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***The Great Reversal: Young People, Education and Employment in a Declining Economy.* By Martin Allen and Patrick Ainley. Pp. 122. London: Radicaled. 2013. £4.99 (pbk).**

*The Great Reversal* develops, expands and updates arguments made by the authors in two previous books *Education Make You Fick, Innit?* (Allen and Ainley 2007) and *Lost Generation?* (Ainley and Allen 2010), and their e-book *Why Young People Can't Get the Jobs they Want and the Education they Need* (Allen and Ainley 2012). It consists of three chapters, each of which deals with a certain facet of the neoliberal education project, and the UK Coalition Government's approach in particular. Its central argument is that the current strategy is to demolish what remains of the social democratic state education system established in the decades after the end of World War Two, and to do this as quickly as possible.

Chapter 1 focuses on young people and the labour market and de-bunks popular assertions about the relationship between education and the economy, particularly the notion that we are somehow supposed to be able to educate our way out of recession. The chapter provides a range of up-to-date information and statistics about education and the labour market, both from the UK and further afield. This helps orientate the reader to some of the key changes in the nature of education and employment that have taken place over recent years, and their consequences for young people in particular. However, the authors also helpfully point out that theorists such as Lester Thurow (1975) were criticising the contemporary doxa, human capital theory, as long ago as the mid-1970s. Either way, compelling evidence is presented to illustrate that, rather than the lacking the skills, qualifications and abilities necessary for work, nowadays most young people are overqualified and underemployed. The authors are quite clear in their position: it is misguided economic policy rather than the education system that has let young people down.

The second chapter deals with the various contemporary 'reforms' which are supposedly intended to cure an array of ills, from 'dumbing down' and 'grade inflation' through to the education system's supposed failure to promote social mobility. There is a wide-ranging critique of numerous policies and initiatives through which the Coalition is attempting to impose a combination of a free market ideology and old-fashioned conservative elitism. Chapter 2 reminds us about the collateral damage being inflicted on our schools, colleges and universities – whether these are changes to school curriculum and assessment regimes, the huge increases in higher education fees which, it is argued, are designed to drive working-class students out of the universities, or the destruction of teacher training as we know it. These processes, it is argued, are part of a concerted attempt to re-establish education as a mechanism of social control, and to systematically squeeze progressive opportunities out of the system.

Chapter 3 looks to the future. The authors point out that contemporary education policy is part of a much broader social, economic and political project to restructure society - and so opposition to 'The Great Reversal' needs to go beyond educational protest. Whilst it is recognised that campaigns against academies, free schools and the like are to be applauded, Allen and Ainley argue that alternative conceptions of work, the economy and society more generally are required if education is to maintain any legitimacy as a source of opportunity. The need to stimulate demand for labour rather than simply focusing on more and more supply-side initiatives is highlighted. Amongst other measures, they argue for systematic stimulation of the economy through restoring housing, the promotion of 'green' industries, and a range of public infrastructure projects. All this is would, of course, require far-reaching social and economic changes, one of which would be the redistribution of wealth – and we are reminded that redistribution should not be seen as an intergenerational matter but as symptomatic of the deep-rooted inequalities promoted by capital. However, the authors also argue for a redistribution of work too. This is not a new idea: Andre Gorz

(1982) was writing about the redistribution of work back in the 1980s, but it is important to put such arguments back on the agenda. It was also refreshing to read about how local authorities could be brought back into the fold. Local authorities have been side-lined, degraded and ridiculed by central government for decades but, as Chapter 3 argues, they could play an important role in rebuilding opportunities for young people – both as direct providers of work and as regulators of grants, contracts, and planning arrangements across the country.

*The Great Reversal* is an engaging, incisive and affordable book. Those involved in providing education and training, advice and guidance, or welfare and support services for young people should read it. Trainee teachers, youth workers or careers advisers should also get a copy. Not only will it help students understand and critique what is going on round them, it will also enable them to argue for more just and meaningful alternatives.

## References

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