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Book review: Distress in the city: racism, fundamentalism and a democratic education. By Linden West

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*Distress in the city: racism, fundamentalism and a democratic education.* By Linden West. Pp 192. London: UCL Institute of Education Press. 2016.

A narrative approach and psychosocial understandings of social class are not my natural terrain and so I approached this book with some trepidation, although my fears were misplaced. *Distress in the City* is an incisive, enlightening and important book which provides a rich, multilayered and sometimes troubling portrait of one of the UK's most deprived cities, Stoke-on-Trent. Its content is both peculiar inasmuch as it focuses on the specific history and trajectory of Stoke but also familiar as it reflects some of the challenges and conundrums facing many communities in the UK, Europe and further afield – the decline of working-class identity, solidarity and security; the rise of various forms of individual and collective anxiety and social conflict; the increasing incidence of mental health problems; and other forms of pain and distress which now characterise so many post-industrial settings. Linden West's writing is both scholarly and engaging and, whilst I am not sure I agree that 'democratic education' can offer an effective antidote to the toxic processes with which the book deals, it offers hope in an environment increasingly marked by anger, division and desperation.

The book begins with West's shock at the election of Far Right councillors in Stoke-on-Trent, the city of his birth and traditionally a stronghold of the labour movement. Chapter 2 describes the increasing alienation of young people from representative politics and the rise of various forms of fundamentalism which, it is argued, include not only certain xenophobic and religious beliefs but also the market fundamentalism associated with contemporary neoliberal regimes. It also introduces the psychosocial understanding of social class which is central to West's work. Chapter 3 focuses on the 'lost city' of Stoke (Rice, 2010 Rice. 2010. *The Lost City of Stoke-on-Trent*. London: Frances Lincoln. [[Google Scholar](#)]), its industrial past and its current 'condition' which, as West argues, exemplifies many of the personal and collective ills associated with contemporary western society. Chapter 4 explains the auto/biographical narrative approach which underpins West's research and which, it is argued, has the ability to illuminate the 'difficult, dark spaces' and the potential resources of hope which other approaches struggle to unearth. The book goes on to draw on the stories of over 50 research participants, including individuals from different social and ethnic backgrounds, community activists, members of faith communities, academics, politicians and others.

Chapter 5 focuses on a predominantly white working-class housing estate where, it is argued, the sense of loss and abandonment felt by many stems not only from the effects of rapid de-industrialisation, but also the chronic failure of successive regeneration initiatives and traditional forms of political representation. Chapter 6 draws on research with Stoke's South Asian community. It deals with the tensions and conflicts which provide the backdrop to processes of extremism and Islamophobia often associated with Muslim youth, at least in certain settings and circumstances. It focuses particularly on one young man's journey into Islamic fundamentalism and explores the feelings of local and geo-political injustice which, it is argued, provide fertile ground for radicalisation. In Chapter 7, West revisits his own past and compares and contrasts Malcolm Bradbury's *History Man*, Howard Kirk, with the great adult educator, R.H. Tawney, to animate his own personal and political journey, and his reassessment of the role of adult education, its purpose and remit. The next chapter presents the stories of two autodidacts, Mick Williams and Derek Tatton, local men from working-class backgrounds who both talk in frank and revealing

ways about Stoke as a city and some of the broader social and economic conundrums facing contemporary society. Their views and opinions about the state of local politics are particularly sobering and insightful. Chapter 9 draws on Raymond Williams' idea of 'resources of hope' and the work of one of Williams' former students, Tatton, to examine the impact of neoliberalism on traditional working-class communities in places like Stoke, and the role which it is envisaged that education can play in reinvigorating civil society – whether via the universities, traditional providers of adult education, such as the Workers' Education Association, or contemporary forms of informal education.

The two final chapters illustrate how different forms of learning might be used to mobilise civic consciousness and promote social responsibility. The discussion of the 'Lidice Shall Live' project is uplifting and, in the last chapter *Beyond the Fragments*, West argues that education can, in various guises, help to reinvigorate civil society – whether through the use of new technology, via informal education such as the Philosophy in Pubs movement, or through universities reconnecting themselves with their local communities in more ethical and socially responsible ways. All this is laudable and I would love to see it happen. Yet, digital technologies are as open to big business and the Right as to more socially progressive movements and universities are increasingly driven by the diktat and discipline of neoliberal agendas, often at the expense of local communities. So I remain sceptical about the extent to which education can arrest the forces of injustice and intolerance causing *Distress in the City* – although I hope my feelings are misplaced.

## **Reference**

Rice. 2010. *The Lost City of Stoke-on-Trent*. London: Frances Lincoln.