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13. THE LIMITS OF NEOLIBERAL EDUCATION

Refraction, Reinterpretation and Reimagination

PREAMBLE

There has been widespread debate about the effects and impacts of globalisation and the predominant waves of reform that have arisen as a result. Many educational theorists have argued that there is strong empirical evidence indicating that educational reform initiatives resemble similar ‘world movements’ (see for example, Meyer et al., 1997; Meyer, 2000), which have their origins in international financial institutions and serve to change the global rhetoric and discourse about education. The convergence of such global rhetoric has been particularly discernible following the financial crisis of 2007 with the emergence of austerity discourse(s) and its translation into clear, market driven policies. Nonetheless, whilst these seemingly unstoppable world movements reflect a significant degree of convergence at the supra level of global policy, they clearly play out differently across national and local contexts and through individual responses. Indeed, comparator data has revealed such widespread national variations (Green, 2016), with other studies also highlighting significant divergence in responses at the level of practice across different European contexts (see Goodson & Lindblad, 2010). However, the reasons underpinning variations at the national and local level, and especially at the level of practice, remain woefully under-researched and under-theorised. This is crucial to further our understanding of the operation and outcomes arising from neoliberal reforms. Of particular interest are the ‘unintended consequences’, as there are few insights into how these variations arise, or the variables and factors that influence such refractions. It is quite plausible that reforms intended to achieve a particular aim, in reality, may operate to fulfil an entirely different objective. Analysis of such ‘phenomena’ may help us understand areas where and how attempts to introduce reforms may be stifled or rejected. Similarly, they can also provide insights into models of resistance and reinterpretation, which in turn, help us to reimagine future possibilities. Moreover, it is amongst these variations and contradictions embedded in structural and personal refractions, where we believe the seedbed for a range of alternatives and reinterpretations exist.

Our recent work has sought to study and conceptualise the process of variation, which we have termed ‘refraction’, by focussing on work across Europe, South America, the USA and Canada, and evidenced at national, provincial, local and

classroom levels (see Goodson & Lindblad, *op. cit.*; Goodson, 2014). Here we suggest that the concept of refraction (Goodson & Rudd, 2016, 2014; Rudd & Goodson, 2016), may be used as both a methodological and conceptual tool for exploration and research, helping us to better understand how and why dominant (and global) waves of reform are mediated, and can result in a range of varied responses. We highlight why now, more than ever, it is vital to explore these refractions and reinterpretations and to consider alternatives that might replace a historically precarious neoliberal model.

REFRACTION AS A TOOL TO ORIENTATE EXPLORATION

The concept of 'refraction' is conceived of as a conceptual tool intended to support complex and rich methodological and theoretical explorations of educational discourse, systems, policies and practice. Whilst each case will be unique, there are four key interrelated and constituent elements to refraction that orientate investigations and require a little more consideration here. These are: analysis of the current 'waves' of reform and the predominant ideology and power; a simultaneous emphasis on both structure and agency (vertical axis) and their interrelationships; a focus on individual and professional narratives; and consideration of historical periodisation (horizontal axis).

Analysis of the Current Waves of Reform, Ideology and Power

Social scientific research must explore the socially constructed nature of action including the effects of power, ideology and discourse and the influence these have on policies, debate and day to day practice. This collection clearly highlights the dominant ideology and power at work, and its far reaching influences in this current historical period. The predominant discourse forcibly promotes 'austerity' policies aimed at promoting a new form of neo liberalism, supporting sizable reductions and redistributions of central Government spending in the public sector and promoting private involvement. It is also clear that recent policies and shifts have fundamentally changed the educational landscape and have reformulated education around principles quite distinct from those underpinning the earlier development of comprehensive state education for all.

Simultaneous Emphasis on Structure and Agency (Vertical Axis)

In identifying ideology and power and the influence it may have, we are not putting forward a structural determinist argument. Rather we acknowledge that supra level global trends are interpreted differently, resulting in varied national policies, and similarly, that national policies are open to reinterpretation at the institutional and individual levels. This 'refraction' results in global trends being mediated by wider national histories, traditions and dominant ideologies and politics, and national

policies being translated through institutional cultures and practice and individual and group beliefs, values and trajectories. In short, a dual focus on both structure and agency and their interrelationships are central to explorations and address a key dialectical challenge for the social sciences (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). The individual agency that can be exerted leaves room for mediation, contestation and reinterpretation through a range of actions and strategies. The resulting translation occurs in range of different ways and for various reasons and the outcomes are the result of the rich complexity of interactions between ideology, structures and institutional responses and individual agency. This is a crucial focus for investigation and analysis, not least because the individual and collective responses also provide examples of alternative possibilities and potential routes to resistance.

