Surviving Economic Crises through Education

Edited by David R. Cole

Bibliographic information published by Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek. Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the "Deutsche Nationalbibliografie"; detailed bibliographic data is available on the Internet at http://dnb.d-nb.de/.

Cover art by Justin Bower

The paper in this book meets the guidelines for permanence and durability of the Committee on Production Guidelines for Book Longevity of the Council of Library Resources.

© 2012 Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., New York 29 Broadway, 18th floor, New York, NY 10006 www.peterlang.com All rights reserved. Reprint or reproduction, even partially, in all forms such as microfilm, xerography, microfiche, microcard, and offset strictly prohibited.

Printed in the United States of America
The recent killing of Osama bin Laden was a dramatic exercise in public pedagogy and serves as one bookend to this reflection on the relationship between education—the institution of schooling—and crises. This bookend can be thought of metaphorically as the bullet. It provides a rhetorical lens for thinking about how our culture handles dissent and of education’s role, as an instrument of culture and enculturation, in a range of violences that are part of its legitimate exercise of power. The other bookend is much more prosaic—it is what I think of as the pen. This metaphor covers the myriad bureaucratic interventions, from marking the role to signing legislation and policy into effect, that characterizes dominant global educational culture. The bullet and the pen are rhetorical devices that help me think about the functions of education today. They define the working context of education which is both a social, even public, display of power and promise (aka the bullet) and institutional performance (aka the pen). The space between the bullet and the pen is one of constant upheaval, negotiation and contestation. It is where life happens and where the social is constantly reinvented, a la Deleuzian theory (1987), as a field of becoming in which the personal and the structural, bullet and pen again, generate ever-new forms for meeting the needs of capitalist culture. This rhetorical starting point for a reflection on education and crisis is important because, as Michael Shapiro has argued, rhetoric can be “not an abdication of analysis but integral to it” (1992, p. 23). The openness of rhetoric can offer a space of indeterminacy for creative engagements with the persuasive forces that demand clarity and so repress the possibilities immanent to all contexts.

Education does not simply manage dissent. More important, and this has already been alluded to above, it manufactures consent by fostering commit-
of activity altogether (1994). Anyon nailed this when she observed of the U.S. system:

As a nation, we have been counting on education to solve the problems of unemployment, joblessness and poverty for many years. But education did not cause these problems, and education cannot solve them. (2005, p. 3)

As a form of critical futures thinking, we need to sidestep the debate about origins and look instead at processes that work between the rhetoric of the bullet and the rhetoric of the pen. It is here we find the grey land of disorientation (Bussey, 2009a). From a pragmatic point of view, this is potentially a space of dissent though generally it is experienced as a vertiginous place in which crises drive our social systems and the cultural milieu that underpin them. Generally people fixate on the elements that constitute their context—these are the structural forces defining what is possible. In pragmatism, whether it is the formal kind developed by Pierce or Dewey or the dynamic kind offered to us by Deleuze (Semetsky, 2006), it is in the space between the structures that human agency is experienced as process. When we focus on structure we immediately accept limits; when we focus on process we become aware of possibilities. Yet process is fluid and unstable, like when you are caught in a large wave at the beach. You cannot fight the wave but have to go with it. So even in process there are historical dynamics and socioecological pressures that constrain action. Crises add to this by amplifying disorientation, increasing the sense of flux and depleting our ability to recognize or operationalise possibilities. As such they are a core feature of capitalist creativity as they erode limiting structures, force people into the between and into a bewildering array of new contexts that release creativity and energy. This creative ferment is contained by the logic of capital production and is bounded by the theatre of the bullet and the pen.

In this threefold reading of crisis as bullet-between-pen, the bullet represents the random anomalous chaotic flux of the day-to-day. It is the litany that drives the media and consumes huge amounts of our energy and attention at both individual and social levels (Inayatullah, 2004). There is something pedestrian about this kind of crisis for all the drama that attends it. It is the familiar crisis enacted on the world stage—it can have a theatrical quality such as that played out on Wall Street in the closing months of 2008, or in the suburbs around Fukushima, or even, if we take terrorism as a crisis of confidence, in the compound in Abbottabad where bin Laden was finally tracked down and killed. The pedagogy in such contexts is of system failure and retribution mixed with vulnerability and anxiety.
In contrast, the system as pen can pull the trigger by labeling, failing, drugging or expelling those in its charge, but it also seduces by offering pathways into the labyrinth of modernist desire. I suggest that the system needs crises of the between to sustain the edgy logic of late modernity that thrives on upheaval and the high energy produced at the edge of chaos. This dynamism has a huge human cost that is masked by the drama of crises in domains such as education, health, security and the environment in which the pedagogy becomes one of turbulence, uncertainty and doubt. The edginess of such crises drives a productive form of creativity, yet misses the escape routes always imminent in the between as the zone of becoming from which new human social formations emerge (Bussey, 2012, Forthcoming).

