widespread reimagining of the notion of "the public" in England and elsewhere, itself linked to the predations wrought by the form of late capitalism known as neoliberalism.

Yet the public has a long history of mobilisation as discourse in response to social, economic and military crises. In pursuing this line of thought, it is important to recognise that the public is not a body or an agent, not the commons or the people. Nor is it something that can be simply contrasted with the realm of the "private." Rather, we see value in recognising how "the public" is mobilised as a discursive strategy for promoting particular aims and ends – calls that are all the more persuasive since they claim to be the voice of the communal. By means of this "public" discourse, the population is captured and its desires are foreclosed, while land, labour and, increasingly, the space of the personal are expropriated for private gain.

Historically, the term "public" has a complex etymology and history of usage (Williams, 1983), with its meanings often slippery, contested and partial (Clarke and Newman, 1998). While ostensibly opposed to the "private," the person considered fit for public life by writers such as Locke, was someone, typically White, adult and male, deemed to enjoy a sufficient degree of independence as indicated by virtue of their capacity for critical thought and their material possessions, that is, by mind and wealth – both of which today we would consider to be aspects of the private individual (Bennett et al., 2005). This is but one example of the complex relationship and frequent intertwining of the seemingly opposed "public" and "private" domains. In current usage, the public denotes a range of meanings (Bennett, et al., 2005: 282), including, but not limited to, the following:

(a) the people, activities or interests which pertain to, or are structured by, the state;
(b) things which are open and accessible;
(c) that which is shared or must be shared;
(e) those realms and things lying outside the household; and
(f) Knowledge or opinion which is formed or circulated in communicative exchange, via oratory, texts, broadcast or social media.

While this set of possible meanings is admirably wide-ranging, encompassing philosophical as well as practical issues, it also contains tensions that undermine any search for a singular definition. For instance, the first point references the structuring activity of the state, suggesting the establishment of boundaries and setting of limits typically associated with the nation-state; whereas the second and third points suggest a more wide-ranging and all-embracing conceptualisation associated with notions of the commons or the multitude.

Picking up on these tensions, it is important to note that strategically, the discourse of the public has been deployed to enshrine and sustain a constitutionally continuant "us" – a form of national identity that is given a vital boost during periods of threat and the demands for defensive solidarity they engender. English history provides plentiful examples of such episodes, such as the attempted invasion of the Spanish Armada, the evacuation of Dunkirk or the devastation of the Blitz. The threats experienced during such episodes can be (re)mobilised for specific ends in more peaceful times. For instance, in recent years, the champions of Brexit (the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community at the end of 31 January 2020) have sought to tap into discourses of embattled Britain in positioning the European Union as posing a threat to British sovereignty and democracy. Such mobilisations can be read as the conscription of the population into the discourse of the public via increasing personal–moral indebtedness and social solidarity, and in order to enhance identification with particular state-capitalist interests.

In what follows, we examine the historical contours of the discourse via a necessarily selective, rather than comprehensive, genealogy of the public in England, where genealogy is understood as a form of radical and critical historicism (Bevir, 2008). Critically, it is important to bear in mind that the themes through which we structure the narrative below do not form a sequence so much as they combine in a palimpsest of overlaid, entwined and entangled discursive threads.

Genealogy is related to both history and philosophy without being reducible to one or the other: "genealogy is history differently practiced, or, history with a difference that can only be accounted for philosophically" (Saar, 2008: 297). This difference involves an emphasis on the links between dominant, naturalised or normalised historical narratives on the one hand and power relations on the other, alongside an attempt to delineate alternative, otherwise foreclosed historical narratives. In other words, "genealogies essentially can be thought of as 'critical' and 'effective histories', i.e. histories that fundamentally change the conception of what they are about" (Saar, 2008: 298; see also, Dean, 1994). Our intention in presenting the following genealogical account of the "public" in England is to offer precisely this sort of disruptive reading. Such disruption stands in contrast to the legitimising or valorising role often played by standard histories. "'Genealogy' is certainly not undertaken with the intention of legitimising any present person, practice, or institution, and won't in general have the effect of enhancing the standing of any contemporary item" (Geuss, 1994: 276). Indeed, "genealogies appear as drastic narratives of the emergence and transformations of forms of subjectivity related to power, told with the intention to induce doubt and self-reflections in exactly those (present day, European, post-Christian) readers whose (collective) history is narrated" (Saar, 2008: 312). The "drastic" implication of our genealogical reading is to refute any comfortable public–private distinction and to disrupt the prevalent and popular idea that education can be made comfortably mapped within a public–private distinction.