In a sense, we suggest that structure and agency are both competing and complementary forces, with power, structure, and fields (Bourdieu, 1984) having significant generating and regulating effects on action. Ultimately, we argue that conceptual and theoretical tools, such as refraction, may direct empirical investigation at the macro, meso and micro levels simultaneously, thus supporting richer and contextualised understandings of practice.

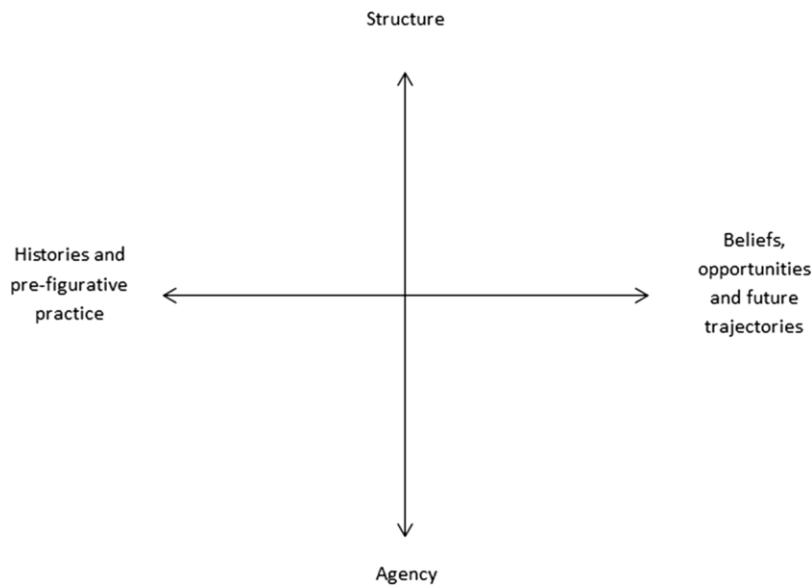


Figure 1. Interrelationships: Structure and agency and histories and trajectories

The opportunity for reinterpretation of policies emanating from structure and discourse is also dependent on prior experience, pre-figurative practice and beliefs, and subjective expectations of objective possibilities (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990). New and alternative courses of action will also be dependent on the level of possession

of various individual and collective capitals that have value in any given context, or field. This dynamic interplay between structure and agency, capitals and context, gives rise to the dynamism inherent within social practices. This is particularly pertinent in relation to educational practice and research, with its complexity and rich diversity. Educational research that fails to account for such complexity may remain limited in scope and will be likely to produce truncated findings. However, there appears to be a worrying trend toward such decontextualized work in the current climate.

The Crisis of Positionality and the Neo Liberal Academic

As has been argued elsewhere (see Goodson, 1999), education has been repositioned and re-stratified through a global work discourse and order, resulting in research on education itself being repositioned. This repositioning can be so significant that the relevance and effect of research (individual or within the field as a whole) may change substantially, or even become inverted, with the roles of educational professionals reconceptualised in relation to how it may support current economic developments (Hursh, 2000, 2000a). The resultant *crisis of positionality* (Goodson & Lindblad *op. cit.*) occurs because of the reconstitution and repositioning of the social relations of production. This is clearly of great importance for educational researchers, as public intellectuals, and is perhaps more important now than ever as funding through research councils and other bodies has decreased following the financial crisis. Moreover, new criteria for awarding funding have been developed which orientate educational research toward evaluations of ‘what works’ in response to an externally imposed set of ‘impact’ measures embedded within the existing system, rather than that which may highlight the weaknesses, flaws and internal contradictions within it. Ultimately, this shift in research emphasis is limiting critical empirical evidence and critical voices from the educational research landscape in favour of evaluations and big data that are being increasingly designed, analysed and utilised to support and justify the neoliberal world view (Torrance, 2015; Lipman, 2013).

The attack on educational research, other than that which has an impact on the existing model of education, was highlighted recently in a speech given by Nick Gibb, the current Minister for School Standards, on *The importance of education research*. In the transcript of his speech, delivered at the *ResearchEd* annual conference, he highlights that too often “*research fails to impact on the classroom...*”, and further contends that many research papers are written in ‘indecipherable language’ making the job of translating the research into impact far too difficult. This is clearly a limited and subjective view of both what research is and its purpose but it does denote the current ideological and political position and the likely trajectory of change in the field. He goes further, citing others who suggests University lecturers justify their existence “with all that pointless theory”, before misapplying a partial quotation from John Maynard Keynes from *The general theory of employment, interests and money*.

Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually slaves of some defunct economist.

