

Submission to



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Title

RADICAL DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION

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Executive Summary

This essay is both about public education in ruins and the creation of a radical democratic alternative. Under neo-liberalism, education in England (and beyond) is withdrawing from a contracting public sphere and moving into an expanding market sphere. The dominant relationship in this emergent education is between autonomous parents and autonomous schools, with the state governing at a distance through systems of surveillance and audit. The dominant images are the child as knowledge reproducer, the parent as consumer, the teacher as technician, and the school as business competing in the market place through the application of human technologies to the attainment of predetermined and standardised outcomes. The dominant purpose is the production of autonomous subjects for an inescapable neo-liberal world: the calculating and risk-bearing consumer, the flexible and lifelong-learning worker, *homo economicus* incarnate, equipped for a life of perpetual competition and instant responsiveness to the flickering of market signals.

The ruination of public education and its replacement by markets and governing at a distance is catastrophic. It removes the idea that education is a subject of civic interest and a

responsibility of *all* citizens - the public in public education. It drains education of overt political content, recasting it as a predominantly technical exercise, consigned to experts, technicians and businesses whose task it is to define, assess and improve standards of performance. The emphasis on standardisation and technical practice impedes education's ability to work with new and important understandings of children, knowledge and learning, which emphasise diversity and complexity. Last, it removes one vital public resource for addressing the multiple crisis threatening our species and environment. When, more than ever before, we need to act collaboratively and with a strong sense of the public good, we are creating an education system incapable of meeting this need; indeed a system that, like its neo-liberal progenitor, makes matters worse, not better.

What then might we offer as an alternative? How might a public education be renewed and re-constructed? How might we develop a radical education with democracy as a fundamental value and the common school as a basic public institution in a truly democratic society? We understand democracy as a multi-dimensional concept, with many different forms and practices; formal and procedural democracy, democratic governance, is important, but so too is democracy as a way of thinking, being and acting, of relating and living together, as a quality of personal life and relationships. We understand the common school as a public space for all citizens living in its local catchment area: a truly 'comprehensive school' contesting the fragmenting, competitive and selective drive of neo-liberal education, with its proliferation of selective schools - academies, charter schools, faith schools. The common school is age integrated and multi-generational; human scale; a place of depth and connectedness over width of coverage, interdisciplinary, inquiry-based, experiential; project based, both in its pedagogical approach and in its relationship with its community; and organised around team working by educators with diverse perspectives and interests. It is a 'multi-purpose' institution providing education-in-its-broadest-sense and serving as a social and democratic resource to its local community

For full enactment, radical democratic education must be practiced through and in many institutions and settings. National and state governments need to espouse democracy, proclaiming it a fundamental value in education, practicing it in their approach to education, and supporting its practice in other institutions and settings. Democratically elected and accountable local bodies – such as local authorities or school boards – need to (re)assume public responsibility for education in their area and, like higher levels of government, proclaim and practice democracy in their approach to education and support its practice throughout the public education system.

But schools are at the heart of our utopian project, vital sites of radical democratic education. We identify and briefly elaborate ten key design features of a school in which democracy is enacted as participation, 'a mode of associated living' and a lived everyday experience, following Lawrence Kohlberg's maxim that "the only way school can help graduating students become persons who can make society a just community is to let them try experimentally to make the school themselves". These features are:

- A proclaimed democratic vitality;
- Radical structures and spaces;
- Radical roles and images;
- Radical relationships;
- Personal and communal narrative;
- Radical curriculum, radical pedagogy and enabling assessment;
- Insistent affirmation of possibility;
- Engaging the local;
- Accountability as shared responsibility;
- The common school.

Erik Olin Wright proposes three criteria to be applied to any consideration of institutional alternatives: desirability, viability and achievability. We focus on viability, "a scientifically grounded conception of viable alternative institutions" and also briefly explore three companion orientations:

- *democratic experimentalism*, Roberto Unger's concept, an essential element of what he terms 'high energy democracy', releasing the creative powers of ordinary people by eradicating the distortions and subjugations of class, hierarchy and the myopic presumptions of prescribed role and, crucially, the support of 'a collective experimental practice from below' Unger, 2005b. p179).
- *prefigurative practice*, the anticipation of future modes of being through processes and relations, not just structures, that exemplify and embody the viability and desirability of radical alternatives. Because this concept can too easily be laid claim to, letting in the merely different rather than the genuinely transformative, we propose criteria with which to develop and evaluate a prefigurative practice that strives to enact a new way of being in the world.

- *Sustainability*, to confront the chastening history of much radical education, so many examples of which have collapsed after a few years. One lesson from more long-lived examples is the importance of regional, national and global solidarities.

These three concepts are important to the process of transformative change, complementing Wright's three criteria and his view of transformational change as a cumulative, step-by-step process. We need to construct, both from theoretical models and case studies, a better understanding not only of how transformative change can be set in motion - but of how to create the capacity to continue to experiment and to future build.

The penultimate section of our essay raises a number of contradictions and tensions in the real utopian project of a radical democratic education in a common school, including: tradeoffs between collective and individual choice, and issues arising from decentralisation; de-marketisation and de-privatisation; local catchment areas and socially differentiated neighbourhoods; and conflicting time demands.

Our concluding remarks return us to the centrality of human flourishing and the importance of democratic fellowship as at once the precursor to and hope, not just of democratic politics, but of education in and for democracy, which is both its agent and an important site of its prefigurative enactment.