A selective genealogy of the public in England I: Credit, debt and financialisation

The discourse of the public has morphed and changed over time; but going back to at least the so-called "glorious revolution" of 1688, it can be linked to notions of creditworthiness and debt, not least in relation to the necessity of funding imperial and military adventurism (Westall and Gardiner, 2014). It is no accident that the eighteenth century saw the establishment of two key public representative bodies, the Bank of England as the overseer of the state's credit regime, and the East India Company as the state's chief imperial resource operation. The rhetoric of the public in these early days was linked to the "eternal creation and maintenance of property from nature" (Westall and Gardiner, 2014: 24), including "human nature" which is projected onto the public as a "body" (Westall and Gardiner, 2014: 24). This body is conceived dualistically in relation to the human mind, as something which the latter can discipline and draw upon – for instance, for military, imperial or productive purposes – but which it always precedes (Westall and Gardiner, 2014: 24).

The promotion of a consensual notion of "the public" got a large injection of energy and enthusiasm during the Second World War. "With white cliffs, individual bravery, initiative, resilience, mistrust of rules, special global status and an everyday accord of the population, the 'neutral' propaganda of the 1940s would set the model for a postwar realism" (Westall and Gardiner, 2014: 58). The Second World War also saw the establishment or consolidation of numerous state-incorporated agencies, such as the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and the Ministry of Information that generated and disseminated this propaganda. Critically, debt obligation became the core of the social contract between the state and the population: the state was expected to register an obligation for wartime sacrifice and the population was expected to manifest gratitude for protection from alien powers (Westall and Gardiner, 2014: 59).

After the Second World War, this strategy mutated into spending for peacetime necessities, including health and education. As a result, the period between 1948 (the first London Olympics and a time of austerity) and 2012 (the second London Olympics and second era of austerity) "saw the state and its quasi-autonomous bodies reach, with increasing pervasiveness, into the household and the personal, doing so, most effectively, through a credit culture of self-creation" (Westall and Gardiner, 2014: 56). This was also the period of what became known as military Keynesianism, whereby the government's use of military spending served as a macroeconomic policy tool, offered as a means to ameliorate the economic cycle (e.g., Syzmanski, 1973). Indeed, during much of this time, Keynesian economics more broadly operated as a form of societal financial management, legitimated in the name of public trust. From this perspective, the "universal" dimension of health and education is as much about the generalised inclusion of the public in responsibility for payment for these services as it is about their general provision. In this way, through inscription into government indebting practices, in the shape of the system of consensual mutual obligations represented by military defence, social security and the welfare state, the people as the "public" become invested in the managerial and the meritocratic principles of the state and are incited to give their allegiance to its inequality-generating institutions and practices.

Key among such inequality-generating institutions is the anomaly known as the English "public" – that is, private – school, which has sustained its grip on the English imagination well into the twenty-first century. Commenting on the 2010 Coalition cabinet, the *Independent* newspaper noted that if British society looked like its government, about 4 million adults would have gone to Eton. Yet these schools were concerned with training rather than education: "intellectual gymnastics and not ideas, calculation not inspiration. . . was the kind of intellectual merit that should count in government and in society" (Joyce, 2013: 332). Indeed, such was the focus on training in these schools, achieved through the segmentation of time and the compartmentalisation of space, that Joyce describes them as being "more Foucauldian than Foucault" (Joyce, 2013: 270). Critically, these schools, as rendered in the popular imagination, have provided a template for the formation and constitution in England of today's academies and free schools, with their emphasis on uniforms, values, correct conduct and a model of learning that Tharp and Gallimore (1988), in the United States context, describe as "the recitation script."

This reading of the welfare state as extending indebting practices runs counter to the dominant narrative, in which the postwar period is associated with the growth of public services provided for and by the people. Instead, our reading sees the postwar decades as the breeding ground for the deregulation and privatisation of the socioeconomic realm, known as neoliberalism and views the latter as part of the long unfolding of capitalism going back to the nineteenth century and beyond. In other words, "debt-as-participation becomes the defining characteristic of the British public" (Westall and Gardiner, 2014: 57). Indeed, this applies not only to Britain: "all modern nation-states including Britain have been founded and funded on the economic basis of national debt and 'public credit'" (Brantlinger, 1996: 3). This is not to say that debt and deficit are bad – they are essential elements in the operation of modern economies – but rather that we need to pay attention to how the affordances and limitations that they entail are distributed within and across societies (Kelton, 2020; Weeks, 2020).