This is presented with no indication of irony or misdirection, and fails to include or acknowledge the points embedded in the subsequent lines of Keynes text:

Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influence, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist. Madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back. I am sure that the power of vested interests is vastly exaggerated compared with the gradual encroachment of ideas. Not, indeed, immediately, but after a certain interval; for in the field of economic and political philosophy there are not many who are influenced by new theories after they are twenty-five or thirty years of age, so that the ideas which civil servants and politicians and even agitators apply to current events are not likely to be the newest. But, soon or late, it is ideas, not vested interests, which are dangerous for good or evil. (Keynes, 1936, pp. 383–384)

As this logic becomes embedded within, and supported by, Higher Education institutions through subsequent strategies, programmes and new practices, we will likely witness a growth of the *neoliberal academic* and a *new managerialist class* charged with servicing the new conditions. As, Lynch (2014) argues, new managerialism represents the organisational arm of neoliberalism. It ensures the realisation of the neoliberal project through institutionalisation of market principles and through its organizational governance. This results in the prioritising of private sector values relating to efficiency and productivity, thereby ‘*giving primacy to product and output over process and input*’ (*ibid.*, p. 1). The recent and rapid repositioning has certainly led to greater emphasis on entrepreneurial values and a reinterpretation of academic labour value against particular types of ‘*impact*’ measures, with the imposition of concomitant ‘*quantified control*’ metrics imposed to both mimic and induce markets (Burrows, 2012). In many cases, this new landscape and logic appears to have been met by largely uncritical acceptance, representing an ‘*implementationist myopia*’ and the de-historicisation of tradition and professionalism in favour of technicist forms of market driven delivery and related institutional change patterns.

It is not just the conflict between neoliberalism and the related belief in privatising education and making it a profit making concern cast against that of state provision and state directed and funded education. Underpinning this dichotomous relationships in their purest forms are also the polarised principles on which they are based. A public education system is based on a form of solidarity and collectivism, in that it is funded by the tax payer with the belief that education will be available and accessible to all, serving a broad set of interests and purposes. This is clearly counter, and a threat to, the neoliberal system of individualism and competition. Furthermore, forms of collectivism and solidarity tend to empower people and thus make them

less passive, thereby making it difficult for vested interests, whose power depends on the obedience of individuals, to exert control. However, as the new logic is applied and becomes embedded within the consciousness of politicians, students, parents and educators themselves, it can become normalised and perceived to be the only viable possibility. We are arguably seeing a contradiction and battle between the realities of neoliberal, marketised education that relies on private involvement, competition, league tables and externally imposed and decontextualised measures of market quality, and other wider discourses of educational equality, empowerment and fairness. However, the latter discourse is being subsumed and incorporated into the discourse of the former to such an extent it has resulted in a form of Orwellian (1949) “doublethink” and “doublespeak”. This is where mutually contradictory positions are held, or presented simultaneously, resulting in a form of ideological indoctrination, repositioning and de-historicisation. Yet, such contradictions are essential for the construction of ‘crises’ that lead to strategies for dispossession (Harvey, 2014).

Whilst the above dichotomous educational positions are clearly somewhat oversimplified, they do juxtapose polarised worldviews. In reality, institutional, collective and individual responses to the changing conditions will vary significantly, ranging from compliant integration, contestation and resistance, through to decoupling (Goodson & Lindblad., *op. cit.*), and it is vitally important to capture and highlight this complexity. Methodologically, empirically and conceptually there is a need to focus on both the *moments of refraction* (the historical conditions and changes that present new opportunities for action) and the *episodes of refraction* (the thick descriptions and narrative portrayals of individual counter actions and their origins). Moreover, in (Higher) education, as in other areas where there have been attacks on professional groups, general de-investment and imposed de-professionalisation, we also need to draw from these portrayals to give examples of alternative practice and consider how public intellectual life might be repositioned and rejuvenated. A key to understanding any human action is through ‘practice’, yet practice should not be considered free from both its individual and structural generative conditions. In other words, practice should not be considered free from human agency and the experiences, pre-figurative practices and beliefs that may contribute to reinterpretation, redefinition and refraction. It is also vital to identify any ‘misrecognition’ in social practice arising through misattribution of wider generative structures and a failure to recognise the social differentiation these maintain and reproduce (Bourdieu, 2000).

Life Histories and Professional Narratives

In order to thoroughly explore relationships between structure and agency we must examine individual practice and action and explore the motivations and perceptions behind them. In education, this requires us to explore professional narratives and action that leads to the reproduction, re-contextualisation, de-contextualisation or refraction of policies. Narrative analyses of instances of professional practice and ‘episodes of

refraction' provide rich insights into the ways in which actors make meaning of their own lives. These rich accounts of subjective realities, will often include detailed examples of varied practices and the generative factors behind them, providing us with 'tales' of orthodoxy and transgression, of innovation and conformity, and of compliance and resistance. In considering these in their wider socio-historical context and in relation to dominant waves of reform, they provide accounts of the ways and extent to which ideology and power may reshape the educational landscape and influence and configure everyday practice.

