Article:

Utopian Pedagogy: Possibilities and Limitations

Hammond, C. (2018). *Hope, Utopia and Creativity in Higher Education: Pedagogical Tactics for Alternative Futures*. **London: Bloomsbury, pp.207 £28.99 (pbk) ISBN 978-1-3500-7972-4**

This is an ambitious book. Its central aim is to encourage staff and students in higher education 'to actively engage with new ways of thinking, new ways of learning and new possibilities of educating' (6). These new ways of thinking, learning and educating Hammond terms 'utopian pedagogy' and the book proceeds to outline both its theory and practice. Influenced by Freire, Giroux, McLaren and hooks, Hammond brings the classics of critical pedagogy into utopian contact with Barthes, Bloch, Bachelard and Debord. This is not a book that dwells in abstract theorisation, however. The key focus is practical as Hammond talks us through his own teaching. He offers us an array of 'pedagogical *tactics* and *counter*-strategies' (9) and even a draft module handbook replete with weekly timetable, assessment rubric and marking criteria.

This is a book, then, that focuses on the *possibilities* of utopian pedagogy. Hammond is keen to tell us that utopian pedagogy can operate within mainstream higher education. To demonstrate this, he bases the book around two third year optional modules (*Utopian Visions and Everyday Culture* and *Alternative Education*) he taught at University Centre Blackburn College between 2011 and 2015. Rather than a distant possibility realisable only once institutional constraints are overcome, Hammond argues that utopian pedagogy is possible here and now as engaged educational practice. He is concerned in particular with drawing out a latent utopian agency. As he tells us in the closing pages of the book, 'we have the potential to be active and expectant participants in a process of creative hope and *becoming*' (185).

The practical focus of the book makes it a welcome contribution to the field of study. Much of the work dealing with utopian pedagogy (my own included) operates at the conceptual and theoretical level, offering very little in the way of advice or guidance to teachers and learners in the classroom. This lacuna is starting to be addressed (see, for example, Bojesen and Suissa, 2018) and Hammond's book is a valuable addition in this regard. As well as giving us tactics, strategies and a module handbook, there is a chapter comprising comments and reflections from students who had 'engaged with, and experienced, all facets of the Utopian Pedagogy' (165). The prominence of student voices in the book adds real value and sets it apart from others.

In terms of its theoretical framing, Hammond offers a familiar 'archaeological' reading of utopian pedagogy. Working on the premise that power is always leaky, the utopian pedagogue seeks 'ways of utilising the cracks, fissures and inconsistencies that open up amidst the mechanics of regulation and control' (10). Within these cracks and fissures are to be found foretastes of human fullness and glimpses of utopia. The role of utopian pedagogy thus becomes one of locating these cracks and excavating what lies hidden beneath. For Hammond, utopian pedagogy is 'an archaeological recovery of hope-traces' (34) by means of 'excavating' learners' dreams and memories (66). Once excavated through 'utopianly' pedagogical encounters, 'the echoes and traces revive and awaken beautiful rhythms of possibility and latency' (145) and 'glance towards the refracted haze of future's potential' (185).

Before exploring the pedagogical tactics and strategies offered by Hammond, a word first about language. One of the great paradoxes of critical pedagogy is that a movement claiming to work with and for the poor, marginalised, minoritised and oppressed deploys, almost without exception, a mystifying obscurantist language. While Hammond never quite reaches the dizzy heights of Henry Giroux in the convoluted gymnastics of his prose, he sometimes comes close in his use of jargonese. Listen to this, for example:

> Learner collaborators kaleidoscopically splinter as utopian particles of incomplete possibility, and through creative and bespoke everyday encounters with culture-works, they engage with the hieroglyphic cipher-symbols of Elpeidetic encounters (185).

I have no idea what hieroglyphic cipher-symbols of Elpeidetic encounters are and to be frank I can live without knowing. Sadly, this is a book full of alienating language.