This analysis suggests that, in the English case, the argument can be made that the notion of the "public," far from being equivalent to the multitude or the commons, is so steeped in financialised notions of social membership and so entangled with elite institutions (e.g. "public" schools, the BBC, etc.) and the interests they protect that we should abandon it in order to free ourselves from the English establishment's constricted view of the public as property franchise and from "the emotional blackmail of consensus that is really shared inequality" (Westall and Gardiner, 2014: 122). This analysis is relevant to any critical consideration of the performative agenda that has

dominated English education in recent years, with schools, teachers and students held accountable for their performance as measured in terms of standardised test results and inspection scores, which serve as a proxy for price in the educational marketplace. However, we risk missing insights into the power of the neoliberal reform of education's ideological grip if we fail to consider the way it has been intertwined with other discourses, central among which is a creeping nationalism that has increasingly taken hold of the educational imaginary in England (as elsewhere) since the 1980s.

A selective genealogy of the public in England II: Nationalism as the prime modality

As we indicate below, the progressive politics of the 1960s and 1970s met with a conservative backlash. This backlash harnessed a discourse of the public that drew upon a glorious past in order to reestablish pride in the nation and the place of the United Kingdom (or more specifically England) as a global power. In English education, fears about the competitive health of the nation, and the demands for a more structured, systematic and instrumental model of education, found policy expression in the landmark 1988 Education Reform Act. In unprecedented fashion, the Act empowered the Secretary of State for Education to prescribe a National Curriculum for all government funded schools. It also established a national, mandatory system of pupil testing in the form of the Standard Achievement Tasks (SATs) in four Key Stages of schooling for children aged 5–16. The grip of the national government was further tightened in 1992 with the creation of the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) as a means of ensuring compliance with the government's national educational agenda – an agenda, as we discuss below, increasingly influenced by not just neoliberalism and with its individualisation of the public but also by neoconservatism.

Specifically, if the establishment of a national curriculum and the SATs assessment regime reflected anxieties about Britain's place in an increasingly competitive and globalising world, the following decades witnessed the development of citizenship education (Crick, 2000), in response to anxieties about internal "others" and as a means of promoting national cohesion and enculturating potentially unruly youth into the civilising values of the dominant (White) liberal status quo (Gillborn, 2005). This growing nationalism in English education was given a further boost with the passing of the anti-extremism Prevent legislation, which is underpinned by a bizarre mix of fantasmatic narratives of national exceptionalism alongside notions of national victimhood, and which involves the co-optation of teachers and other state employees into surveillance functions (Fekete, 2018; Kundnani, 2014). A key part of this agenda has been the requirement on schools to promote so-called "British values," which serves to normalise a state-controlled neo-colonial order against perceived threats from a racialised, alien other (Winter and Mills, 2020).

As this discussion suggests, in many ways the developments in education in the past thirty or so years, from the promulgation of the National Curriculum and the national SATs testing regime – with the latter given a boost in emphasis by the establishment of the Program for International Student Achievement, which has been reduced by the governments of many Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries to an international educational league table – to the diminished role of local education authorities and universities, can be read as the entrenchment of a nationalist agenda in England, such that we can speak of nationalism as England's new modality of public education. The fact that these developments have occurred within various political movements, including neo-conservative and neoliberal agendas, is testimony to the protean energies, chameleon-like character and deeply resonant affective grip of nationalism. As Valluvan writes:

> Nationalist sensibilities have managed to land and entrench themselves across a variety of often conflicting and contradictory political languages. It is this multiplicity, this criss-crossing and shrill ideological

> clamour that constitutes a vital node of analysis as regards a reckoning with the contemporary political moment, a moment when liberal, neoliberal, conservative and left-wing rationales, idioms and affects are all made to dance to the nationalist song. (Valluvan, 2019: 67)

However, in arguing for the increasingly nationalist register of public education, we do not mean to suggest that the earlier managerial, meritocratic and credit-oriented framing outlined in the previous section were superseded. Rather the nationalist emphases have been overlaid onto the earlier template in palimpsest-like fashion. The challenge thus becomes – to mix our metaphors somewhat – to consider how these threads might be, if not unpicked or replaced, rewoven in more egalitarian, cosmopolitan and socially-just fashion.

This analysis also raises the question as to whether, despite these homogenising and hegemonising aspects of the public as a strategic discourse, it is still possible for the term "public" to retain its value. In asking this question, we recognise that ontologically, "the public," rather than existing as some romantic or ideal realm, is that moment at which specific convergences become crystallised and solidified at specific historical moments, some of which we outline below in our selective genealogy. In other words, the public is only ever the outcome or process of confrontation and struggle over meaning, a consequence of the "exteriority of accidents" (Foucault, 1984: 81), rather than a manifestation of some true inner identity or destiny.