If educational institutions, as Bourdieu (1977, 1977a) suggests, are sites of social and cultural reproduction, we cannot overlook the effects that power, ideology and related policy making has on the practices within such sites. We must also examine the orthodoxy, 'rules' and 'logic' (Bourdieu, 1993) that may be inferred or transmitted, and the effects these have on subsequent perceptions and practice. This is fundamental to holistic explorations and enables clearer understanding of agency and the ways in which actors may, or indeed may not, actively respond to, or accept, symbolic power being exerted in the field (Bourdieu, 1999).

Historical Periodisation

To obtain a fuller picture of the origins of action and drivers underpinning the formulation of policies, we contend that there is a need to situate research and analysis of social change and practice within their wider socio-historical contexts. This 'historical periodisation' is essential in locating broader movements, cycles and waves of reform, and also in understanding practice and the extent to which it action and practice may mirror or refract dominant waves. Historical periodisation requires analysis of socio-historical trends, which can vary significantly and are refracted in different continents, countries and cultures. For example, the Professional Knowledge Project (see: Goodson & Lindblad *op. cit.*) studied professional life and work in seven European countries and identified distinct variations in historical periods in each. Whilst there was a general trend for more neo-liberal informed restructuring, this was mediated by nation specific foundations and trajectories. At the national level, responses also varied from fairly compliant integration, which was most evident in England, to those characterised by contestation and resistance, most evident in the Southern European countries, through to 'decoupling' responses, interestingly evident in the more 'successful' educational systems of Finland, and to a lesser degree, Sweden. This demonstrates how national systems, structures and histories can lead to political refraction of various guises in response to wider globalising forces and movements. Following national responses to restructuring, it was then possible to identify empirically work-life narratives arising in relation to the new conditions and emerging orthodoxies. When juxtaposing systemic narratives and work life narratives, it must be considered that there are numerous *points of refraction* through which restructuring policies must pass, from national and regional systems, interest groups, boards and committees, through to individual institutions,

each having an ‘interpreter effect’¹ (Gazzaniga, 2005), and mediating intended outcomes and practice. Whilst responses may range from faithful compliance and truthful translation through complete rejection and resistance, in many cases the most illuminating insights arise when exploring and trying to understand the motivations behind practice that appears at odds with predominant waves of reform.

Again, this highlights the value of locating investigations in relation to broader socio-historical analysis, as not only can it help identify how historical developments influence, and are influenced by, national systems, cultures and existing professional practices, but it also gives us clues as to how policies might be received by different groups, institutions, individuals and organisations.

In the specific case of the UK, the key historical periods and restructuring reform narratives² since the second world war might broadly be described as the: *progressive narrative on welfare state expansion* (1945–1979); *the marketisation narrative* (1979–1997); *the third way narrative* (1997–2007); and *the reconstituted neoliberalism and austerity narrative*³ (2007–?). These somewhat crude and limited descriptions, at least promote debate and discussion as to whether, or to what extent, each of these periods reflects a wave or cycle of reform, what type of cycle it might correspond with, or whether some of the periods outlined are merely surface representations of their predecessor. Moreover, they also provide a starting point for empirical explorations and a set of reference points against which to situate any policy changes, discourse and practice.

Figure 2 (below) is an attempt to represent the ‘axes of refraction’ in relation to UK waves of reform. The potential for (vertical) refraction occurs at any point in the interactions between structure and agency at the supra, macro, meso and micro and individual levels and may result in unintended consequences arising from reform.

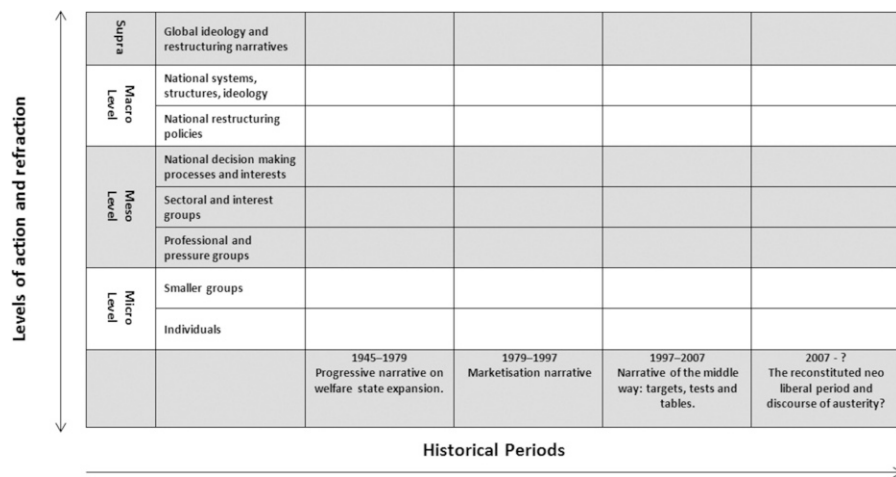


Figure 2. Axes of refraction: Horizontal and vertical refraction

The other site of refraction is the horizontal level of historical periodicity, whereby different ‘windows of opportunity’ for the delivery, operation, and also possible reinterpretation and rejection, of policies are presented.

