

## Teachers, classes and the crisis

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### ABSTRACT

In this paper I wish to argue: (1) that Australian education is in crisis; and, (2) that analytical philosophy of education and historical materialism, as two discernible tendencies in Australian philosophy of education, are also in crisis. From this I wish to suggest further: (1) that neither analytical philosophy nor historical materialism seems likely to solve the educational crisis in this country, and; (2) finally that the emergence of a 'new right' intellectual configuration in Australian culture will ensure the continuation of the crisis in a sharper and deeper form.

### PREFATORY NOTE

The paper below appears as a result of the very kind invitation of the editors. However, since it was first presented at the XIII<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the Philosophy of Education Society of Australasia at James Cook University in August 1982, a number of events have occurred which suggest that a brief prefatory note would be helpful.

In the time since this paper was given there has been a Federal election in Australia which saw a change of government in March 1983, and more recently the largest State - NSW - re-elected a Labor government. Education, especially levels of funding, featured as an election issue and the new national government has slightly increased the quantum of funds and moved to disburse them in a more equitable manner. Where amalgamation of adjacent institutions was a prominent public issue at the time this paper was given, it has now receded a little and been replaced by a policy of cooperative rationalization. Thus far, these have been the only major changes.

Without wishing to disparage the importance of the public political arena the purport of my paper does not focus solely on the 'surface reality' of clarity political life, nor does it see solutions to the crisis emerging only from that quarter. Rather, my intent was to highlight the nature of theoretical conflict in recent philosophy of education, and to assess the practical mediations or such conflict as possible contenders for solving the crisis in education.

The editors expressed the hope that this paper will generate discussion. I share that hope since it underpins the reason for writing it initially.

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*There cannot be a crisis next week. My schedule is already full.*

Henry Kissinger<sup>1</sup>

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From this I wish to suggest further:

1. that neither analytical philosophy nor historical materialism seems likely to solve the educational crisis in this country, and
2. finally that the emergence of a 'new right' intellectual configuration in Australian culture will ensure the continuation of the crisis in a sharper and deeper form.

At the outset let me stress that my Cassandra cap of catastrophe, while certainly visible in the gloom-laden remarks to follow, has clearly inscribed upon it - pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will.

## 1.

I'd be the first to say that 'crisis talk' has become fashionable, even legitimate of late. Much as I dislike the term however, no other readily suggests itself. One does not have to be a Jurgen Habermas or an Andrew Theophanous (Australian Democracy in Crisis, 1980) to know that all is not well in Australia's political economy generally - and in its education specifically.

I want to argue that Australian education faces a deep-seated, systemic crisis - a crisis involving far more than its teachers and classes. Unfortunately, indices of our calamity are not hard to find. An Australian Teachers' Federation national survey of government schools, released this month, highlights serious deficiencies in staffing and facilities along with a marked growth in junior secondary and primary class sizes. The ATF survey notes that aboriginal and migrant school students, unsurprisingly, suffer the worst from this. Despite a large non-English speaking school population there are only 1750 ESL teachers in Australia's government schools.<sup>2</sup> Again in the 15-19 age group Australia has 60% in the workforce or on the dole. In other words school students tend to quit as soon as they can.

Completion of secondary schooling shows some other interesting features according to the annual Schools Australia (1981) report of the Bureau of Statistics released in June this year. Retention rates for state schools nationally are at 28.5%, while for private schools they are nearly double at 56.9%. No wonder politicians and parents are keen on fostering the further privatization of schooling. Another way of putting this is to say that nationally the state system of allegedly free compulsory and secular schooling is being rapidly eroded and delegitimized - one feature among many of the rightward shift in cultural politics. Another is also revealed in the same Report, namely the 7.5% annual growth in student numbers in what might be termed the 'exotic' schools: Hare Krishna; Ananda Marga, Accelerated Christian Education, Rudolph Steiner and so on. Perhaps the only glimmer of hope in the Bureau's figures is that 6% more female students than male students completed secondary school in 1981, although this is dampened somewhat by a shrinking tertiary sector.<sup>3</sup>

Mention of higher education brings us to a further aspect of the crisis, and one which all of us I expect would readily recognize. I am aware that, at some level, my domestic experience of Newcastle University's current travail colours the remarks made here, but I think our particular difficulties have their specific echoes elsewhere. On the enforced amalgamation of adjacent

institutions Newcastle shares an acute problem with Tasmania, Wollongong, New England and James Cook. How typical it is of decision making in our country that political elites, armed with financial muscle, bludgeon and coerce understandably reluctant institutions into hasty shotgun marriages without so much as prior consultation, discussion or justification. Since the aim of amalgamation is to cut costs by reducing staff the disastrous consequences will be felt now and for some time to come.