Nonetheless, we will lay our cards on the table and assert that *strategically* it is not only possible but essential to retain some notion of the public, not least as a means of embodying and reflecting the idea of furthering integration and solidarity across lines of difference. Thinking this challenge through in greater depth and detail might just offer a way into resuscitating the notion of public education for the twenty-first century. First however, we need to engage more fully with the phenomenon known as neoliberalism and its different but related faces.

A selective genealogy of the public in England III: Neoliberalism – reactionary and progressive

Our analysis suggests that the postwar period, usually seen as a time of expanding social democracy prior to the onslaught of neoliberalism, was actually a time when the seeds of neoliberalism were laid. Specifically, this was a period when social and educational psychologists, management scientists and a wide network of linked technocrats increasingly became auditors of character and brokers of personal productivity, shaping and moulding the thoughts and behaviours of the public in the name of the public. Here we would note that, as with nationalism, it is important not to read neoliberalism in monolithic or static terms and to view it, "not as a 'culture' or a 'structure', but as mobile calculative techniques of governing that can be decontextualized from their original sources and recontextualized in constellations of mutually constitutive and contingent relations" (Ong, 2006: 13). Regardless of its dynamic and disparate nature, however, neoliberalism is governed by an underlying logic of competition (Davies, 2017) – a logic which, despite policy mantras such as "every child matters" and "educational excellence everywhere" that proclaim otherwise, requires both losers and winners. This competitive logic, requiring numerous individuals and institutions to be deemed as failures, is hardly the hallmark of an inclusive public education system.

However, it can be argued that attempts to make schools open to "the public" by making high quality education *open and accessible to all* and making sure that the benefits *were shared* equally (via for example, the introduction of student councils, encouraging girls into science, early childhood programmes such as Headstart, anti-racism policies, etc.), while absolutely necessary, perhaps ironically facilitated the neoliberalisation of education. These progressive agendas had their roots in the New Left politics that emerged in the 1960s in many countries in the Western world (e.g., the

United Kingdom, Australia, United States, France, and Germany) to challenge both the traditional left and the establishment. Many within these movements were railing against bureaucratic structures, were critical of the oppressive role of the state and mobilised a notion of the public to argue for more self-management in institutions and key decision-making bodies. These politics also laid the foundations for the rise of identity politics in the 1970s and 1980s, which identified those who had been excluded from dominant constructions of the public. Running concurrently with these agendas, though, was an economic agenda of the right, monetarism, that was similarly critical of bureaucracy, suspicious of the state, and articulating a move towards self-management within public institutions (best encapsulated in Friedman's (1962) *Capitalism and Freedom*). Nancy Fraser (2019) has suggested that the left's fixation with identity politics allowed neoliberalism (championed in the United Kingdom throughout Margaret Thatcher's Prime Ministerships), to take root in liberal democratic countries. To some extent, Fraser argues, the in-roads that identity politics were making into the public sphere on the one hand, and the similarity of the concerns expressed by new left and neoliberal politics in relation to government and institutional structures on the other hand, meant that progressives were slow to respond to neoliberal agendas. (This may be a little simplistic in the United Kingdom context – one only has to think of the support given to miners during the 1980s strikes by women from Greenham Common peace camps and the London Queer movement support for Welsh coal miners as encapsulated in the 2014 film *Pride*).

The early manifestations of neoliberalism were often accompanied by socially conservative politics of moral panic, condemning what were perceived to be progressive gains in education, as elsewhere in society. For instance, resistance to progressive practices in education in England were evident in various quarters from early on, most notably in the series of papers known collectively as the "Black Papers" (Cox and Dyson, 1969a, 1969b, 1970). This criticism, which focused on the unsystematic nature of curriculum and the detrimental effects of child-centred pedagogies, while advocating a return to traditional educational methods, served to create a sense of crisis in education. Another notable example of this moral panic in the United Kingdom was Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988, which prohibited the teaching of gay and lesbian issues in British schools, as local authorities were not allowed to "promote" homosexuality or acknowledge gay relationships as an acceptable family formation. This legislation was repealed in Scotland in 2000 and in England and Wales in 2003.