Whether such crises are dramatic or mundane the coverage from the media and the commentary from politicians and public intellectuals alike tend to be insistent and alarming: The whole world is in crisis! Crisis has become the norm, not the exception. It generates spaces—or what Agamben (2005) would call 'states of exception'—where the violence of killing, as in the case of bin Laden, becomes rational and indeed commendable! This is exciting stuff and demands our attention. It drags our focus away from substantive issues of ethics, praxis and sustainable living and holds it transfixed on what Baudrillard (1998) called 'the spectacle'. In fact, it takes the full panoply of a royal wedding, a wonderful spectacle, to assuage the anxieties of many and invoke a momentary sense of normalcy. It is such a moment—the systaltic pause—that reminds us that life used to be (was it really?) less driven, complex, uncertain and off-centred. This event, of course, fosters nostalgia for the past and for a momentary sense of normalcy.

Ours is a society addicted to crisis. This addiction is the raison d’être behind late modernity’s managerial approach to the grey open, truly dangerous, space between the bullet and the pen. This indeterminate between is the domain of inmanence, the culturally creative heartland of all human activity. This is where we live, always struggling as Latour reminds us, to keep the floor clean and the kitchen (aka laboratory) in order (1991). The between is a dangerous space, because it acts as a cultural Tarhir Square that situates and ferments dissent between the violence of the bullet and the structure of the pen. The instability of this space has always been managed by culture via norms, values, and practices that mask the ferment providing individuals and communities with a sense of order amidst the disorder of the Chaosmos. Culture provides a sense of continuity, stability and security. Tradition, bound to identity and reinforced by habit, holds the openness of the between at arm’s length. Now that time-honoured traditions are no longer appealing to a modernity that privileges the new and novel (Bauman, 2000), modernist culture markets discontinuity and crisis as the desired alternative to what is perceived as stasis, entropy and decline (Loy, 2002). There is no middle ground. The citizen-student is offered either the vertigo of crisis and growth or the slippery slide of decline. Thus in orthodox economics crisis and growth are closely aligned as both rupture the present while directing attention into a future already ordered with the ongoing logic of both.

Currently education contributes to this process by enacting crisis both systematically through constant change which is accompanied by the drama of speed, acceleration and intensification (Finger and Asún, 2001) and pedagogically through a discourse of uncertainty that destabilises educational objectives, focusing attention on information and content management rather than the deeper synthetic possibilities of critical and holistic learning (Gatto, 2002). The resultant ed-anxiety creates stress for those working at all levels of the system: stress for students, their families and teachers, stress for those in educational support systems from the tuckshop to the offices of the Minister of Education. High levels of stress, of course, reduce our ability to learn by generating the white noise that masks the creative possibilities inherent to any moment. If education is to make a contribution to engaging this culture of crisis, it must do so by challenging the prevailing climate of change and uncertainty that afflicts both system and individual alike. Such a change requires a paradigm shift not towards the eternal verities of the past (the conservative response of back to basics), but towards the possibilities of the future. This, in turn, requires the promulgation of practices that inculcate tolerance, resilience and innovation along with the requisite stillness to allow for the affective self-composure of each student around a secure, resilient and open identity.

What I am proposing here is the laying of a foundation for slow education akin to the slow food movement (http://www.slowfood.com/). We need slow education to enhance our ability to respond to the crises and stresses of late modernity. Slowing down will help us think about the processes of education and its relationship with the productive forces of our world. Slowness challenges the speed, disorientation, crisis addiction, and homogenization of current educational practice. Slow education can counter the edu-anxiety that dominates education today. This slowness is about the inner health of the learning system. Like slow food it is interested in the relationships of production—local relevance; social health; the ‘taste’ of a subject of study; the time students and their teachers have to develop scholarship, meaning, relevance, relationship and rigor; the sense that learning needs to be more than just functional in nature and that scholarship has intrinsic merit (Bussey, 2008). When we approach our complex world in this way it becomes an invitation to
creative and proactive engagement rather than the coercive and reactive taskmaster of a diminished and terrified education system. Such an education can lay the foundation for resilient identity formation. Resilient identities are not easily overwhelmed or goaded into reactionary behaviors and prejudices. They have a critically alive consciousness which understands and nurtures relationship both between cultures and also between the cultural and natural world.

