
Democracy & Education

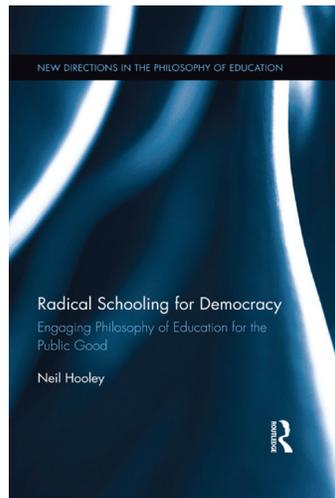
Envisioning Democratic Education in Neoliberal Times.

A Book Review of *Radical Schooling for Democracy: Engaging Philosophy of Education for the Public Good*

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IN *RADICAL SCHOOLING for Democracy: Engaging Philosophy of Education for the Public Good*, Neil Hooley (2017) sets out to reexamine formal education by highlighting six competing ideologies that contemporary schooling must contend with and respond to. One of Hooley's stated concerns is that sociological issues have taken precedence in education, specifically focusing on issues of *access*, to the detriment of epistemological concerns. In this sense, the book's scope is philosophical in a corrective sense. Under the political and economic dictates of neoliberalism, Hooley argues, the scope of learning has become narrow and constrained to the frustration and alienation of many students and teachers. Reflecting on these concerns within the many issues of education today, Hooley's project positions philosophy of education as a meaningful tool in our globalized context.

The stated aim of the book, more broadly speaking, is to promote democracy through education. Hooley's understanding of democracy is flexible and appropriately Deweyian. He goes into some specific details of Dewey's notion of "creative democracy," which also foretells the pragmatic spirit of the book's conception of democracy, but by and large, the term is used as an axiom. The analysis to follow will not track the ideas as democratic theory in their own right, since the idea of democracy is largely considered in this axiomatic sense. One exception to this usage is in the book's later considerations of social democracy, which helpfully display the democratic tensions between liberalism, progressivism, socialism, and communism. In many ways, the attention paid to so



many political worldviews reflects the variety inherent to Hooley's (2017) notion of democracy. In what follows, as we have indicated, we will focus on analysis that does not deploy the term "democracy" explicitly, but should clearly presuppose and complement it. It is our view that this oblique approach will provide a more detailed sense of the democratic aims than by a conceptual analysis of the direct usage of the term.

In part one, Hooley (2017) begins presenting readers with what he considers to be a new approach to education that is "inherently philosophical in character" (p. 2). Drawing on Dewey, Jürgen Habermas, and George Herbert Mead—which calls into question how truly new this approach is—Hooley centers human action as the heart of epistemology. Action, according to Hooley, is characterized by the ability of participants to build understanding and resolution together. Rooted in pragmatism, his framework claims to theorize learning as it springs from the resolution of dilemmas. We might recall William James' first conception of pragmatism as "a method for resolving metaphysical disputes" in concert with Hooley's pragmatic notion of action here. Echoing Dewey's calls for experiential, progressive education (albeit not noting Dewey's reservations about its implementation in 1938) and Freire's notion of

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“conscientisation” (p. 33) (albeit not noting Freire’s later auto-critique of the concept), Hooley frames education as “the process of becoming more subjectively human” (p. 119). (This framing recalls the famous line from the English translation of Freire’s *Pedagogia do Oprimido*, “the historical and ontological vocation to become more fully human.” Sadly, this translation adds the words “fully human” to the Portuguese ending that only stipulates *ser mais*—“be more.”) Asserting that formal education today isolates and alienates the majority of learners, Hooley claims further that schooling contends with multiple philosophies and therefore remains a site of contestation. As true as this rings, it is also hard to see how new this approach is or even how different it is from any of the other approaches and theories that largely rest upon the same basic premises.