Whilst exploring these factors simultaneously may present us with a detailed exploration of both the generative and regulative factors that underpin social practice, they are most profitably explored through ‘thick’ description and rich narrative portrayals that emphasise and illustrate key empirical focal points, or ‘episodes of refraction’ (represented by action that might be presented in any single ‘cell’ within the table).

In exploring education in relation to a historically situated ‘longer view’ we are far more likely to gain deeper and contextualised insights into the nature and trajectory of change. Sociologists, economists, historians and others have previously sought to conceptualise and locate policy development and changes against the backdrop of longer waves, or cycles, of reform (see for example, Tyack & Cuban, 1995; Tyack & Tobin, 1994; Fontvieille, 1990). Such historical analyses provide a better basis for understanding the past, current policy change and directions, and the factors, ideologies and pre-existing conditions and practices underpinning them. Furthermore, historical analyses may also enable us to postulate longer term outcomes and implications of policies and emergent practice, providing us with insights into both future possibilities and areas of potential contestation. Whilst theories regarding the nature and regularity of waves of reform vary significantly and give rise to much debate (McCulloch, 2011), they at least provide a socio-historical context on which to base discussions and theorisation. Yet, historical periodisation is given scant attention, with emphasis instead increasingly placed on unique, contemporary possibilities and processes. These tend to focus on bringing about change that reflects the prevailing ideology and related logic introduced through a narrowly defined system and tightly bounded institutional outcome measures, resulting in dehistoricised and decontextualized debates and policies. As Howard Zinn (2007) contends, the lack of a historical memory results in the facts of history often being distorted or ignored to support the discourse and interests of the powerful. Moreover, he felt the key to finding creative, alternative futures may well lie in the hidden histories of individual and collective resistance and compassion.

If history is to be creative, to anticipate a possible future without denying the past, it should, I believe, emphasize new possibilities by disclosing those hidden episodes of the past when, even if in brief flashes, people showed their ability to resist, to join together, and occasionally to win. I am supposing, or perhaps only hoping, that our future may be found in the past’s fugitive moments of compassion rather than in its solid centuries of warfare.

Whilst there is a rich history and numerous conceptual models that support analysis of historical epochs and cycles, there is no singular or definitive method or conceptual framework for doing so. Researchers and theorists have studied links between historical cycles of economic growth and educational expenditure (see

for example, Lowe & McCulloch, 1998; Carpentier, 2001) and have developed or applied particular models in doing so. The *Annaliste School* combined history and sociology in attempts to understand change, with perspectives on cycles, or waves of reform, argued to occur on three levels, over longer (based on structural factors and world views), medium (cycles of economic boom and bust) and shorter (discrete periods, politics and policies and individual action) terms. Whilst each may be viewed as competing models, they are often interwoven and interdependent, and indeed, complimentary approaches. Whilst there have been numerous refinements and reinterpretations of these ‘waves’ of reform, from our own conceptual standpoint, the development of refraction requires consideration of ‘waves of reform’ and action occurring at all three levels simultaneously.

Following the financial crisis policies do not yet appear to be diverging from the predominant form(s) of neoliberal capitalism. There is much debate as to whether this can be identified as distinct and long enough cycle to constitute being termed as a new wave of reform, or whether it is merely a continuation or refinement of its predecessor. Conversely, there are those who suggest that in the longer view, we may not be seeing a new wave of reform but are in fact are witnessing the end of the previous one. This raises questions as to whether, or at which point, neoliberalism might be replaced by a new wave of reform and what the signals may be that will indicate its demise. Arguably, there are already indications it has already overextended and overreached its limits, resulting in irreparable and irreversible damage to society, social systems, culture, democracy and the environment. Perhaps, it is around the areas where most damage has been done that new opportunities, directions, discourse and action will arise. In education, the need to manufacture ‘crises’ to justify and underpin neoliberal reforms is perhaps close to becoming self-defeating. Three decades of such reforms have not provided the solutions promised in the schools sector, yet we are now seeing similar developments implemented in Higher Education. The growth of monitoring and metrics, performance tables, monitoring agencies, managerialist policies, private involvement, and so forth, have seemingly failed to improve education, and moreover, consistently undermine teaching and learning processes and professionalism. We must therefore ask whether dogged adherence to ideologically informed policies represents a new epoch for reform, or alternatively, whether we are witnessing desperate actions emanating in response to the terminal decline of the neoliberal period. The reality may be any shade of grey in between. However, we might again consider historical developments and the links between historical cycles of economic growth and educational expenditure to inform our views. Many economists have considered historical periods in order to analyse and predict ‘business cycles’, change and future trends. There are, of course, significant variations in how different models are used. For example, Schumpeter (2014; 2006 [1939]; 1954) drew on pre-existing models to present a composite waveform. Others have also suggested that longer Kondratiev wave models (between 45–60 [54]⁴ years), consist of three lower level ‘Kuznets infrastructural investment waves’ (15–25 [18] years). Arguably, each Kuznets wave itself is also made up

