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Book Review

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Inequality, Poverty, Education: A political Economy of School Exclusion

Francesca Ashurst and Couze Venn

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This is a penetrating, moving and deeply sobering genealogical account of how some of the most vulnerable children in society have been categorised, treated and ultimately excluded from education in the UK, but specifically in England and Wales. It focuses on poor children across the historical period from around 1800 to the present. The authors demonstrate through research drawing on historical documents, legal records, court transcripts and many other sources, how poor children, classified variously as paupers, perishing, ragged, wild and feral, have acted as a symbolic dumping ground for unresolved political tensions. Each chapter picks up a specific political and historical moment and demonstrates the way the poor are excluded from society.

The first chapter provides a very helpful reminder of how political economy works in order to frame the argument about the plight of vulnerable children, which I rehearse here in brief. The linchpin on which liberal democracy stands or falls is that there is a 'greater good' underpinning the reason why citizens should submit to the rule of the state. However, what that greater good looks like is highly contested. Ashurst and Venn trace two broadly oppositional views of the good life, which emerged in the 1800s and, which continue to circulate today. The first is a liberal humanism that captures the idea that all creatures are equal before the eyes of God and the second is a utilitarian vision deeply influenced by Malthusian thought, in which the market is paramount and citizens have to be regulated and controlled to function effectively for the good of the society. The authors argue, convincingly in my view, that the way poor children are managed and treated can be viewed as a function of which of the competing discourse of political economy dominated at specific times. These conflicting forms of liberalism are beautifully exemplified through descriptions of historical figures such as Mary Carpenter (1807-1877) and William Augustus Miles (1796-1851). Carpenter 'tirelessly campaigned for the reform of education for poor children' (p25). She represents a thread of humanitarian liberalism underpinned by a Unitarian emphasis on equality'. Miles was a student of Malthus at Haileybury (East India) College who used statistics about the poor to influence social policies. He is described as a 'moral entrepreneur' who seemed to be 'driven by his Malthusian and pessimistic view of human beings and society' (p26). He represents the polar opposite to Carpenter, and is used to capture a strain of thought that blames the poor for their idleness and predisposition towards crime that is imagined to require strict discipline and a strong work ethic as the route to salvation. Thus the solution to the problem of 'feral' or street children is predicated on which view of the citizen dominated at specific historical moments and how this influenced the kinds of laws and institutions that were invented. The message of the book is that when the tensions between competing versions of 'the greater good' cannot be resolved, children in poverty become political pawns.

The second chapter, titled *Pauperism, Delinquency and Learning to Labour*, focuses on the way the workhouse was invented, and how the harsh and inhumane structures and practices affected girls in particular. The authors argue that during the early part of the 19th century in England there was a great concern over purposes of education and Malthus' ideas dominated. A predominant view was that the poor were to blame for their plight, which was backed up by an appeal to inheritance as if the poor beget the poor. Thus the solution to pauperism was strong discipline that was imagined to be required to readjust a defective or non-existent moral compass. Thus the workhouse was created as a punitive institution and education beyond moral correction was considered only to exacerbate the problem. The workhouse often sold children as soon as they were old enough to become cheap 'apprenticed' labour. The authors document the plight of one girl called Frances Colpit who was indentured to Esther Hibner as an 'apprentice' tambour worker. The physical and emotional abuse that she received was so great that she died in service. The authors provide harrowing accounts from Old Bailey transcripts of Esther Hibner's murder trial, which document how Frances was tortured, starved and abused. The transcripts make it clear that children such as Frances were treated as slaves.

The third chapter titled, *Labour, Poverty and the Export of Destitute Children as 'Waste'* draws out connections between Britain's colonial economy and how the Poor Laws developed. In effect, the genealogy of exclusion that the authors trace between the 1830 and 1950 depicts how a growing population of poor children were re-categorised in increasingly dehumanising ways. They became imagined as the waste within society that could be deported to the colonies as cheap, and indeed, free labour. The colonies were suffering from labour shortages due to slavery being made illegal.

Chapters four, *Security, Population and the New Management of the Poor*, and five *Disciplining and Punishment: The New Exclusionary Regime Emerges*, trace the rise in laws and practices that increasing scrutinised, controlled and punished poor children. The authors describe the way Miles positioned himself as an expert on juvenile crime and pioneered the use of statistics to influence the Select Committee at Westminster to create ever increasing punitive measures to manage poor children. Children were moved off the streets and into prisons.

The next two chapters describe how an alternative approach based on humanitarian liberalism pioneered by reformers such as Carpenter allowed a counter narrative about poor children to emerge. In the chapter titled, *Ragged Schools, Child-Centred Education and the Struggle for Egalitarian Politics*, Carpenter's reforming work is documented. She argued that poor children were 'perishing' through malnutrition and neglect. Her ragged schools were founded on a principle of care. In the following chapter, the authors demonstrate that an alternative kind of institution based on a family structure rather than a military structure was briefly adopted influenced by a French institution called Mettray. For a short period of time education rather than punished was viewed as a 'solution' to child poverty. However, this enlightened position did not prevail for very long and the final chapters argue that excluding children from school now can be interpreted as the reemergence of a strong retribution model for managing poor children.

The book argues that, in effect, failures of the political imagination to reconcile competing versions of liberalism have resulted in poor children acting as a kind of social safety valve, a dumping ground, and at times even as waste products because their plight does not fit the policy agenda of the day. Most disturbingly they suggest that in current times, neo liberalism has resolved the tension by

making the state serve the ends of the market, identifying the welfare of all with the welfare, interest and values of 'feral' capitalism. They argue that neo liberalism has won out and the state now serves the market. The dismantling of the welfare state, the rise of the audit culture and the reduction of education to the market, means that the dissenting voices of the progressive movement have been silenced once again. They suggest that even the new discourses of Inclusive Education battens up against an educational system, which makes egalitarian values all but impossible to enact. Provision for poor, troubled children is now little more than drugs and Cognitive Behaviour Therapy. The authors remind us that there has been a huge rise in numbers of vulnerable children being excluded from education short term or permanently. Is this really the best we can do? The authors point to a serious lack of political imagination to get beyond the harsh and dehumanising discourse of neo liberalism. This is a book, for educational scholars of every hue and one that we should ask every beginning teacher to read.