# EDUCATION & IDEOLOGY: Notes

The definition of ideology that I use here is:

> *a broad interlocked set of ideas and beliefs about the world held by a group of people that they demonstrate in both behaviour and conversation to various audiences. These systems of belief are usually seen as 'the way things really are' by the groups holding them, and they become the taken-for-granted ways of making sense of the world.*

(Meighan & Harber, 2007: 212)

## What sort of society?

Throughout history and across the world philosophers, thinkers, politicians and citizens have debated what the best form of society might be. What would be the core values and beliefs that helped such a society prosper? What would be the role of education in a society based on those values and beliefs? One of the debates over the last two-hundred years or so has been about the role the state (government) should play in relation to society – is it to hold the ring for its inhabitants or to enter the ring on their behalf? By this I mean is the task of the state simply to protect the individual, through the procedures of law and order, to create their own priorities and quality of life or should the state intervene in people's lives in order to help create a better quality of life for all? A non-interventionist, *laissez faire*, stance provides the freedom for individuals, organisations and networks to organise freely as they wish. An interventionist stance, on the other hand, may be preferred by the state in order to bring about particular social ends.

The three ideologies sketched out here highlight some of the differences between these two forms of society and help explain some of the discord in today's world. They are: welfare state ideology, neoliberal ideology (plus some neoconservative aspects) and green ideology. The first two of these reflect different forms of capitalism. All three help explain different attitudes to education, life and the universe.

## 1. WELFARE STATE

## Nature of such ideology

As Heywood observes:

> The twentieth century witnessed the growth of state intervention in most western states and in many developing ones. Much of this intervention took the form of social welfare: attempts by government to provide welfare support for its citizens by overcoming poverty, disease and ignorance. If the minimal state was typical of

the nineteenth century, during the twentieth century the modern state became a welfare state (Heywood, 2005: 60).

In the UK the first signs of this were under the Liberal government (1906-14) which brought in legislation relating to old age pensions, free school meals and national insurance contributions for unemployment and health benefits at work. Prior to this great inequality had been the norm and serious poverty still remained between the two world wars. In looking towards a post-war Britain Liberal politician William Beveridge identified five 'giants on the road to reconstruction': poverty, disease, ignorance, squalor and idleness.

## Rise of such ideology

He thus proposed the setting up of a fairer welfare state to aid in the nation's recovery. The main elements of this were a free national health service, social security, free education for all, council housing and full employment. The notion underpinning this was that no individual or group should be penalised for the social circumstances that they found themselves born into. There should be equal opportunities for all. The Liberal, Conservative and Labour party all supported Beveridge's recommendations which were implemented by Labour through a series of Acts of Parliament after the 1945 general election. These included the Town and Country Planning Act (1947) which saw the building of 1.25 million council houses by 1951 and the Children's Act (1948) which required local councils to provide good care and housing for children lacking a normal home life. To kick-start the recovery of industry the railways, road haulage, coal and steel were all nationalised.

This was the world I later grew up in during my youth. The National Health Service was efficient and free, as was going to the dentist. My parents didn't have to pay for me to go to school nor did I have to obtain a scholarship. When I chose to go to university in the 60s I received a state grant, based on my father's income. When I began teaching in the 70s education was under the control of Local Education Authorities and children went to their local neighbourhood school. Education itself was, as in any other field, designed and run by education professionals, overseen by Her Majesty's Inspectorate. Political interference was largely non-existent. But in the 70s and 80s all of this, and not only education, began to change as the result of an ideological counter revolution by what were known as the 'new' liberals (neoliberals) and 'new' conservatives (neoconservatives).

## 2a NEOLIBERAL

## Nature of such ideology

In Britain liberalism grew out of the ideas of 18th century philosophers such as Hobbes and Locke but now appears as the basis of western 'reality' rather than one ideology amongst others. Whereas in medieval times society was seen as a hierarchical and organic whole Enlightenment thinkers saw the individual as of prime importance and

thus stressed the importance of individual liberty. Consequently the rights of the individual and the attainment of human happiness became key goals in liberalism.

Liberalism also assumes that the individual is essentially a rational person and therefore knows his/her own best interests. The pursuit of self-interest is therefore what should guide all human activity. The corollary of this is that liberalism has a 'weak' notion of society as a whole and of notions of the 'public good.' The role of government, it is argued, is to protect the rights of the individual (whether persons or companies) and not to interfere in the pursuit of their self-interest.

## Rise of such ideology

The 1970s saw a backlash against the idea that the state should provide services for all and especially for the weaker members of society. The notion of a welfare state which emerged after World War Two in the UK was the opposite of liberalism in that it believed the state should provide a range of services to meet everyone's needs. In the UK, as referred to above, this led to the creation of a national health service, the provision of a state pension, and the notion that services such as water, transport and education should be provided for all.