However, the left's focus on challenging socially conservative politics has, in many instances, been effective in that attitudes have often changed and shifted, but often without disrupting economic agendas. For example, it has not been uncommon for those espousing economic liberalism and valorising the subjection of the public to market forces, to also support, for example, gay marriage and denounce practices that discriminate against women and minority groups. Nancy Fraser argues that the success of the left's focus on and prioritising of recognition issues brought into being what she calls "progressive neoliberalism." This progressive neoliberalism has championed "diversity," "freedom" and "choice," and thus served as a "Trojan Horse" for economic neoliberalism, with its reliance on competition, performativity and exclusion. This strategy has won over voters traditionally associated with left of centre parties – indeed many such parties have themselves (at times) been an advocate for neoliberal politics (e.g., New Labour).

In England, progressive neoliberalism can be seen to be embodied in education through the academisation agenda – an agenda that has blurred lines between the public and the private (Clarke and Newman, 1997). This agenda emphasised notions of the market, deregulation, choice and diversity, fighting to promote these values from the deadening hand of monolithic public bureaucratic structures and practices represented by local education authorities. Much has been written about the regressive impact that the academisation of English schools has had on social justice issues in that country – including narrowing the curriculum along ethnocentric, patriarchal and heteronormative

lines, increasing school exclusions and encouraging authoritarian disciplinary regimes – and how this impact has fallen disproportionately on students from backgrounds marginalised by poverty and race/ethnicity, fuelling teacher stress and burnout and damaging school to school collaborations (Ball, 2013; Keddie, 2017; Wilkins, 2012, 2017; Wilkins and Olmedo, 2018).

Academies in England had their origins in earlier moves towards the Local Management of Schools in 1990, which empowered head teachers to manage budgets and staffing and required them to assume responsibility for marketing their school in the increasingly competitive landscape of education. The establishment of academies, initiated by the Labour government in 2002, was taken to new levels after the election of the Conservative-led Coalition government in 2010, leading to the (as yet unfulfilled) declaration of intent, in 2016, for all schools to become academies by 2020. That in this ostensibly decentralised model of education, all academies and multi-academy trusts are ultimately responsible to the Secretary of State for Education, illustrates the unprecedented power of the central state in relation to "public" education in England. However, we do want to acknowledge that efforts have been made to challenge some of the more obvious regressive impacts of an unfettered market through systems of accountability – which bring with them their own problems – requiring, for example, that schools as a matter of social justice demonstrate how they are supporting the learning of *all* students. Such efforts reflect Ball's (2013: 106) insight that the dualities of freedom and control run through the education reform agenda in England.

These dualities can to some extent be attributed to the socially progressive agenda that has accompanied the neoliberal politics of the market. This is evidenced through, for example, the outlawing of corporal punishment in state schools, to the extent that this is now taken for granted, and the more recent attempts to introduce a human relationships curriculum that broadens definitions of the family to include same-sex relationships. This latter, of course, has not been smooth, with protests outside some schools' gates demanding, on the basis of religious freedom, that such curricula not be taught as they are a private, household matter and not a public concern. Schools are also formally made aware of, and expected to address, issues related to gender, race, sexuality and "unconscious bias" in their treatment of staff and students. Schools have become places through which numerous programmes addressing key social issues are delivered, for example, on domestic violence, homophobia and racism. In line with the neoliberal politics shaping public policy, these socially progressive agendas have not, however, in any way threatened existing hierarchies of power, despite backlashes suggesting the contrary.

Backlashes to a perceived progressiveness in schools have often argued that equity has gone too far and that forms of "reverse discrimination" are now at play in schools – the "what about the boys?" discourses surfacing in schools during the 1990s (see for example, Mills, 2003) and rearing their head again are a prime example. So too is the "it's okay to be White" movement. Many of these discourses are neoconservative in their appeals to "traditional" values and focus on behaviour, conduct and national values in schools. As an interesting sign of the times, many academies and multi-academy trusts have adopted highly traditional forms, such as uniforms with school badges and crested blazers, that, in harking back to the reassurances of a fantasmatic past of British "greatness," suggest a pervasive and lingering colonial melancholia.

Such melancholia has also contributed to a populist rhetoric that suggests that it is the "establishment" and (neo)liberal elites who have propagated the downfall of the nation with a lack of concern for "public" welfare. These populist critiques of neoliberalism have secured an audience among those who have been most severely affected by neoliberalism, and, through what could be seen as a sleight of hand, laid the blame for austerity and hardship at the feet of "foreigners" and those who support the free movement of people and extend compassion towards refugees. This populist sleight of hand has also deployed notions of the "public" to justify regressive policies and practices. The public has become associated with a nationalist state, where the indigenous population has been