In part two, *Thinking Educationally*, Hooley (2017) uses concrete scenarios from classroom and school. This highlights his experience as a secondary teacher and in many ways stands out in a field where theory can often overtake examples. Concerned with the fragmentation of and competition over formal education, Hooley attempts to conceive of a new knowledge discipline of education and teaching. It is again imprecise to label these ideas as new, but his reasoning in this part is clearer. Moving beyond the “neoliberal agenda,” philosophy and education are proposed as the basis of what it means to be human, forming Hooley’s view of education as a “philosophy of practice.” Hooley writes that education as its own discipline should be “available for testing, researching, strengthening and critique” (p. 66). By attempting to create “measurable” education, there is the possibility that Hooley leaves himself open to reproducing and reinforcing neoliberal norms of efficiency. And his ideas can be found repeated well before neoliberalism. One example is Dewey’s well-known advocacy for education as an academic subject. However, returning to neoliberalism, in his later discussion on teacher education, Hooley turns away from competency-based measurement and accountability. Drawing readers’ attention to neoliberalism’s effect on the divide between theory and practice, Hooley argues that teachers are disconnected from the practice of evaluating teaching and schooling. He presents “practice-theorising” for teacher education programs where teachers and students are involved in the evaluation of their practices, within a community of colleagues and professionals, recognizing knowledge as a production of mutual experience. However critical we have been of the newness of previous claims, this one is both concrete and, we think, quite novel indeed in the context of teacher education.

Hooley (2017) continues by exploring questions he describes as related to epistemology, ethics, and ontology while describing the relationship between education as “a philosophy of practice” and six rival philosophies that formal education has historically had to, and currently does, contend with. These are religious, conservative, neoliberal, social-democratic, scientific, and Marxist. Presenting concrete scenarios in a school or educational setting, the majority of part two is spent overviewing and interpreting these competing philosophies. Each scenario introduces space for readers to reflect, embrace, and challenge the six philosophies within educational contexts. These scenarios explore stories of

individuals, ranging from Rydia, a working-class mother concerned for her children’s education, to Emile, a university budget manager who must consider the responsibilities of his position. In his discussion of these six philosophes, Hooley reasserts his contention that education must be guided by its own principles, rather than those of political or economic nature. Throughout the book, the notion of the “dictates” or “agenda” of neoliberalism is posed as a threat to formal education, though its description remains somewhat elusive throughout the text. Although Hooley cites “markets, privatisation, individualism and accountability” (p. 12) as markers of a neoliberal epistemology, a more developed critique would introduce readers to how “neoliberalism” and its effects on education contrast with previous forms of capitalism. Furthermore, it is unclear on what sense of the political Hooley has to build his otherwise somewhat overdetermined distinctions.

In the final section of the book, “Thinking Democratically,” ideas from the book are taken up in their specific relation to teacher education, Indigenous education, and schooling at a global level. In attempting to address issues at an international level, Hooley (2017) acknowledges he opens himself to “serious questions of educational and cultural imperialism” (p. 63). Nonetheless, Hooley reflects insightfully on the strong influence that European thinking has played in his philosophy, as well as the epistemological impact of Indigenous Australian cultures and knowledges. We should note that Hooley’s short engagement with feminism in the book is subsumed within a discussion on pragmatism. Also, in upholding social class as the dominant and unifying aspect of life (both national and international), Hooley designates other “sociological trends,” such as racism, ethnicity, gender, disability, and sexuality, as “identity politics” (p. 123). Without argument, his sociological categories are not particularly philosophical and ethically concerning. Grounded in a class analysis, Hooley’s framework does not attempt to capture nuanced experiences of “identity politics” but rather seeks to find commonality in its emphasis on action and inquiry. In his discussion on social class, Hooley contrasts the viewpoints of “bourgeois” and “proletarian,” assuming there is a continued coherence to these groups. Drawing on the Marxist distinction between the two—and ignoring the reality that Marxian class analysis sees many more classes than only two and frequently critiques the lower classes—Hooley overlooks neoliberalism’s individualization and fragmentation of the proletariat, a danger that Marx himself made clear long before neoliberalism. “Proletarian culture” is described by Hooley as “inclusive, supportive of community” (p. 119), without further elaboration. This is far more Romantic than Marxist.

In sum, *Radical Schooling for Democracy* (2017) engages philosophy of education at an international level, raising important concerns surrounding education within our globalized, neoliberal context. In its best moments, it is rooted in concrete situations and creatively imagines approaches to teacher education, but these moments are often constrained by the sheer scale of the object under analysis. Arguing that schooling’s purpose has been narrowed by the demands of economic forces, Hooley reimagines education within an action framework, centering education as an attribute of being human. Integrating insights from

philosophy, sociology, and epistemology, this book will be of interest to those concerned with education's future and its relationship with many competing philosophies in society, but we are not certain how sympathetic those familiar with the history of ideas Hooley draws on will be of its scholarship—and, above all, how those who see sociological and political concerns as being of grave

moral important, and not mere identity politics, will respond to his chosen emphases.

References

Hooley, N. (2017). *Radical schooling for democracy: Engaging philosophy of education for the public good*. Routledge.