More generally, funding for the tertiary sector has drastically been accompanied by a severe curtailment of Australian Research Grants Committee awards, and the abolition of Education Research and Development Committee. And the result? Reduced research opportunities, and highly limited possibilities for capable young graduates to further their studies. Falling student numbers, especially in teacher education, attacks on tenure, and a resurgence in the rhetoric of 'accountability' completes this brief overview of the most obvious features of the crisis in tertiary education. In common with welfare provisions, education has been subjected over recent years to a concerted assault from conservatives utilizing monetarist economics and libertarian politics. Robert Nozick's nostrums regarding the minimal state have their adherents here, and were the framework of John Passmore's Boyer Lectures - *The Limits of Government* (1981).

When we turn to philosophy of education specifically our difficulties are likely to increase. Apart from matters already mentioned, our problems are due in part to a noticeable concern for crass vocationalism which marginalizes reflection and circumscribes the questioning intellect. Within pre-service teacher education programmes and post-graduate coursework degrees, philosophy of education has steadily dissolved into a service component for predominantly behaviourist modes of competency based preparation. Although there are four professors currently occupying chairs in our discipline, and approximately 100 other academics in universities and colleges teaching it, I believe we face a crisis in our own legitimacy. Moreover, this can be connected to our failure to articulate a substantive critical framework capable of transforming educational discourse and practice. The humility of underlabourers is easily ignored.

It might be that incineration rather than publication is the final fate of these words, but my intent is deeply serious. It is to raise the questions of the practical mediations of theory, and the theoretical mediations of practice.

## 2.

When we consider the theoretical practices that have dominated discourse in Australasian philosophy of education, I think both analytical philosophy and historical materialism have shaped the parameters of theoretical struggle. This is not to say that other tendencies are not evident, but merely that these two have predominated. In this section I wish to argue that both the major discourses indicated are, though obviously for different reasons, in crisis.

Given the presence of Jim Walker's paper in this volume, it would be otiose to provide yet again an outline of the genesis, development, methodology and principal contentions of analytical philosophy of education (APE). I shall take these as understood, and focus rather summarily on the sources of the crisis in APE. The sterility of APE discourse derives from the following:

1. its defective empiricist epistemology;
2. an assumption of theoretical individualism which leads to a social atomism hostile to collective action;
3. a reification of language and semantics which, when combined with a rationalist theory of mind, locks APE into mapping the 'logical geography' of concepts;
4. a noticeable hostility to theorizing in education, not just to critical Continental views (e.g. Marcuse, Habermas), but also to potentially less threatening theories (Deweyan instrumentalism);

5. to the extent that APE has endorsed liberalist politics then to that extent it has failed to thwart the conservative education backlash.

There are undoubtedly others matter that could be raised against APE but I think the five points mentioned here distil the principal difficulties. It is my view that the crisis in APE is so serious that there is little hope of resuscitation, and even less that it might develop the theoretical tools and insights to participate in solving Australia's educational crisis.

I turn now to the crisis in historical materialism, or marxism. Let me emphasize immediately that the comments which follow are not offered- in the spirit or context of Richard Crossman's *The God That Failed*, a work that has unleashed an avalanche of apostasy. Nor am I intending any succour for the intellectual and political opponents of the left. Rather I wish to promote a frank discussion of some acute problems faced by marxism. This is a process that has been undertaken in a number of forums in the UK, USA and Australia. I think it is time the matter was raised here. From the UK one can cite 'Socialist Politics and the Crisis of Marxism', an article in the *Socialist Register* (1979); the major public debate of March 1980 in Central Hall, Westminster before a crowd of several thousand, which has been published as *The Crisis and Future of the Left* (ed . Peter Hain, 1980). Here in Australia there is the appearance in 1980 of *Thesis Eleven*, emanating from the politics Dept. at Monash, which has editorialized forcefully on the question 'Whither Marxism?'. Meanwhile in the USA there have been two contributions: one, a special symposium, 'The Crisis of the Left' in *Telos* (No. 46, 1980/31), while the other consists in the only substantive book-length treatment of the question by Stanley Aronowitz, *The Crisis in Historical Materialism* (1981).<sup>4</sup> Obviously a considerable body of opinion is concerned about the prospects for marxism, but what exactly constitutes a crisis?

