
Introduction

“ARTICULATING AND PERFORMING A PHILOSOPHY OF ACTIVISM”: UNDERSTANDING THE NEOLIBERAL BEAST FROM WITHIN... FIGHTING THE NEOLIBERAL BEAST FROM WITHOUT...

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When OVPES president Stacy Otto sent me the 2016 conference call for proposals to disseminate, I was immediately drawn to one word in the conference theme’s title: “menacing.” It struck me as the perfect adjective to describe the neoliberal beast “way back then,” and it strikes me as an even more apt adjective to describe the neoliberal beast today, particularly so in light of our most recent “historic” election. (Why are all elections “historic” of late?) Menacing, in its adjectival form, can be traced directly back to its Latin root, *minax*, or “threatening in nature.” Other such synonyms would include sinister, portentous, foreboding, and minatory. Maybe most telling in this context is not so much its denoted meaning, but its connotation as something *impending* rather than present—an impending evil. I do wonder (and plan to ask Stacy when I can) if recent events would have her choosing a different adjective—one indicative of a visiting *present* evil rather than an impending *future* evil . . . it has, after all, been a tough year.

Stacy’s choice of menacing for the title conjures up both interesting images and important questions—questions that her presidential address, Michael Gunzenhauser’s response to that address, and the articles included in this year’s issue of *Philosophical Studies in Education* take up in a variety of ways. I have over the last several months been pondering two of those numerous questions related to Stacy’s talk myself, one from the “inside-out,” and another from the “outside-in,” so to speak. The inside-out question goes something like this: have “we” (fill in your favorite particular category of humans—philosophers of education comes to my mind) allowed ourselves to wallow so deeply within the suffocating waters of neoliberal thought and policy for so long that, like fish who can’t see the water, it has become impossible for us to see the beast, much less fight it from within its watery home? The second, companion question: must we embrace the position/perspective/role of complete outsider, as Stacy suggests, if we are to have any chance of defeating or fending off the beast—outside of (even) those groups that have organized with the specifically stated purpose of fighting this neoliberal beast? The first question is, I believe, particularly crucial and dictates to some degree how the second question might be addressed. And, both are crucial questions for understanding the history of

social-political action generally and the future of contemporary social movements more specifically.

As to the first, inside-out question, there remains much confusion as to what, precisely, neoliberalism entails and what, precisely, neoliberals believe (those of you who attended the conference might remember this discussion at the special session). This lingering conceptual muddiness makes the beast exceedingly tough to understand, locate, and organize against. Some time ago—midway through President Obama’s second term—a colleague of mine and I were invited to pen a chapter for a book examining the state of civics education around the world. We were asked to write about the United States in this regard. As we thought and wrote our way through the terrible state of affairs on that count, we found ourselves making a somewhat surprising philosophical/political argument: it became increasingly clear that since the 1980’s—and maybe earlier—there had been a steady political evolution that had severely diminished the historic distinction between educational (and other) policies generally of the left and generally of the right. That is, we argued, neoconservatism and neoliberalism as historic extensions of conservatism and liberalism had conflated to the point that actual educational policy work was mostly indistinguishable one from the other. Of course, the context was the Obama era and so maybe that is not so surprising; and, things have seemingly changed in today’s context.¹

But, here’s the point: if this conflation is even partly true, then we fish in the water are in even deeper trouble than we might suspect. When there is no truly distinguishable option for how we conceptualize our individual relationships as citizens to public and private entities, organizations, and institutions, we can very quickly become blinded to the menacing beast’s impact on our concepts, psyches, and even bodies. When the two core competing conceptions of self and institution have conflated to the point that policy decisions are indistinguishable, then we can easily fool ourselves into thinking that options actually exist, when they really don’t, at least not in the watery home of the menacing beast. When such conflation occurs, it becomes easy to rationalize or naturalize our concepts and practices and lose sight of alternatives. And, such conflation certainly provides ample hiding places for the beast, in addition to blind spots among the fish, thereby making it difficult or impossible to see, locate, and fight against.

This in turn leads to the second question I’ve been pondering: do we, given the above, in fact need to exit existing social structures and organizations specifically built to fight the neoliberal (and neoconservative) order? Are these organizations, in fact, part of the problem rather than part of the solution? Do we

¹ I am not convinced that when it comes to educational policy particularly that any real change has occurred at this point in the new “regime.” See Jessica A. Heybach and Eric C. Sheffield, “Creating Citizens in a Capitalistic Democracy: A Struggle for the Soul of American Citizenship Education,” in *Citizenship Education Around the World: Local Contexts and Global Possibilities*, ed. John E. Petrovic and Aaron M. Kuntz (New York: Routledge, 2014), 92–126.

fish—particularly those of us who spend time philosophically examining concepts and their impacts on daily life—need to completely exit the water before we can see any real alternatives for which we might fight? Must our superheroes come from Krypton rather than earth because potential earthly superheroes simply cannot see alternatives that might lead us out of this mess? Are the radical left and the radical right so dead that there are no alternatives remaining? These and numerous other questions stemming from last year’s conference are taken up more substantially in the articles that follow.