Currently this edu-anxiety is symptomatic not just of education as a system but also of culture as an educative process of becoming. Edu-anxiety flags the instability of identity in the face of capitalist production in which flows of energy recycle, transmute and invert ideas, symbols, and identities in a maelstrom of nuclear-identity fission. The individual, as the primary social unit of modernity, akin to the atom in physics, is the primary source of energy as the alienated ego constantly releases energy into the economic and political domains. This energy is material, restless, economic as well as intellectual, creative and innovative. It is expressed through high mobility, unstable relationships, heavy consumption and also as cultural innovation, psychological and spirit malaise and technological brilliance. It sustains the economic systems of capital and must not be allowed to coalesce in real terms into networks, groups and communities, and where these exist in potential they must be distracted, forever turned away from relationship. In this context we can keep the trappings of family, community and nation, but not the substance. This is why the space between the bullet and the system where becoming, immanence and possibility restlessly work out alternatives is so feared. This is also why education as a central cultural process in identity formation has such subversive potential. Furthermore, education is a key object in the crisis manufacture business.

Education plays an effective role in maintaining a fragile, volatile sense of identity in postindustrial society. Yet through slow education a deeper sense of identity can be fostered. To survive crises, financial or otherwise, requires new stories to emerge that counter 'this feeling of living on the edge' that Hicks and Bord describe (2001 p. 414). I believe education is well placed to offer such stories if only it could shake off the driving logic of edu-anxiety and arrive at a place of stillness in the midst of change. Stories frame issues and cultures all operate, usually unconsciously, according to set narratives that underpin the epistemological lenses framing the paradigmatic terrain that education both maintains and enforces (Thompson, 2004). To understand the core values of any age we need only look at the education systems they generate. This period of edu-anxiety has its roots in acts of cultural, civic and political will in the nineteenth century that set the template for education on the factory model (Hetherington, 1997; Scott, 1998). Similar acts of will now need to be engaged for new, less orderly stories to emerge.

We already know the ingredients for this story as the language, aspirations, and imaginary formations are imminent in the present: relationship; equity-gender, planetary, specist; transdisciplinarity; ethics; ecological outlook; and intercultural dialogue. How these are embodied in a system is another matter. The imagination is constrained by dominant models of ordering. At the moment, education is a vehicle for managing the danger of immanence. Yet immanence, the chaos of it—its muddle of possible becomings—threatens to assert its right to reinvention. So we have that age-old tension between the addiction to order, or sets of orderings that mobilize and stratify the real in time and space, and the fluid juices of the Chaosmos. Capital attempts to harness this fluidity, to brand it in its own image. This is the trick of modernity: to market instability as the flux of capital and to model human processes as capital processes. In this becoming-capital, education must also reflect the order-chaos tension and obey the rhythms of capital process. It does so by enforcing a rational mode of accounting (aka tests) upon those in its care, by representing information as capital and students as clients—consumers and the system as a mode of production that has 'standards, deliverables, outcomes and strategic goals'. Once this is accomplished the constant flux of capital is reinscribed as 'system restructures' and 'curriculum overhauls' that purport to further efficiency and pedagogical outcomes.

Thus financial crisis equates with capital crisis and this in turn becomes educational crisis as the ground for edu-anxiety which demands the response once again of system. This permanent reinvention of system, the endless restlessness of formulations, as the reflection of an equally restless creator-market is currently framing education as a strata of the economic in which calculability, legibility and accountability are driving memes. Market failure, aka learning failure, is punishable as an offence against order. In this way we see that the socioeconomic assemblage of capitalist modernity is in fact committed to the disorders of restless capital formations. Those in the system are never allowed to find their feet, gain their bearings, chart a clear line of flight, nor listen to the whisperings of their own heart. They are perpetually being transported to other strata of the system in order to maintain the endless sense of vertigo that underpins its maintenance. From this perspective the real crisis would be for there to be no crisis at all.

Notes

1. This phrase, of course, is famously used by Herman and Chomsky (1994) to describe the role of the media in managing public opinion. Their analysis relies on a range of literacies...
and illiteracies that are grounded in the educational consensus propagated as Western mind."

2. Of course, this relates to the social sphere. It is also worth noting that the individual is also, as Hal and Sidra Stone (1989) show, multiple in nature and, following Deleuze (1993), exists as a folded becoming-being in which identity is only ever provisional and contextual. The work of Ferruci on psychosynthesis is also noteworthy for its contribution to an understanding of the inner possibilities of integrative work (2004).

3. Ananta Kumar Giri's edited text, The Modern Prince and the Modern Sage, offers an example of how such stories can be generated—it is inclusive, dialogical, transdisciplinary, and eclectic and even in its structure offers insights into alternative orderings (see Giri, 2009).

References