Returning to the project and practice of utopian pedagogy, Part I of the book outlines three tactics used by Hammond to explore how 'the now-time of *today* can become re-enthused and re-invigorated with visions and creative, anticipatory stories for a better and transformed tomorrow' (34). The first, inspired by Ernst Bloch, is to use a cultural artefact – Hammond uses fairy tales – as a means of encouraging students to recover and share hidden submerged hope-traces. Once they have a feel for this, he argues, they will see hope-traces everywhere and this 'can build a momentum towards revelations of previously hidden or latent aches for belonging, hope, victory, utopia and, ultimately, a new future' (32). The second is to use a medium such as film to try to invoke something like a Barthesian puntum; a puncture hole in the-way-things-are through which 'a surge of memories, experiences, and associations' escape and swirl around, bouncing off each other in a process full of utopian potential (49). The third is to stimulate a state of Bachelardian creative reverie. Hammond talks here of 'an archaeology of…*glimmering fragments of childhood possibility*,' by which he means asking students to revisit, reconstruct, and reimagine the 'hopeful possibilities' of childhood in order to construct, in reveric fancy, 'hopeful stories of alternative and redemptive possibility' (64).

I read the chapters on pedagogical tactics with great interest. I was particularly keen to see whether and how these tactics dealt with one of the key questions posed by archaeological readings of utopian pedagogy, namely, how we know when we have found a crack or fissure through which can be glimpsed a foreshadowing of the not-yet. Running with the archaeological metaphor, one might ask: how do we as educators know where to dig and how do we identify an archaeological find? These are important questions because not *all* experiences, desires, dreams and memories contain utopian traces or stories of redemptive possibility (see Webb, 2017). On what basis, then, does a teacher judge one set of experiences or desires to be full of possibility and another set not? Does Hammond's discussion of Bloch, Barthes and Bachelard, of hope-traces, punctums and reverie, help us here?

Unfortunately not. For Hammond tends to assume that excavating childhood memories will unearth utopian images that raise no ethical issues or dilemmas. At no stage does he consider the *content* of the hope-traces uncovered by his pedagogical devices. Judith Suissa points to the possibility that the pedagogical project of uncovering repressed histories – a liberatory pedagogy of hope and indignation – may lead to forms of resistance that are ethically troubling and even repugnant (2017, 878). She points out that it is often taken for granted that 'uncovering submerged desires' and 'excavating buried memories' will stimulate responses that are morally unproblematic. To make this assumption is, she suggests, a form of 'easy optimism' (2017, 877). One of the limitations of the utopian pedagogy advanced by Hammond is that it falls foul of such an easy optimism. It is simply assumed that excavating the hope-traces that lie within cultural artefacts will stimulate radical utopian longings in line with the educator's own sensibilities; it is assumed that what will emerge through a punctum is a whirlwind of utopian possibilities that raise no ethical questions; and it is assumed that the alternative stories that emerge through creative reverie will always be hopeful in a nice left-leaning liberal kind of way.

Hammond, like many others working in the field of utopian studies, adopts an elastic understanding of utopia as an open-ended process. He is reluctant to give any *content* to utopia for fear of totalising closure. Emphasising fluidity, he tells us that 'the parameters of any revelations and articulations of hope and aspirant information should be left almost entirely to each collaborator's creative imagination' (32-3). What this means is that he never gives us any actual examples of how the jargon-laded processes he describes work to give concrete utopian form to his student-collaborators' articulations of hope. As it was with Bloch, Barthes and Bachelard, so it is with Debord. Referring to détournement and the dérive as counter-strategies, Hammond says that 'they can be malleably implemented and subjectively received in ways that can recognize and enable fractured searches for latent nubs of expressive hope' (84-5). This may well be the case, but it would be useful to be given some examples of the ways in which their malleable implementation had enabled students in their search for nubs of hope.

