How Can Neo-Liberal Ideologies Be Resisted?

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Welcome to this Issue

Along with my associate editors, Jared Kemling of Southern Illinois University and Zane Wubbena of Texas State University, I am pleased to share with you this editorial team’s current issue of The Journal of School & Society. We continue to thank the many members of the John Dewey Society who have supported us in this project.

The John Dewey Society was founded in 1935. While the ideas and topics that interested Dewey are shared by all in our organization, as an editorial team, more than anything else, we seek to work in the spirit of the great American philosopher—and in particular, with his commitment to the use of the method of conjoint experience and communication for the enrichment of democratic living. We seek to help communities of like-minded interest—understanding that term in its most Deweyan sense, as that which leads us on to our shared aims and ends—find themselves.

The Journal of School & Society aims to speak to all those interested in the place and function of education in a democratic society—to academics, certainly, but even more so to public school teachers, to parents, and to community activists—both young and old. To that end, we actively seek to highlight voices from diverse constituencies. We seek to be a journal of intelligent practice for creative and justice-oriented practitioners.

In this issue, we join with the many educators who have criticized the trend in public education policy to use market forces as levers for “reform.” However, we do so within a tradition of Deweyan pragmatism. That is, rather than pit ideology versus ideology, we seek to highlight educational practices that subvert the view of the human being embedded in contemporary capitalism: the competitive, acquisitive, self-interested, and coolly rationalistic self.

Our Contributors

Today, nearly all institutions are under threat from ideologies that stress competition over cooperation, consuming over being, and scarcity over abundance.

All of these values—as John Dewey might be the first to note—have their place in a democratic society. Yet the fact remains: institutions that seek to secure shared public goods—pure water, healthy food, clean air, beautiful art and music, as well as strong bodies and intelligent minds—have come under sustained attack.

Public schools, therefore, might work towards a newly cooperative social ethos, one that takes as its primary aim the creation of a society where all are their sisters’ and brothers’ keepers. This issue of the Journal of School & Society explores the creation of such an ethos in several realms.

The Realm of Abundance

Poets and mystics have always rejected the notion that the great goods of life are limited. Da-
vid Jardine, in the featured article for this issue, explores this sense of fullness and how it might yet anchor us in this time of uncertainty: that is, how abundance, rather than being seen as a state or a condition, might instead become a practice. Such a practice would reconnect us to the wonder and beauty of our world and might serve as a new basis from which to rethink what we mean by curriculum.

The Realm of Cultural Wisdom

Bottom-line thinking is colorblind thinking. It flattens everything it touches and makes culture into something that must be overcome in the pursuit of “fidelity of implementation.” In our next section, we hear from educators who have grounded themselves in diverse cultural traditions as a way to challenge neoliberal orthodoxies.

Melissa Bradford and Monica Shields bring the Japanese notion of “soka” into dialogue with eco-centric forms of education in pursuit of a schooling that helps children unlearn what is harmful, all while learning to care for the Earth and the many forms of life which she sustains. Sheron Fraser-Burgess and Camea Davis use the work of Ta-Nehisi Coates to theorize what a less destructive form of the American dream might entail—one that is no longer forgetful of the black and brown bodies who have been violated by the relentless pursuit of white supremacy and wealth accumulation. Finally, Lina Zhang asks what happens when neoliberalism comes into contact with traditional Confucian values—and whether or not child-centeredness can escape the threat of self-centeredness that unfettered capitalism brings with it in contemporary China.

The Realm of Service

Schooling has become a commodity. The aims of education have become commercialized. We go to school to get a good job, a nice home, and a large paycheck. Things that are difficult to justify in purely economic terms, such as art and music, are the first things cut from the school curriculum.

Yet, educators can resist this commodification in a variety of ways. One very practical way to do this is by maintaining and promoting service learning by students—who are then asked to explore what they can do for others rather than asking what teachers and adults can do for them. Theresa Udziela explores the possibility for service in an article on her school’s innovative and popular leadership program.

Another path for resisting commodification comes through story. Who are you? How can I help? These are basic questions that every educator, in one way or another, mobilizes as they start to build relationships with their students. Cynthia Douglas, through her service to undocumented immigrants facing the most heartbreaking of situations, shows us how she approaches this process of humanization through story.

The Realm of Possibility

Whether it be parents seeking to “opportunity hoard” for their own children; teachers who maintain grading systems where students come to see learning as a zero-sum game with “winners” and “losers;” administrators who rate faculty as “highly effective” for their compliance and high test scores; or children who view the talents of another as a threat to their own self-worth— institutions that promote competitive social relations distort the human capacity for harmonious growth.

In our final section, we hear from educators who challenge capitalism head on by staying rooted in the “what may be” rather than the
“what is.” Arthur Chiaravalli argues that it is time to hold accountability accountable by embracing the uncertainty that is part-and-parcel of the humanities. David Militzer argues that the best way to resist the nefarious effects of “disaster capitalism” is to make friends with the future—through a practice of hopeful awaiting. Finally, Lucia De Luca argues that imagination is the classroom practice that must be cultivated if we are ever to see our way beyond the narrow-minded obsessions of the present.

**John Dewey and the Distorting Effects of Endless Competition**

In 1935, John Dewey wrote that:

> the actual corrosive “materialism” of our times . . . springs from the notion, sedulously cultivated by the class in power, that the creative capacities of individuals can be evoked and developed only in a struggle for material possession and material gain.¹

As true today as it was in 1935, Dewey’s critique of liberal economic theory reminds us of the profound impact that the creed of competition can have on the development of the young.

Classical economics is built upon the idea of scarcity—that resources, capital, labor and time are inherently limited. Hierarchy is, in some ways, a response to the challenges of a perceived scarcity—those at the top receive more, those at the bottom less. A “natural order” is in this way justified. What is worth stressing it is the very belief in scarcity that grounds the entire system.

The rejection of scarcity might be the rejection of hierarchy. And the rejection of hierarchy would be in this sense the rejection of fear.

Throughout his life, Dewey stressed that it is the form of social association in which we find ourselves that shapes who we are and who we might yet become: “Liberalism that takes its profession of the importance of individuality with sincerity must be deeply concerned about the structure of human association.”²

Should we appropriate the hours spent by children taking standardized tests and re-dedicate them to serving elders and neighbors, stewarding the environment, and making goods that enrich life, making it more interesting and lovely—schools could become sites that release human potential and remake a society crippled by varying levels of fear.

It is our hope that this issue of our journal provides some food for thought as we each seek to realize these ends.