Neoliberals in the UK and the USA, however, believed that the state should be 'weak', i.e. it should not interfere with people's lives and that what is privately owned is always better than what is publicly owned. A central belief is that of 'economic rationality' – everyone should act to maximise their own personal benefits, i.e. the notion of the free market and free-enterprise. This means that private businesses competing against each other should result in the greatest good for each individual. The state should therefore not interfere in any way that might hinder business and industry from pursuing the vital goal of capitalism which is to maximise profits for producers and shareholders.

## 2b NEOCONSERVATIVE

Since neoconservative ideology shares some key elements with neoliberal beliefs and values these are also described briefly below.

## Nature of such ideology

This political ideology is based on what is seen as the prime importance of conserving things so that which is perceived as a threat to the existing social order needs to be resisted. What exists is by definition generally better than possible alternatives, thus the importance of respecting and honouring tradition. Most conservatives tend to be somewhat pessimistic about human nature and highlight its weakness, selfishness and irrationality (Goodwin, 2014). In order to control such human proclivities government may need to be authoritarian in order to protect the social order. Conservatives tend to stress the importance of the family, moral values, self-restraint, strict punishment,

private property and patriotism. Individuals, it is argued, should see to their own needs and not depend on (so-called) 'handouts' offered by a welfare state.

## Rise of such ideology

In the 1970s neoconservatives in the UK and the USA were also opposed to everything the welfare state stood for although not necessarily for the same reasons as neoliberals. What they did agree with was their view of economics. Neoconservatives thus prioritise the privatisation of national assets and deregulation of the market in order to encourage business. This has led to a reduction in social services, employment protection and building regulations, for example, because they are seen as impediments to business. People, it is argued, should always be self-reliant and stand on their own two feet, a good Victorian value. Rather than the state trying to control the economy, 'free market' economics is seen as the best foundation for a vibrant economy. From the late 1970s onwards the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher in the UK put these beliefs into practice in a way which profoundly changed the nature of British society. In particular neoliberal and neoconservative beliefs together were to drastically change the face of education, as set out below. It is thus vital for educators to understand the critique of these two ideologies and their impact on society. Two of the best sources on this are Gray (2009) and Harvey (2007).

## 3. GREEN IDEOLOGY

## Rise of such ideology

Whilst various writers and thinkers in the past had stressed the importance and value of the natural environment in human affairs it was not until the 1960s-70s that these ideas began to crystallise and widely influence debates about humanity's growing impact on the planet. This new awareness emerged with the publication of books such as Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (the damaging effect of pesticides on wildlife), Donella Meadows' *The Limits to Growth* (the first global computer model on possible future impacts) and Fritz Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful* (constant growth is unsustainable). This period also saw the setting up of organisations such as Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace, the Sierra Club and events such as the first UN Conference on the Environment.

## Nature of such ideology

This flowering of ideas was particularly concerned about humanity's relationship with nature and the planet. In prehistoric and medieval times nature had often been seen as a beneficent provider to be respected and propitiated. Christianity, however, taught that man should have mastery over the earth and the Industrial Revolution provided the tools to achieve this. By the mid-twentieth century the dangers of this view were becoming increasingly apparent and this surge of 'green' awareness was particularly opposed to the growing destruction of the environment, warning of serious problems ahead if this was not quickly reined in. This led on to major debates about the changes

that would be needed to achieve a more balanced human-nature relationship and these continue today. At root the question is how deep to these changes need to be? Can we continue with life much as before through technological improvements or does it require fundamental change to the way in which we envisage progress and well-being.

What is distinctive about green ideology is its stress on the need for holistic or systems thinking in order to understand problems and solutions. This arises from the realisation that damaging or interfering with any part of an ecosystem (whether soils, flora, fauna or habitat) can lead to unexpected change or collapse, since all parts of the natural environment are interrelated. One needs therefore to understand the nature of whole systems not just the different parts. Humans are only able to survive on this planet because of the biosphere - soil, rocks, atmosphere, waters, insects and wildlife – which is in effect our life support system. The extent of the damage being done is marked, for example, by the rate at which species are becoming extinct and the rate at which global warming is causing more dangerous and extreme weather across the globe. Central to green thinking are the twin concepts of unsustainable and sustainable practices and procedures (Washington, 2015). Any social, cultural or economic activity that causes damage to people or the natural environment is unsustainable – systems will crash. Conversely any activity which enhances the long term well-being of people or the natural environment is sustainable.

Green ideology is different from the other ideologies discussed here in that it focuses not just on how human society may work best but broadens that notion to encompass all aspects of our life support system, human and non-human. Increasingly dangerous climate change would seem to suggest a bigger picture such as this has its value.