denied its fair share of public goods, and redress involves practices exclusionary of the "other." Brexit is an outcome that epitomises the effects of such discourses. Many of these populist discourses also challenge the fundamentals of neoliberalism – for example that the free market will produce the best outcomes for all – by calling for protectionist policies when it comes to trade and employment. Many of the responses to the global COVID-19 crisis have also undermined neoliberalism – governments that espoused neoliberal politics have made massive state interventions into the economy supporting both business and workers – welfare packages that were unimaginable a few weeks before being implemented have passed through parliaments unopposed. Indeed, in what can only be read as a rebuke of Thatcher's form of neoliberalism, epitomised in the statement "there is no such thing as society," Prime Minister Boris Johnson declared during this crisis, while himself being in quarantine with the virus, "One thing I think the coronavirus crisis has already proved is that there really is such a thing as society"[1]. However, if we are to project what a post-neoliberal future might look like, there is an obvious need for caution.

A selective genealogy of the public in England IV: The rise of populist politics

Nancy Fraser argues in *The Old is Dying and the New Cannot be Reborn: From Progressive Neoliberalism to Trump and Beyond* (Fraser, 2019) that populism is presenting a challenge to neoliberal politics – a reactionary populism typified in the United States by the rise of Donald Trump and in the United Kingdom with the Boris Johnson led Conservative Party (and Brexit) – and progressive populism in the two (now failed) Bernie Sanders United States presidential campaigns and in the similarly disastrous Corbyn 2019 campaign in the United Kingdom. While not wanting to overstate the case, it does appear that reactionary populist politics in particular are putting progressive neoliberalism under pressure, as it mobilises the "public" to differentiate between "us" and "them" and to determine who should have access to and share in the benefits of the nation. "Populism," of course, is a contested term and the ways in which it is used are affected by location: the term is used quite differently, for example, in the United States and Europe (Müller, 2017). While Fraser (2019) calls for a "progressive populism" and Chantal Mouffe (2018) a "left populism," Müller suggests that all forms of populism are undemocratic, with the claim that there can be a progressive form of populism being largely a United States phenomenon (Müller, 2017:11). Müller argues that populists demonstrate the following characteristics: they are critical of corrupt elites; they are anti-pluralist, seeing themselves as the true voice of "the people;" they adopt a distinctly moralising stance; and they utilise a form of exclusionary identity politics (Müller, 2017: 2–4). For Müller, things do not get any better when populists gain power. Populist governments, he argues, demonstrate three features: attempts to hijack the state; corruption and "mass clientelism';" and suppression of civil society (Müller, 2017: 4). Consequently, for Müller, populism "tends to pose a threat to democracy" (Müller, 2017: 3).

However, Fraser's distinctions between reactionary and progressive populism do appear to have some currency, and possibly offer some hope for a more socially just future – including in the provision of public (government) schooling. Reactionary populism is reflected in nationalist discourses that seek to place blame for crises – economic or social, real or imagined – on a demonised "other." This was evident in the discourses surrounding the Brexit referendum and the ensuing debates, which blamed elites and (somewhat ironically) their progressive social policies for an intertwined set of underlying factors – austerity, deindustrialisation, immigration, housing prices and so on.

Reactionary populist discourses have also permeated education policy in England. During his support for the Brexit campaign, Michael Gove, a former Secretary of State for Education who was a major architect of the Conservative Party's pursuit of academisation, infamously commented:

"people in this country have had enough of experts." This distrust of experts also appeared to include teacher educators located in universities, as an anti-intellectual, "common sense" agenda drove teacher education increasingly out of universities and into schools, in which practice trumps theory. Utilising populist rhetoric and moral panic, recent Conservative Party platforms have made behaviour management a major issue. While neoliberal discourses have clearly had a major impact on school exclusions, the populist turn has taken on a far more punitive tone. Under neoliberalism, students were off-rolled and excluded from school (sometimes illegally – Office of the Children's Commissioner, 2013). However, now rather than simply being removed from the school (with admittedly little care for their well-being), they are punished in isolation booths within silent rooms; headteachers are to be given the power to use reasonable force; and zero tolerance (demonstrated to have a racial and class discrimination element to it in the United States – see for example, Sellers and Arrigo, 2018) is to be encouraged. Such practices are consistent with the views of Prime Minister Boris Johnson who, as Mayor of London, advocated the use of "boot camps" for misbehaving students (see Mills and Pini, 2014) and whose endorsement, along with that of Michael Gove, graces the back cover of the populist education manifesto, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Teachers: The Michaela Way* (Birbalsingh, 2016). This populism has tapped into understandings of the public as having more (common) sense than the experts (elites) who have to date been responsible for, among other things, going "soft" on misbehaviour and for failing to improve the educational outcomes of "working class White boys."

