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Article:

Webb, D. (2020) Spaces of hope? Policy Futures in Education, 18 (5). pp. 681-683. ISSN 1478-2103

https://doi.org/10.1177/1478210319853486

Webb D. Spaces of hope? Policy Futures in Education. 2020;18(5):681-683. © 2019 The Author. doi:10.1177/1478210319853486. Article available under the terms of the CC-BY-NC-ND licence (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

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SPACES OF HOPE?

***Spaces of Political Pedagogy: Occupy! And Other Experiments in Adult Learning*. Cassie Earl, Routledge, London, 2018, 195pages, ISBN 978-1-138-63321-6**

This book focuses on three sites of 'emancipatory learning' – Occupy London, the Social Science Centre in Lincoln and the Student as Producer initiative at the University of Lincoln. Based on primary research conducted in and with these movements and institutions, Earl poses three central questions. Firstly, to what extent 'a transformative critical pedagogy' was practiced within the sites; secondly, whether connections and lines of continuity can be traced between them; and thirdly, what lessons might be learned from their respective successes and failures. Earl offers some refreshingly honest responses to these questions and the book makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of social movement learning.

The book is driven and animated by hope. Earl opens by declaring herself committed to the project of hope and utopia and promises us a book exploring spaces and pedagogies of hope in an attempt 'to contribute to hope' itself (7). While critical of certain aspects of the learning spaces she explores, Earl nonetheless seeks to capture the 'ever-present hope' of those involved (9). Although never fully articulating what she understands hope to be, I see this as a book seeking to give voice to, while contributing to the emergence of, what I have termed elsewhere *critical* and *transformative* hope (Webb, 2013). Earl certainly cannot be accused of easy optimism and the tensions in her accounts testify to hope as a site of struggle.

Earl approaches her study from the perspective of autonomist Marxism. John Holloway's *Crack Capitalism* is the main reference point and guide throughout her analysis and Earl tells us that the voices of those involved in Occupy London 'began with Holloway's scream' and then 'began to constitute a Multitude' (32). Together with Holloway, Freire provides a kind of backdrop to the study as Earl continually asks how best to deploy critical pedagogy as 'a tool for social change' and how 'to place critical pedagogy in the service of the new social movements' (56, 60). In an interesting move, Earl then places Ira Shor and Jacques Rancière in dialogue, bringing *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* and Shor's democratic power-sharing pedagogy into contact with her research participants in order to assess their relevance and value to the project of revolutionary education.

While Rancière speaks clearly to Occupy's refrain that 'anyone can teach, everyone can learn', Earl concludes that 'the ignorant schoolmaster thesis is flawed' (149). She argues that her research supports the model of critical pedagogy developed by Shor, in which the teacher does not relinquish their expertise but has this questioned and examined by learners in the process of co-producing knowledge. As learners gain in confidence and self-understanding, the educator relinquishes their power and 'withers away' (74). This is where the book is at its most interesting, in Earl's claims that 'revolutionary education cannot do without a skilled pedagogue, at least initially' (148) and that social movements need 'some kind of organised pedagogical direction' (161).

Although the book explores three case study sites, the focus is placed firmly on Occupy London and the fieldwork conducted there between Autumn 2011—Spring 2012. One gets the feeling that the Social Science Centre (SSC) and Student as Producer (SaP) proved rather disappointing research sites, not only because of the limited extent to which they can genuinely claim to embody 'emancipatory learning' but also because in each case the fieldwork mainly comprised interviews with one (and the same) person. Here Earl is diplomatic in her phrasing as she tells us to 'exercise scepticism' when considering Mike Neary's exalted descriptions of the SSC and SaP and to recognise that his words are 'predominantly rhetoric' (116). While gesturing towards to the radical potential offered by

both these sites, Earl's fieldnotes rightly recognise the exaggerated claims made on their behalf.

Earl's engagement with Occupy London is fascinating as her account oscillates between hope and frustration. She concedes honestly that 'many scholars had a tendency to want to see only the best of Occupy. I was with them. I wanted to work in solidarity; I wanted to believe that Occupy was what it seemed to be, and more' (101). This was true also of the occupiers themselves as Earl notes 'a duality at play, that people wanted to believe the movement was one thing even though they knew it was not' (106). Her analysis then reflects the tension between the promise of Occupy—the birth of a new revolutionary subject, new social relations, new ways of being and living and doing—and the lived realities of a movement reproducing existing relations of oppression that was unable to perceive the dehumanising aspects of its own organisation and practice (99-101).

Earl offers glowing assessments of 'Occupy's unique form of educational commons' (86) and radical experiment in 'self-organised education' (30). At the same time, however, she acknowledges the 'temptation to over romanticise' the kind of organic learning taking place and critiques some of the celebratory accounts of movement learning offered by autonomists. For Hardt and Negri, for example, 'the spaces created by bodies coming together created the movement and the learning that emerged from it' (20). In reality, however, the learning emerging from bodies coming together was limited in the extreme. Rather than liberating the imagination, the assembled bodies were 'reproducing some debilitating capitalist values' (102). In this sense, Earl argues that Occupy London 'defied theory' (102).

This is a significant claim and the central argument of the book is a powerful one. In the absence of the *organic* emergence of revolutionary theory and pedagogy, Earl argues that social movements require the intervention of pedagogues from outside. As she puts it, 'transformative pedagogy, instigated by skilled pedagogues, could make an escape from the enclosure of capitalist and neoliberal social relations a possibility' (8). Here the researcher/pedagogue would act as 'a critical friend' (102) embedded within the movement, a kind of pedagogue-in-residence picking up on oppressions and subjugations and turning them into opportunities for learning and mutual understanding (113). Consistent with Shor's 'withering away' of the teacher, however, the 'pedagogical leadership must be willing, able, and encouraged to relinquish its leadership' once movement actors had developed requisite skills of pedagogical self-monitoring (147).

Who are the pedagogues Earl has in mind? She provides a clear answer:

> These initiatives seem to require the assistance of those who have spent their lives becoming experts in fields that are essential to the understanding of how to elicit social change: sociologists, psychologists, linguists, political theorists and many others including the educational theorist, all of whom reside for the most part within academe (125)

Earl concludes the book with a call for students and researchers to create alliances with social movements to help bear witness to protests, demonstrations and occupations (154-5). This would allow academic voices to be heard within the activist community and activist voices to be heard within the academy. Earl's ultimate goal, however, is the dissolution of the university as academics and activists work together in 'turning whole cities into explicitly pedagogical sites' (154).

This is an important contribution to the field. In terms of style and structure, the book bears the hallmarks of its original form as a doctoral thesis (e.g. the extended discussion of methodology, methods and ethics in Chapter 2). The central argument, however, challenges

anarchist and autonomist notions of organic social movement learning and poses serious questions about the potential role to be played by academics within social movements. This is something I have been grappling with in my own research (Webb, 2017; 2018) and Earl has provided plenty of food for thought. Some may be wary of the conclusions drawn—Earl is not afraid to use the word 'vanguard'—but the position is developed and presented with admirable clarity. Although she does not use the term, the concept of 'the vanishing mediator' comes to mind to describe the role of Earl's pedagogue. A vanishing mediator is a bearer of change that disappears and is forgotten about once the change has occurred. The dissolution of the university and the disappearance of the academic is a 'utopian future' for sure (154).

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