## 4. IMPACTS ON EDUCATION

## The neoliberal impact

Since the 1980s the impact of neoliberal/neoconservative ideas on education in the UK and USA has been dramatic, in particular see Michael Apple's classic critique, *Educating the 'Right' Way: Markets, standards, God and inequality* (2006). In the UK proponents of these views argued that education had been going in the wrong direction, i.e. it reflected welfare state ideals, and so in the 80s a series of ideological attacks was launched against teachers, schools and the education system itself – a system which had made England famous for the quality of its primary education. From the 1950s to the early 1980s UK teachers were respected because they were professionals in their field, free to engage in all sorts of curriculum innovations, supported by their Local Education Authorities (LEAs), and engaged in a variety of national curriculum projects. During this period schools had both greater autonomy and greater local support than thereafter.

Neoliberals see money spent on education as a waste of time unless it helps the country compete efficiently and effectively in the global market place. Students are now seen as global capital and their value is judged against the extent to which they have gained the

skills needed to be effective in the global marketplace. The metaphors applied to education became those of the market place: parents as consumers, business as the model for education, internal and external competition in schools to bring out what is the best in both pupils and schools. UK teachers in the 1980s, together with their professionalism and unions, their passion for education in its own right, were seen as impediments to this view of education. Schools were thus encouraged to forge greater links with business and industry, since economics is seen as the measure of all things. Education became modelled on the business world and consequently embraced a more technocratic, managerial and performance driven view of teaching and learning.

In the 1980s the Conservative party under Thatcher launched a major attack against the teaching profession and introduced a mandatory national curriculum in order to gain greater control over what went on in schools. With this came the dismantling of the power of Local Education Authorities which, especially in Labour controlled areas, were thought by Conservatives to have a pernicious effect on young people. Conservatives wanted a return to traditional values, a curriculum which was untainted by discussion of local and global issues, for example, or matters to do with race, class and gender. The way to achieve these goals, they believed, was to stress the importance of literacy, numeracy, science and information technology as key subject areas, to bring in SATs (standard attainment tasks) in order to raise standards within schools and league tables in order to raise standards nationally. This was based on the belief that competition always brings out the best in people (as the free market is supposed to do in business) and will therefore do the same for both pupils and schools.

By giving parents a choice over the school their children went to (instead of attending the local school which had traditionally been the case) it was argued that good schools would prosper and poor ones would be closed down. This process is seen by neoconservatives as part of the 'natural' (i.e. competitive) order. What the curriculum changes actually led to was a deskilling of teachers since all they had to do was follow a national curriculum already shaped for them by Conservative politicians. Whilst the arrival of New Labour in the 90s might have challenged many of these educational principles in fact they generally only tinkered with the system having abandoned welfare state principles for neoliberal values themselves. Whilst under New Labour education was still underpinned by these values the curriculum was opened up to include vital issues such as global citizenship, education for sustainability and sustainable schools.

The arrival of a Conservative/LibDem coalition in 2010 naturally saw a resurgence of conservative ideas. Whereas traditionally the state has provided education through the normal network of primary and secondary schools the then Minister of Education, Michael Gove, believed that parents and other interest groups should be free to set up their own schools (the privatisation of education). This was a divisive tactic to break up the collective support once delivered by Local Education Authorities to their schools. Similarly, since conservatives believe in a 'traditional' (old fashioned) curriculum, the emphasis is now on 'proper' disciplines so that cross-curriculum concerns such as citizenship and education for sustainability are no longer a focus of official concern.

## The green impact

Whilst green ideology has influenced mainstream politics in a number of countries this has generally been in smaller rather than larger ways. It is, however, an ideology which many across the world are sympathetic to. An ideology does not have to have its own political party to be of significant influence. And, remembering the definition of ideology at the start of these notes, green thinking (whether called that or not) is taken for granted in different forms by millions of people and organisations across the planet. Its time may well come. To understand more about its actual and possible impact on education see the examples under both education for sustainability [SustSchools] and futures education [FuturesPerspective].

These notes have outlined some of the reasons for needing to understand neoliberal and welfare state ideologies given the impact they have on the form of education that exists in many countries today. It is important to understand how preconceived ideologies such as these shape the nature of education. In understanding this it is possible to see how education could be different if informed by a different value system. Long standing progressive initiatives can challenge such taken-for-granted notions of teaching and learning and vitally contribute to positive longer term educational change.

*Disclaimer:* these notes are only intended as an outline and introduction to differing political ideologies and their impact on the form and practice of education. To explore these matters further see the sources below.

It is also worth noting that the field of education was once one of critical and creative discussion until neoliberal ideology deliberately marginalised wider debate. With politicians now controlling both the form and practice of education, in schools and teacher education, most critical and creative debate has been simply and conveniently outlawed.

# FURTHER READING

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