So where does this leave "public" education? Is there a place for a more progressive form of populism that makes the "public" in education an inclusive project with the interests of the most marginalised at heart? In the last section we want to map out what a public education might look like. We do not want to go into detail here; that is another project, one that takes into account issues of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment, with school organisation and decision-making, with work practices, with how schools can address matters of economic, cultural and political injustices faced by students and teachers in and out of school. We deliberately paint a broad picture to generate reflection as to how we can move from the current moment to one underpinned by a reimagined concept of the public grounded in a commitment to "care."

Conclusion: Realising public education in England?

In thinking about ways to move forward – beyond the exclusionary logics of indebtedness and public credit with its shared inequality; insular nationalism with its reliance on rejected internal and external others; and neoliberal education project with its toxic mix of deregulation, competition and performativity-driven accountability – we want to think about mobilising discourses of the public for more socially just forms of schooling. To this end, we want to consider how we might make real new forms of "public" school that are similar to Fielding and Moss's (2011) notion of the "common school." For them, it is imperative we move beyond what they call the "dictatorship of no alternative," a reference back towards Thatcher's 1980s insistence that "there is no alternative" to the neoliberal political agenda that she was advocating at the time, to consider new ways of doing school based on existing radical models. Hence, when Fielding and Moss talk about "common school" they mean "a *radical democratic* common school" (original emphasis) (Fielding and Moss, 2011: 88). For them, there are a number of features of such schools: fully comprehensive; age integrated; small scale; prioritising depth over coverage of curriculum; based on teamwork; and having a project identity, often acting as a resource for the community (see especially Fielding and Moss, 2011: Chapter 3). We are in accord with Fielding and Moss's argument for, as well as their outline of the features of, a radical democratic common school. The notion of the public that underpins their claim is one that does not reject experts. Indeed, it draws on educational

research that demonstrates how all, but particularly marginalised, young people can be engaged with a rich and meaningful education within a non-punitive environment. However, it does not treat students nor other stakeholders in education (parents, teachers, and concerned citizens) as unable to engage critically with that research in pursuing a common interest – the welfare of all young people in a school.

Fielding and Moss's work is unapologetically utopian. In particular, they draw on Erik Olin Wright's *Envisioning Real Utopias* (Wright, 2010). But they also provide a number of concrete examples of schools that demonstrate features of the democratic radical school. Highlighting such examples, as Fielding has argued elsewhere, works to demonstrate what could be:

> When we actually encounter radical alternatives, it is in large part their brute reality, their enacted denial of injustice and inhumanity and their capacity to live out a more fulfilling, more generous view of human flourishing that in turn moves us to think and act differently. (Fielding, 2013: 125)

We too are sympathetic to new utopian studies and in particular to Ruth Levitas's *Utopia as Method* (Levitas, 2013) and the view that we need to engage in an "imaginary reconstitution of society." In order to posit a view of what a socially just education system could look like (see Francis and Mills, 2012), we suggest that there is a need to engage in an imaginary reconstitution of state/public education for the twenty-first century. Hence, rather than offering a complete solution to the historical issue of enduring empty rhetoric of the public accompanied by the non-realisation of meaningful public education in England, we wish to outline some thoughts about the reimagining of public education based on notions of care and solidarity.

"Care" provides a powerful alternative to anxiety-producing discourses and practices of competition. Ghassan Hage usefully contrasts the concept of care to the more destructive and anxiety-producing matter of worrying:

> Worrying is. . . a narcissistic affect. You worry about the nation when *you* feel threatened – ultimately, you are only worrying about yourself. Caring about the nation. . . is a more intersubjective. While one always cares primarily about oneself, caring also implies keeping *others* within one's perspective of care. Most importantly, caring does not have the paranoid, defensive connotations that worrying has. (Hage, 2003: 3)

Hage's argument links powerfully to our earlier discussion of the destabilising effects of nationalism in the discourses of public education in England, which have served to justify an emphasis on testing and the position of England in international education league tables. Such discourses encourage anxiety and defensiveness at the expense of caring and hope. Hope is not something we have foregrounded thus far but it is intimately connected to the utopian sensibility that Levitas articulates. Hope is also, as Hage reminds us, closely related to the labour of caring – for ourselves, each other and society:

> Societies are mechanisms for the distribution of hope, and that the kind of affective attachment (worrying or caring) that a society creates among its citizens is intimately connected to its capacity to distribute hope. The caring society is essentially an embracing society that generates hope among its citizens and induces them to care for it. The defensive society, such as the one we have in Australia [and England] today, suffers from a scarcity of hope and creates citizens who see threats everywhere. It generates worrying citizens and paranoid nationalism. (Hage, 2003: 3)