of two ‘Juglar waves of fixed investment’ (7–11 [9] years), and that each Juglar wave comprises of two ‘Kitchin inventory cycles’ (3–5 [4.5] years).⁵ From such a perspective, some commentators suggest that economic ‘crashes’ and subsequent deep depressions will occur when the downward trajectories of each of the four cycles, or waves, correspond.

Table 1. Business cycles and waves of reform?

<i>Name</i>	<i>Period</i>	<i>Driver</i>
Kitchin	3–5 [4.5] years	Inventory
Juglar	7–11 [9] years	Fixed investment
Kuznets	15–25 [18] years	Infrastructure
Kondratiev	45–60 [54] years	Technology

THE DECLINE OF NEOLIBERALISM?

Given the above, we need to ask whether neoliberalism has passed its peak, triumphalist period and is now on the downside of the historical cycle. Whatever our views, we cannot deny we are in a specific historical moment, and if Schumpeter was correct, then capitalism should only be truly understood as an evolutionary process of innovation and ‘creative destruction’. This process encapsulates both periods of economic growth and also contraction and instability, which will ultimately lead to its collapse as it becomes progressively weaker and self-defeating. This, in turn, will lead to a further stage of evolution, which Schumpeter suggested would result in a new form of socialist corporatism that seeks to reign in capitalisms excesses and inclinations toward damaging boom and bust. It has been argued that the financial crisis of 2007/8 was a coming together of each of the four cycles on a downward trajectory following developments arising after World War II. Others however (see for example, Quigley, 2012), suggest that we are currently entering a period of ‘greater depression’ (2013–2020), with others also suggesting that a full Kondratiev cycle did not begin until the 1960’s, meaning we may not reach conclusion of its downward trajectory until the 2020’s.

Other commentators suggest that rather than seeing the rise of a new ‘reconstituted’ period of harsher neo liberalism, we are in fact witnessing its end. To date, much of the mainstream literature relating to the economic crisis has focused on why it happened and how to return to stability and growth. However, there are those who have highlighted its inherent contradictions (Harvey, 2014), and questioned whether it can continue in its current form (Davies, 2014). The perception that there is no viable alternative prevails, yet there are those who suggest that this is not clearly supported by historical patterns (Wallerstein et al., 2013). Such commentators point to the collapse of prior epochs and modes of production that came to relatively abrupt and largely unforeseen ends. Moreover, it may be argued that various economic,

structural, cultural and environmental issues and related crises of over production, accumulated and hyper-consumption, may all play a role in any future epoch shift. Jacques (2016) also argues that the western economy has stagnated now for almost a decade, with no end in sight. Moreover, he argues that its decline should also be seen in its wider socio-historical context, highlighting that the declines in the real income of the bottom 10% in the US has been falling since the 1970's. The bottom 90% of incomes have also been stagnating, whilst the incomes of those in the top percentiles have been growing disproportionately. A similar picture can be found in the UK and elsewhere, with this division becoming more marked since the financial crisis, resulting in greater inequality in the absence of countervailing pressures, as Piketty (2014) suggests. As returns on capital are also in decline, it is perhaps unsurprising that there are moves to reduce both labour costs and services in order to maintain profits, and also to encroach into areas of welfare state provision that may provide capital with new revenue sources. However, it is argued that this unfettered 'winner takes all' ideology is ultimately unsustainable, and that we are already beginning to see resistance to it, albeit to date, often through somewhat misplaced 'populist' policies and movements. Considered in this way, arguments suggesting we are witnessing the end of neoliberalism may not seem as far-fetched as first it may seem, given it has never brought strong economic growth and outcomes for the majority and is now seemingly in a long period of stagnation and fragility, as uncertainty and fears of another financial crisis abound. As Jacques further contends, the majority are now facing visions of a future where their children will be worse off than they were and dissatisfaction, discontent, anger and unrest appear to be on the rise. To date, this unrest has been widespread but has tended to relate to disparate and atomised issues and groups, with little clear indication as to how, or if, such disparate groups might join forces to conspire through collective action to bring about change.

