



Neoliberalism and Education
Bronwen M. A. Jones and Stephen J. Ball, Eds.

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Abstract

*The editors of this book respond to the difficulty of defining neoliberalism as an analytic category by conceptualizing the subject as a *dispositif* in relation to education. This enables the formation of a web of meaning that involves local, global, ethical, social, and personal throughlines. The histories and philosophies of neoliberalism are acknowledged, while ‘actually existing’ examples are centered for analysis. The variety of examples presented in this curated volume match the variegated nature of neoliberalism. Educators, scholars, and students will be asked to consider their relationship with education, with each other, and with their individual selves against the backdrop of market logic.*

Keywords: *neoliberalism, dispositif, commercialization, marketization, academic capital, resistance*

Commensurate with neoliberalism as a “variegated, partial, and hybridized process” (p. 43), *Neoliberalism and Education* presents a variety of cases that examine the interplay of the two subjects across local, global, ethical, social, and personal throughlines. The book encourages scholars and practitioners to consider how we are made up as educational subjects and what it means to be educated—with and against the forces of commercialization and marketization.

The book consists of 11 chapters, the first an introduction to the volume and the subsequent 10 curated from previously published material. The editors, in their opening chapter, lightly trace the history of—and the difficulty in defining—neoliberalism. They propose conceptualizing neoliberalism as a *dispositif*, a “heterogeneous and polymorphic ensemble . . . cohered and connected by a particular web of meaning, a theme, a concept” (p. 8). They contend that the relations between “varying practices, processes, technologies, discourses, buildings, gestures, signs, etc. . . . visibilise the *dispositif* and are critical to naming it” (ibid). This stance functions as a set of criteria for their selection of the chapters.

The editorial decision to base the book on the mechanisms and structures of neoliberalism results in the book’s chief strength: its arrangement. While the chapters are varied in their approaches to neoliberalism, they are in dialogue with and build on each other. Conceptualizations and themes are recurring, but not redundant. For instance, Jessop presents four main forms of

neoliberalism based on theory and history (particularly of the United Kingdom), and they are useful for analytical purposes. Kamat, in studying urbanism and education in Hyderabad, posits the notion of “actually existing neoliberalism” (p. 65) to underscore how “neoliberalism does not manifest itself in a uniform and identical manner the world over” (ibid). Baltodano, in turn, juxtaposes the local focus of Kamat with a systematic review of how neoliberalism has led to the demise of education as a public good, while offering its history in America just as Jessop does for the UK.

As another example, Riep analyzes the ways in which a multinational publishing and education company creates credibility “around efficacy based on legible, measurable and auditable techniques” (p. 101). Legitimacy is created through social impact which stems from commercial activities which are driven by legitimacy, etc. In contrast, Holloway and Keddie present an Australian case of commercialization in education that simultaneously recognizes autonomy and yields educationally productive results. However, when public schools demonstrate that they *can* be profitable, they invite the consequential question of whether they *should* be profitable. Is there really autonomy, when the rules of capitalism are so embedded in neoliberalized societies? Creative answers to this question are presented in the subsequent chapters. They focus on sites of governance and sites of resistance—and the space between them that allow for the subversion or rejection of neoliberalism.

The global, local, ethical, social, and personal aspects of education—and the ways that neoliberalism interfaces with those aspects—are considered throughout this volume. At times, this intertwining dialogue across and between chapters incites cynicism and frustration: one soon recognizes the difficulty in discerning whether neoliberalism has been deflected and resisted, or if it has found ways to co-opt its critics to revitalize itself and ensure its continuity. Some alleviation is graciously provided: Peck conjectures that because of neoliberalism’s variegated, partial, and hybridized nature, it is always in a state of necessary incompleteness—“it must always dwell among its others, along with the rather cold comfort that its ultimate destination is unattainable” (p. 39). Alternatives will never be completely expunged nor entirely erased nor rendered inert and from this condition emerges the possibility for other imaginaries.

As such, educators in search of prompts for how we view education and how we understand ourselves and each other as educated subjects will find this curated volume helpful. Scholars seeking examples of “actually existing neoliberalism” will find them here, along with gateways to further investigations and possibilities. And students in our contemporary moment yearning for language to name their struggles and differences in power structures, for strategies on how to negotiate a sense of identity beyond that of *homo economicus*, and for a (renewed) vision of education as a public good and as the bedrock of democracy, will find some solace within the pages.

Jessy Cheung is currently in his first year of doctoral studies at Western Illinois University, pursuing an EdD in Organizational Justice, Equity, & Inclusion. He previously graduated from WIU’s College Student Personnel program. Before returning to the United States, he spent a few years managing training and development programs for the Alberta Council of Disability Services in his Canadian hometown of Calgary. He aims to be a scholar-practitioner in higher education and student affairs.