As the journal tradition dictates, our first piece is Stacy Otto’s write up of her intriguing presidential address and that is followed by Michael Gunzenhauser’s response to Stacy. Otto argues that there is “strength . . . in obscurity” and advantages in “anonymity and invisibility” that can serve as places to “teach, model, and mount nonviolent social change.” And, she ponders the core inside-out question: “How can we remain outsiders?” Gunzenhauser’s response, which he describes as “a white man’s response to a white woman’s paper,” begins with the question of whether it is more important to *be* superheroes or *bear witness* to everyday superheroes. Both authors engage in an important discussion about the nature of empathy and the actions such empathy requires of us as activists.

David Humphrey takes up where Stacy and Michael leave off. Relying on Ta-Nehisi Coates’s *Between the World and Me* as an extension of W. E. B. Du Bois’s suggestion that “black and brown bodies” have shouldered “the brunt of societal dehumanization, bigotry, and hyper-visibility” (Humphrey’s words), he works to connect two contemporary menacing beasts: neoliberalism and racism. Interestingly, Humphrey’s discussion of the hyper-visibility of the black body and the “invisibility of whiteness” harkens back to Otto’s suggestion that there is strength in obscurity. Angela Hurley and Jennifer McCloud follow Humphrey and early on take up the conceptual question often lurking in discussions of neoliberalism: what is it? For Hurley and McCloud, “neoliberalism refers to the current cultural and social penchant to privilege corporate power and language in political, economic, and social institutions, such as schools.” They couch their analysis in two very different “episodes” at their university—episodes that speak to the evolution and impact of the neoliberal “juggernaut” on schools and universities.

Keeping with the theme of historic moments of difference, Michael Bulfin writes on the manner in which human conflict, past and present, is conceptualized in educational contexts. Bulfin “theorizes that the education students receive in human conflict past has gradually become discordant with how they conceptualize human conflict in the present”; that is, I would add, human conflict that has been with us non-stop for decades now. Bulfin ties this distinction to the impact that new technologies have had on how conflict is reported and, therefore, experienced. In much the same vein, John Covalesski examines the “paradox” and “complexity” of a “rule-based instrumental rationality” that has taken over contemporary schools—a rationality based in neoliberalism. Covalesski bemoans the fact that this “bland” rationality is just fine

for producing consumers to feed the neoliberal beast, but not so much for producing democratic citizens who might act against ongoing conflicts and other injustices.

Our next two offerings move the conversation to two particular student populations and the matter of student vulnerability. Caitlin Howlett argues that critical pedagogues (including most prominently Henry Giroux) put our youngest children at risk when they “assume the child as not-yet having knowledge.” This, Howlett argues, leaves children vulnerable to the very danger critical pedagogy is meant to fend off: neoliberal logic. Howlett suggests that children can and should engage in conversations as “political and knowledgeable” participants if they are to be active resisters to the neoliberal beast. Tony DeCesare makes a similar case for the freedom of special needs students to participate in decisions regarding their educational experiences. In his reconceptualization of the “capability to be educated,” DeCesare argues that “when we take the notion of a ‘capability’ in its best and fullest sense,” it “must include children’s and youth’s participation in the conceptualization and pursuit of valued functionings.”

The final two manuscripts in this year’s *PSIE* collection bring us back to those inside-out/outside-in questions where we began. Austin Pickup, reiterating a version of the fish in the water conundrum, notes: “The move to position education within a narrow discourse of economic rationality, efficiency, accountability, market logics, and any number of other tenets of neoliberalism has seemingly become commonplace” to the point of being perceived as “all that there is and has ever been.” Pickup suggests that “transformative efforts” can only succeed when grounded in an analysis that “denaturalizes neoliberalism and creates possibilities for thinking otherwise.” Pickup relies on Colin Koopman’s work to suggest what such a transformative project might entail. Finally, and maybe thankfully (given the darkness of that menacing beast), we close on what I think is a hopeful pragmatic notion. Julia Novakowski wants to bring a breath of fresh air into our struggling field—a suggestion that also leads us back to inside-out/outside-in matters. Julia’s suggestion: “in order for philosophers of education to find their second wind, we as a field must be willing to engage in more discussion and public intellectualism, as [William] James had done throughout his life, and find the ‘regenerative properties’ that exist in these processes.” In closing, the question I’d like to leave us all to ponder: From where, with whom, for whom, and how will we take a stand against this beast among us?²

² I want to thank all the folks involved in this year’s publication of *PSIE*: the editors (thanks Amy, Kip, and Clarence), the reviewers (too numerous to list them all here), Stacy and Michael for such a stimulating call-and-response interaction, and all the authors themselves. Bravo! Thank You! You’ve made this a very nice publication!