- It is not simply the currently chilly reception accorded marxist contentions in the academies of the West. That is not new and should be expected. Rather it is that marxists face the historical experience, especially in Western Europe since World War I, of a future without revolutionary consequences for the working class. In a sense this is the spectre haunting Western marxism.
- Moreover, marxism has increasingly, especially since World War II, been forced to examine the concrete circumstances of currently existing socialism - Hungary 1956, Czechoslovakia 1968, Poland 1980. To me this means that historical materialism has to go beyond its initial critique of political economy (Marx, *Capital*, 1867) and engage additionally in a critique of extant socialism. Obviously such a task is fraught with possibilities for political and intellectual divisions. They have not been slow in coming.
- Again, marxism in the West has gradually become sequestered within universities and consequently removed from much of the practice of revolutionary politics. This is especially so in nation-states where socialist and working class politics are weak (e.g. U.S.A., Australia, N.Z.) . In effect academic marxists are seldom intrinsic to, or perhaps even welcome in, the labour movement. In part this is due to an often implicit assumption by marxists that they are heirs to a so-called 'master discourse'.
- *Thesis Eleven*, rightly believe, points to the fragmentation of knowledge within marxism that in a way reflects the extreme division of labour found in bourgeois discourses generally. Admittedly what bourgeois society sunders is not easily united, but since marxism aspires to an holism it will need to get beyond the intellectual fragments.
- Furthermore, marxists need to both politicize theory, which in general their critique of APE has done, and to theorize politics, which in their accounts of education they have generally ignored by retreating into a bleak pessimism. Another- way of putting this is to say marxist academics are fairly easily co-opted. Western marxist intellectuals can dissent without penalty - provided their dissent is ineffective.

- The major oppositional movements to capital at the present - feminism, ecology, social responsibility in science, anti-facism and the anti - nuclear struggle - must all seek their political autonomy, and not allow their concerns to be reduced to a crude economic determinism.

To repeat, these comments on the crisis in marxism are offered to stimulate debate on the question of why marxism has not, and is not, delivering the revolutionary and emancipatory possibilities its theorists and adherents desire.

### 3.

Earlier I remarked that neither analytical philosophy nor historical materialism seem likely to resolve the education crisis in Australia. I am aware that a full defence of this claim would involve more than is provided here. I can illustrate my concern by reference to two recent publications which can be taken as good presentations of the analytical and marxist viewpoints respectively. They are John Passmore's *The Philosophy of Teaching* (1980) and Kevin Harris' *Teachers and Classes* (1982).<sup>5</sup>

Few would dispute that Passmore's retrospective collection of essays falls squarely within the Anglo-APE paradigm. Consequent to it if that paradigm is irretrievably crisis-ridden, as earlier suggested, then Passmore's account will share APE's difficulties. I think it does - with one qualification and one addition. The qualifier is Passmore's apt warning that the

great temptation of analytical philosophy (is) to collapse into the making of pointless distinctions, the construction of unnecessary definitions, becoming in the process as drearily, as little related to any fundamental problems, as the pseudo-philosophy it replaces.<sup>6</sup>

Regrettably these remarks, made in 1965, fell largely on deaf ears. The addition is that Passmore explicitly denies for philosophy of teaching any concern with classroom procedures, and conceives it as an abstract investigation searching for universal principles through the analysis of concepts like observation, experience, understanding, imagination and so on.<sup>7</sup> Such a stance could hardly be described as interventionist, and Passmore's liberal solutions are ensured a precarious future.

Kevin Harris, by contrast, is explicitly interventionist in his structuralistic account of teachers and classes. Yet his revolutionary strategy for teachers while necessary, may not be sufficient. Let me explain. Australian marxist scholars, especially in philosophy of education, have in the main utilized the strategy of counter-critique of orthodoxies as part of the process of establishing historical materialism on the intellectual agenda. To some extent such counter-critiques were dependent for their force on the strength of their opponent - the much-battered APE. However, if analytical philosophy has been moved to 'any other business', then clearly it is incumbent upon marxists to propose their methods and solutions. One of the several merits of Harris' book is that it essays just that, cheerfully leaving APE to the gnawing of the mice. But the question persists - are his strategies and solutions adequate? There are two reasons for doubting this, neither of which relates to the specific suggestions *per se*, but extends their consideration into the consequences of such activism.