Alongside care we also want to add the associated value of solidarity. "Care" we would argue, as many feminist scholars have done (e.g., Noddings, 2013; Williams, 2018), is a dimension of social justice. Kathleen Lynch (2012) refers to this as "affective justice." For her, affective justice

consists of what she calls love, care and solidarity. Love relates to those in one's immediate circles (family, close friends, and partners) and care to those with whom one has close contact (work colleagues, friends, one's students, etc.). Social justice concerns here relate to who does the caring, who receives the care, what that care looks like and how these aspects of care are structured along, for instance, class, gender, race and ethnic lines. Solidarity goes beyond caring for those in one's immediate circle to recognise the care that is demonstrated towards those one does not know and for particular oppressed groups – for example refugees. Such solidarity is inextricably connected to understandings of the public, a public that goes beyond the known to care for the stranger to whom we are connected via a politics of "shared estrangement" (Roach, 2011). In this sense "the public" transcends instrumental self-interest and nationalistic boundaries to recognise the interconnectedness of "publics" in a globalised world – as the recent COVID-19 virus transmission (and corresponding national responses) and climate emergency concerns have demonstrated. Education systems that deploy discourses of the public to valorise competition within and between systems, with their neoliberal commitment to individualisation, fail to grasp that a system that cares for all the public is better for all.

The project of realising public education in England thus needs to resist the exclusionary logics characteristic of financialised, nationalistic and neoliberal conceptualisations of education and society. This produces something of a paradox, insofar as "*the attempt to exclude exclusion is itself exclusory and thus reproduces the logic of exclusion*" (Vardoulakis, 2017: 7, emphasis in the original). Crucially, what the realisation of meaningful public education requires is a critical turn that resists the pathologising tendencies of past and present versions of public education and instead values the power of those who are unrecognised and unredeemed in the eyes of the financialised, nationalised or neoliberalised notions of public education that we have outlined and analysed above. This inclusionary public education will need to recognise and value those who have been deemed too slow, too irrational, too angry or too depressed to be of productive worth, and to find sources of inspiration for utopia in the ethics of caring and the poetics of everyday activity (Bray, 2019). It will need to be characterised by an ethos of pluralisation, beyond mere pluralism, that recognises how the boundaries of inclusion must always be expansive (Connolly, 1995). And it will need the wisdom and humility to resist viewing education as a neocolonial enterprise of knowing and categorising the other and instead to recognise that "the possibility of 'We', of community, is granted on the basis that every familiar is ultimately strange and that, indeed, I am even in a crucial sense a stranger to myself" (Santner, 2001: 6). Seen from this perspective, education is always in-part a journey of self-discovery and self-creation.

This is not to suggest that we eliminate the private in favour of the public – this would be an impossibility since the existence of the one implies the existence of the other and to some degree they mutually depend on and define each other. But at the same time, we need to consider the distribution of affordances and limitations concomitant with any configuration of their relationship. With regards to education (and health care) a significant role for the private has gone hand in hand with inequality in the form of inferior resourcing and standing of the public and a similarly skewed distribution of opportunities and life chances. This suggests that the private needs to be exorcised from education. In order for this to happen certain "truths" about education and schooling need to be challenged through, for example, working with schools, teachers, parents and children to dislodge the equation of educational success with examination results; to dismantle the conflation of information and knowledge; to demand an end to the substitution of training for learning; and to disrupt the misrecognition of compliance and conformity as criticality and creativity.

This may sound utopian in the negative senses of the word; but perhaps at a time when the links between education and the economy are becoming more and more tenuous, as a consequence of automation and off-shoring (Blacker, 2013); when English public education is increasingly

adopting populist authoritarian, neo-Victorian values and practices, as it increasingly becomes obsessed with the banalities of control and compliance; and when the rapid spread and devastating economic and health effects of the COVID-19 virus are encouraging increasing numbers of people to question the wisdom of a return to any pre-pandemic "normal," we might take the opportunity to rethink the aims and purposes of education informed by ethical and aesthetic, rather than purely instrumental and economic, considerations. We might then ask how transformational an educational experience is, how it contributes to enhanced possibilities for caring, expression and livability for individuals and communities, and how it assists institutions and organisations in developing new, improvisatory forms-of-life.

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Note

1. https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/mar/29/20000-nhs-staff-return-to-service-johnson-says-from-coronavirus-isolation

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