Hammond comes close to valorising anything and everything that emerges from his pedagogical tactics and counter-strategies as a utopian signifier of redemptive possibility. Whatever hope-traces a student recovers can be deemed 'utopian' if the student regards them as so. This is certainly the understanding of utopian pedagogy that the students themselves took away from studying with Hammond. Two full chapters are given over to the voices of students, one chapter recounting life histories and another collating feedback provided on Hammond's two utopian modules. These are fascinating to read, but there is a tendency to *individualise* and *privatise* utopia. Raeesa, for example, says that doing a degree was fulfilling her dream 'to achieve my incomplete, the not-yet' (158). Ruth comments that: 'As Bloch stated, utopia is the 'not-yet', it is many things to many people at every different time' (177). Liz refers to 'the 'not-yet' that I am striving towards…reaching my 'not-yet' daydreams' (160). She then discusses Bloch's theory and 'the notion that each individual can have their view of utopia' (176). Bloch is understood here as suggesting that 'we all have different yet potent visions of our own possible utopian futures, which we should pursue' (177).

Bloch, of course, was a revolutionary Marxist, not a liberal individualist. In his epic *The Principle of Hope*, Bloch differentiated between *abstract* and *concrete* utopia, between enervating escapism and the forward pull of the Absolute All. Not every individual wish, want or desire points toward the possible New, and in fact most do not. Many of the individual daydreams and aspirations described by Hammond's students would fall into Bloch's category of 'unregulated wishes,' not the *venturing beyond* that characterises 'concretely genuine hope' (Bloch, 1995, 5). Bloch himself had a very clear pedagogical project, the project of *docta spes*, of educated hope. Taking the individual wants, wishes and desires of Hammond's students, Bloch would be concerned with 'knowing them deeper and deeper and in this way keeping them trained unerringly, usefully, on what is right' (Bloch, 1995, 3).

Hammond himself would never say anything like this. Rather, he tells us that in deploying the Blochean tactic of setting students off in search of hope-traces, input and 'interference' from the teacher or lecturer 'should be kept, as much as practically possible, to an absolute minimum' (33). This, I think, is the dominant position within contemporary critical-utopian pedagogy (see Webb, 2018). Most writers in the field would argue that utopian pedagogy is concerned with opening spaces – spaces for discovery and exploratory encounters, spaces of possibility, open-ended spaces of becoming. The role of the pedagogue is to facilitate the opening of these spaces (as Hammond does by way of Bloch, Barthes and Bachelard) rather than to guide or direct what goes on inside them. It is easy to see the attraction of this. Contemporary utopian educators want to avoid accusations of authoritarian imposition, totalising closure, the suppression of difference, diversity and dissent – all the accusations levelled at 'blueprint' utopianism by liberal critics such as Popper.

Something, however, has been lost. Something is missing. When Hammond tells us that by 'following the chaotic personal *rhythms* of nostalgic trace paths, small collectives of learner collaborators fractally glimpse and manifest co-possibilities of renewal and redemption,' he goes on to say that: 'Each individual puzzle of revealed mystery equates to a constituent shred of *utopia-within*' (144). But does it? Does *everything* the students come up with point to utopian renewal and redemption? Is there no need at all for the teacher or lecturer to critique, problemetise, guide and direct? Clearly, the Freirean insistence on the need for authority and direction within utopian pedagogy raises many questions and problems. Is the best way of engaging with these, however, simply to ignore them and confirm that each and every hope-trace is a utopian signifier? The fact that students left the modules thinking that Bloch's notion of utopia relates to individual life goals (rather than revolutionary social transformation), and that he regarded all views of utopia and personal 'not-yet daydreams' as equally worthy of pursuing, suggests not.

This is nonetheless a book worth reading, and it makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of utopian pedagogy. The student voices and the draft module handbook mark it out as a practically-focused attempt to bring utopia into the classroom. Hammond's tactics and strategies are offered as gifts – gifts we can accept, adapt and utilise in our own teaching. The language at times becomes tiresome, however, and smacks a little of *faux*-profundity. More importantly, the utopian pedagogy outlined in the book seems to evade rather than engage with a range of significant issues facing the 'utopian' educator. There is plenty of work still for us all to do.

References

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