In the UK, and elsewhere, there are few signs that neoliberalism might be displaced through party political resistance and alternatives. Numerous commentators have questioned the feasibility, role and position(s) of left wing politics in the current context, with some suggesting the left too, is in crisis. For example, Harris (2016) argues that the left is in crisis all across Europe, highlighting significant recent declines in political support in Germany, France, Spain, Greece and Scandinavia, with a seemingly inverse rise in right wing populism feeding off a climate of uncertainty, dissatisfaction and fear related to immigration and strains placed upon welfare states and other resources. Whilst the left has been reinvented in those countries most harshly affected by the Eurozone crisis, with more radical responses potentially offering alternative to neoliberalism, ultimately these have not translated into lasting and connected European wide movements. He further argues that in the UK the reformulated Labour Party is still failing to make notable in-roads because the ideals on which the left traditionally built its strength have either shrunk or disappeared completely. Ideals such as equality, solidarity, protected public services, along with previously sacred notions of collectivism, collective worker rights and power, and compassion for 'outsiders', appear relics, ruptured and severed from the mainstream

political and public discourse in the 21st Century. This raises profound doubts about the left's ability to return to power with a truly alternative mandate. Indeed, many of the voices of resistance amongst left leaning interest and pressure groups, including those focussing on education, largely tend to suggest that neoliberalism can only be replaced with some form of return to 'old left' politics and values which, it might be argued, has little impact on wider political discourse and the perceptions of the majority of voters. Yet, this does not mean any coherent and viable alternative won't appear in time but it may be more likely to arise as a result of the failure of neoliberalism rather than a change of party political consensus on viable alternatives.

So, how might we identify viable alternatives? Where might these arise, and what might educators and researchers do to retain their professional integrity and identities? First of all, perhaps we need to ask whether reforms make sense. We must make this argument and highlight the flaws and contradictions in relation to both current economics, and in terms of other more important aspects of human and social life beyond systemic and institutional economic competitiveness and individual wealth. This will likely require strategic and coordinated analysis of each area of weakness and internal contradiction in order to present the need for change and to take action to make it happen. If such arguments are to have sufficient impact, then it will require a joining of forces between disparate groups suffering from the consequences of neoliberal reforms. There are those who also believe that radical reform cannot happen through the existing 'democratic' systems as they serve to maintain the status quo, and therefore they contend that change can only arise following direct activism, including that which is beyond the boundaries of legality. However, a significant number of those opposing neo liberal reforms may feel powerless or unable to resist reforms, let alone become activists for change.

Furthermore, there are other commentators who suggest that resistance itself is a passive concept in that it ignores the terms of its own engagement in relation to the totalising effects of neoliberalism. From such a perspective, the propagation of the free market across the globe represents a new form of imperialism that now pervades all aspects of our society. This reifying power of late capitalism has become all-encompassing and colonising, meaning that attempts at resistance will become co-opted and ultimately futile (Jameson, 2000). Furthermore, they may even inadvertently lead to a reaffirmation of its viability in the absence of tangible alternatives. This clearly raises a key question about agency and how to engender and embody critique amongst oppressed groups. From such a standpoint the extent of social fragmentation and the atomisation of oppressed groups means that collective and meaningful resistance is doomed to failure unless the specific standpoint of various groups is acknowledged and accounted for, whilst what is common to each of these groups is foregrounded. This potentially may provide the basis for re-imagination and reinterpretation that may underpin new forms of solidarity and cooperation for undertaking active political work. Perhaps, as Bakunin argued, "*the precious seeds for the organisation of the future*", may already exist in existing social relations and practices occurring in opposition to the neoliberal logic.

Moreover, the potential of new horizontal networks and horizontal reimagining may serve to uncover that whilst there appears to be a neoliberal hegemony, it may actually prove to be far more fragile, unsupported and unsustainable than one might be led to believe.

The story of the neo-liberal project that has now been clarified and documented most notably by Mirowski is one of a 'long march' through the institutions of civil society (Mirowski, 2013). Each has been made to conform to the maxims of the 'market society' (Sandel, 2013) which is now close to all pervasive at the level of rhetorical exhortation at least.

We have pointed to the variations and contradictions at the institutional level which we argue still provide seedbeds for alternative thinking and structural modification. But there are other domains where the market mantras and worship of profit and money have not achieved saturation.

