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Original Citation

Simmons, Robin (2013) Education, social control and the Great Reversal. *Post 16 Educator* (72). pp. 16-17. ISSN 0459-2026

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Education, Social Control and *The Great Reversal*: Continuing the Debate

By Robin Simmons

The last issue of PSE carried a review by Colin Waugh of Martin Allen and Patrick Ainley's latest book *The Great Reversal: Young People, Education and Employment in a Declining Economy*. The first part of Colin's review enthuses about the way Martin and Patrick explain how the education system – if indeed system is the correct term – is descending into chaos, and how a succession of governments have attempted to use education as a 'cure' for various social ills including de-industrialisation, economic decline and youth unemployment. I can only agree with Colin's endorsement. *The Great Reversal* provides an incisive and broad-ranging account of social and economic change and de-bunks pervasive notions about education and its role in the so-called knowledge economy, as well as various negative assertions about the causes of youth unemployment. One of the key strengths of the book is, in my opinion, the way in which it illustrates that, rather than the lacking the skills, qualifications and abilities necessary for work, nowadays most young people are in fact overqualified and underemployed.

The Great Reversal is an engaging and accessible book, and it is suitable to a broad readership – if you are involved in education and training, advice and guidance, or welfare and support services for young people you should buy it. Perhaps more importantly, students should read this book too: if your students are training to be teachers, youth workers or social workers they should get a copy. Not only will it help them understand and critique what is going on around them, it will enable them to argue for more just and meaningful alternatives. This last point brings me back to Colin's review and the questions he raises about what these alternatives should be. Colin argues that *The Great Reversal's* call for a range institutional and curricular reforms as well as broader changes in the distribution of work, income and the role of trade unions and local authorities is rooted in particular views about education and social control – and he is not totally convinced that Martin and Patrick's position on this is correct.

Whilst he argues that securing social control has traditionally been a central role of state education, Colin also reasons that, nowadays, the need for education to perform this function is fading. Basically, Colin's argument is that today the ruling class have a range of far more efficient ways of maintaining social control at their disposal - and it is not difficult see how the systematic creation of debt, job insecurity and housing shortages can act as powerful disciplinary tools, especially for young people. Moreover, the mass media, in its various guises, is clearly far more pervasive nowadays than ever before, and is highly effective in promoting the interests of capital through a range of overt and covert practices. Colin's argument is interesting, as is his proposal to rebuild independent working-class education as an alternative to the current status quo. Either way, it is difficult to disagree with the suggestion that the ruling class now has access to a great range of powerful ideological tools, many of which were either unavailable to them or were less influential in previous times. However, having said this, I also believe that social control remains one of the key functions of the education system. There are a number of reasons for this, some of which I sketch out below.

Whilst the ruling class may well have a range of new and potent forces at its disposal, this does not necessarily mean that education's usefulness as a mechanism of social control has become redundant. The crisis of capital which began in 2008 has been so deep and so sustained that the ruling class needs every weapon its armoury to legitimise the massive restructuring of wealth and opportunity away from the poor and into the hands of the rich which is taking place not only in the UK but across the world. Also I am not sure that I agree with some Colin's logic about

government's changing approach to education. For example, I would not agree that the Coalition's higher education policy is evidence of the state's loss of interest in education. Abolishing public funding for teaching all higher education courses - other than for STEM subjects - whilst massively raising tuition fees for students, can just as easily be seen as part of an attempt to reassert social control. The humanities and social sciences have long been the home of dissent and the Coalition's actions can be interpreted as a crude attempt to deprive working-class students of access to the 'dangerous ideas' they are likely to encounter on sociology, philosophy and politics degrees, and on a range of other courses. Cutting public funding for higher education also represents a form of *de facto* privatisation and an attempt to promote a consumer culture across the university sector. In any case, the former polytechnics and other institutions where working-class people tend to study have always been far more reliant on public funding than Oxbridge or the other elite universities where the ruling class send their children.

Whilst I think that Martin and Patrick are arguing that the state's withdrawal from the direct provision education is at heart of *The Great Reversal* – I do not think this means that the ruling class has abandoned its attempts to use education as a form of social control. In a recent paper entitled *The reluctant state and the beginning of the end of state education* Stephen Ball (2012) argues that by turning more and more of the state education system over to religious bodies, charitable foundations and profit-making companies, essentially the Coalition is attempting to turn the clock back to the nineteenth century, an era in which people from different social classes received radically different forms of education: a time when education was seen as a commodity which the rich bought and the poor received via charitable bodies. The current policy of bringing private and voluntary providers into the educational mainstream is, I believe, part of a deeply ideological class-based strategy to dismantle a central part of the social democratic welfare state, and yet another way of imposing a combination of a crude free market dogma and old-fashioned conservative elitism on everyday life. The promotion of 'diversity of choice' in education, via the bewildering range of free schools, academies, studio schools, and various selective institutions, is also a way of loading the system against working-class parents and their children. Lacking the social, economic and cultural capital necessary to be able to work the system, working-class people are systematically disadvantaged in the 'education market' in contrast to their more privileged counterparts who are able to use class-based advantages to gain access to more desirable and prestigious forms of education.

On another level, research I have carried out on the experiences of young people classified as NEET (not in education, employment or training) with my University of Huddersfield colleagues, Ron Thompson and Lisa Russell, has found that many training programmes which claim to equip them with 'employability skills' are, in many ways, little more than thinly disguised programmes of social control. As I reported in PSE 65 (Simmons 2011), unfortunately, many NEET young people find much of the training they receive on such programmes them to be neither stimulating or of practical use – and, at its worst, they find it boring, irrelevant and, frankly, soul-destroying. Moreover, such training often provides participants with little or no labour market advantage and may, in some cases, actually results in negative labour market returns. It is therefore unsurprising to find that many NEET young people are reluctant to engage with them. Much of the training NEET young people are required to undertake is based upon inculcating them with so-called 'soft skills' such as 'problem solving', thinking skills' 'learning to learn'. Typically other activities include repeated CV writing, skills audits, interview skills and the like – and, whilst such activities can sometimes be worthwhile if embedded in particular vocational, intellectual or social contexts, it is difficult to see them as anything other than an exercise in social control when they are delivered without an underpinning core of knowledge and skills. Whilst, over the years, various forms of

education and training have been accused of 'warehousing' young people (see, for example, Finn 1987), the concept of education as social control is perhaps more evident than ever in low-level vocational education programmes aimed at unemployed young people today.

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