Firstly, I think there is a tension within *Teachers and Classes* which derives from the analysis of reproduction and the proposals to counter it. That is, Harris suggests that teachers and the students in their classes are both agents and bearers of productive and reproductive relations, which are determining features in the formation of their consciousness. Since this occurs under capitalism such relations will be alienating, fetishized etc. and so must be countered and replaced. But the problem here is that Harris underestimates the coercive strength of the structural reproduction of labor power (which is the principal subject of his book) and over-estimates the possible success of counter-strategies. It is not that such advice is in any way worthless, or should not be given, but simply it is unlikely to be taken. I think this point gains force when we consider as well the problem of linking ideological with economic and political struggles. Understandably Harris focuses on the

ideological, but even a sympathetic reading of the history of Australia's political economy would reveal that socialism let alone marxism has never been anything other than a marginalized minority interest - now perhaps more than ever. If so, it could be that Harris' revolutionary strategy fails for the want of a deeply entrenched socialist movement. As much is admitted in his comment about the 'lack of disposition towards collective action' being an impediment for teachers developing counter-strategies.<sup>8</sup>

#### 4.

The recent emergence of an extreme right intellectual movement in Australian universities can be said to herald a further deepening of the educational crisis. This development is critically examined in Marian Sawer, *Australia and the New Right* (1982).<sup>9</sup> She argues that the revamped right owes much of its revival to the work of Robert Nozick, John Hospers, Milton Friedman, F.A. Hayek, and Murray Rothbard whose writings have provided much of the rationale for libertarian politics. This has joined with anti-communist Andersonians associated with Quadrant, which is now a powerful voice for libertarian notions.

More recently a Centre for Independent Studies has been established in Sydney with assistance from corporate finance, and the intention to research into free enterprise, the market economy and private property as solutions to our current problems. This venture is supported by economists Warren Hogan, C. G. Simkin, H.W. Arndt, sociologist John Ray, and philosopher 'Lauchlan Chipman, whose *Liberty, Equality and Unhappiness* was published by the Centre.<sup>10</sup> A similar body, the Centre for Policy Studies under Michael Porter, has been established at Monash with over half a million dollars in grants from the Aluminium Company of America, mining industry, Australian Research Grants Committee and the university. One could go on, but the general trend is clear.

The libertarian recipes for education are by now all too familiar: slash public spending; proliferate choice via private schools; vigorously promote raw capitalism in the curriculum with the aid of Enterprise Australia, whose activities have recently been documented by Alex Carey.<sup>11</sup>

Libertarians have managed to hoist liberals on their own petard through what Peter Singer calls a peculiarly narrow conception of rights based on an individualistic theory of the 'state of nature', and all cocooned in the mythology of the neutral state.<sup>12</sup> The marxist critique of the inequities sustained in the Welfare State has been easily overturned by the libertarian demand for the abolition of welfare. I conclude that the greater the success of the libertarians then the broader and deeper the educational crisis.

#### 5.

To those who feel my description and analysis of Australia's current educational problems was insufficient, selective and inadequate - I agree. For those who feel my discussion of analytical philosophy and historical materialism was conducted in a way that privileged the latter, let me say that there is no Archimedean neutral point outside of the productive relations of theory formation. And, of course, I have not proposed solutions myself, merely being content to attack those of others. That's not quite so. I believe that a careful reading of this intellectual ramble would find my answer implied often. But for those who blinked it starts with the famous injunction of US labor leader Joe Hill - 'don't mourn, organize'. After all, as the conservatives have shown, if you don't fight you lose.

#### Notes

1. Time, Jan. 24, 1977.
2. Newcastle Herald, 14.8.82.

3. Sydney Morning Herald, 18.6.82.
4. L. Altvater and O. Kollschener, 'Socialist Politics and the Crisis of Marxism', in R. Milliband and J. Saville (eds.), *The Socialist Register 1979*, London: Merlin Books, 1979. P. Hain (ed.), *The Crisis and Future of the Left*, London: Pluto Press, 1980. Thesis Eleven, No. 1, 1980, pp. 2-4. 'The Crisis of the Left', in *Telos*, No. 46, Winter 1980/81, pp. 81-111. S. Aronowitz, *The Crisis in Historical Materialism*, New York: Praeger, 1981.
5. J. Passmore, *The Philosophy of Teaching*, London: Duckworth, 1980. K. Harris, *Teachers and Classes*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982 .
6. Passmore, 1980: 8.
7. Ibid.: 16.
8. Harris, 1982: 150.
9. M. Sawyer (ed.), *Australia and the New Right*, North Sydney, NSW: George Allen & Unwin, 1982.
10. Ibid.: p. 8.
11. A. Carey, 'Social Science, Propaganda and Democracy', in P. Boreham and G. Dow (eds.), *Work and Inequality*, Vol. 2, Melbourne: Macmillan, 1980, pp. 60-93.
12. Sawyer, 1982 : 48.