One clear area is in the domain of what we might think of as 'the meaning of life'. The purchase of a third superyacht would not replace issues of moral purpose and basic humanity for most people when considering the meaning of our short lives. Only the most brazenly greedy and unreflective would embrace that as constituting a meaningful life. So the question of 'the meaning of life' continues to elude the neo-liberal market society. It is the question that will not go away and, despite its pervasive take-over of our institutions the market society has often failed to win 'heart and minds'.

So our 'life politics' the way we pursue our life, our moral judgements, our human interactions, our ongoing social projects and our purposes remain a precious, indeed, sacred, site for re-interpretation. I found in one of my journals this unattributed quote from Paul Goodman:

Suppose you had the revolution you are talking and dreaming about. Suppose your side had won and you had the kind of society you wanted. How would you live, you personally in that society? Start living that way now!

Of course in a market society such personal utopias may prove contested and precarious but the effort to live in a way that is respectful of our better instincts for humanity is itself a pre-figurative statement. To live in a way that is consistent with our beliefs and ideals is itself a victory and one that provides avenues of exploration of the 'meaning of life'. Moreover it provides models and modalities for other personal projects and collective actions.

Modelling can be a huge influence as the example of Muhammed Ali shows. Remember his often quoted statement – a statement right against the grain of the existing structure of American society:

I am America. I am the part you won't recognise. But get used to me – black, confident, cocky; my name, not yours, my religion not yours; my goals, my own. Get used to me.

This was Ali's life politics, intensely contested and precarious. But look at his influence and read in the recent obituaries, the sheer scale of influence of his personal life politics.

The African American playwright August Wilson (1990) has talked about these kind of 'life politics' and especially the process of 'coming to know' they facilitate:

We found ourselves in a world that did not recognise our language or our customs, did not recognise our gods, and ultimately did not recognise our humanity. Once you understand that you have an intrinsic sense of self-worth from the way your ideas of morality, your concept of justice and beauty, your eating habits, your idea of pleasure and pain all those things go into your mythology, your history. All of these things go into the makeup of a culture and I think that it is crucial that we as Black Americans keep this alive. Now what the society has told us that if you are willing to deny that, if you are willing to deny the fact that you're Africa, if you are willing to give up your culture and adopt the cultural values of the dominant society, which is European. Then you can participate better in American society, go to school and have decent jobs and have decent housing etc. That's at a tremendous cost, that's at the loss of self. I think that the vast majority of the 35 million Americans have rejected that social contract. They want their social contract that will allow them to participate in society as African people with their culture intact.

There is of course a tension at the heart of the argument for 'life politics' as a site of refraction. But as we know our institutions are being saturated by market mantras and mentalities. It is hard to find our moral bearings within them – for finding a way through an institution where the management strata is being created and consolidated to facilitate neo-liberal dogma is difficult. It presents us with what we have called 'a crises of positionality' (Goodson, 2014).

This is why in spite of the dangers of individualism the site of personal life politics is so important. When our institutions are market-saturated we have to begin elsewhere. Paul Mason (2016: p. 36) has written cogently about the tensions at the heart of life politics. He says:

It accepts, in a way our grandfathers would have found hypocritical and intolerable, the self as the centre of the world: it understands work on the self as a contribution to collectivity.

This new collectivity links with our notion of working horizontally not vertically. If the managerial elites are in place to instantiate market mentalities vertical hierarchical action is essentially redundant. Mason says:

If we all have better, less angry, more educated selves, the society we build will cohere without any need for rigid hierarchies. And its concept of human liberation is based more on freedom than on economic well-being (ibid).

Horizontal refraction and personal refraction then provide the seed-beds for new virtues and visions. They are our ‘resources for hope’ in resisting the current march towards what Marquand calls ‘a kind of seedy barbarism’ (Marquand, 2015).

We need to begin a ‘long march’ in the opposite direction and strategies for refraction, reinterpretation and re-imagination are our starting point.

NOTES

- ¹ This interpreter effect is debated in the field of neuropsychology whereby the (‘left hemisphere’) interpreter attempts to generate and construct explanations by reconciling emerging information through reference to the past.
- ² The table presents an overview of key policy discourse in identifiable historical periods in the UK. The original Professional Knowledge research included responses only from English participants, on which this amended table is based.
- ³ The term the ‘reconstituted neoliberal period’ did not arise from the Professional Knowledge project but is our more recent addition to the descriptions of the waves of reform and dominant restructuring narratives.
- ⁴ The broader range in number of years is presented first. The figure in brackets is not a precise figure but is presented for illustrative purposes to demonstrate the possibility for composite and interlinked cycles.
- ⁵ Many commentators suggest a Kitchin cycle lasts around 40 months but there is much debate as to the length of the cycle.

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