

The 'crisis in education': modernity, counter-modernity and enchantment

Abstract

More than half a century ago Hannah Arendt described education as being in a state of crisis, and identified two factors responsible for this: the loss of authority and the impulse to control the future; both emerge from the distinctive dogmas of modernity. Understanding a number of troubling characteristics and practices of contemporary education in relation to these ideas opens up ways of critiquing what is and imagining what could be. Turning to the notion of counter-modernity, in particular enchantment as an oppositional mode in relation to the concept of child, this paper explores some possibilities that might disrupt or impede the fundamental prejudices that enable the dominant instrumental thinking in educational contexts.

Keywords

modernity, counter-modernity, enchantment, child

The general crisis that has overtaken the modern world everywhere and in almost every sphere of life manifests itself differently in each country, involving different areas and taking on different forms. (Arendt, 2006, p. 170)

As crises go, the one described here by Hannah Arendt in 1954 has unusual longevity. It is a characteristic of the educational predicament in which we find ourselves that it has been a long time in the making. Arendt points out that a crisis is also an opportunity, which 'tears away façades and obliterates prejudices – to explore and inquire into whatever has been laid bare of the essence of the matter' (Arendt, 2006, p. 171). For Arendt, the particularity of each historical or topical situation distracts from an underlying truth that extends beyond those boundaries. Arendt's contention is that two concomitant factors are distorting education to the point of destruction: the loss of authority and the impulse to control the future. Arendt was identifying a global phenomenon, a slow-moving leviathan with a reach that extends not only geographically but also temporally. These themes may both be traced backward and also projected forward in time: they have a long history and an apparently endless future, and their reach extends well beyond strictly educational matters.

The sense of crisis has become increasingly acute in the decades since Arendt wrote these words. Martha Nussbaum (2009) has warned that the 'profound crisis in education' has now arrived at a point where we can see the 'imminent demise of liberal education, and with it those capacities of sympathy and critical thinking that support 'the very life of democracy itself' (Nussbaum, 2009, pp.52-53). The election of the 45th President, Donald J. Trump in 2016, and subsequent political events in the US, certainly seem to bear out her prediction in that context at least.

Understanding the nature of this crisis is important: but the devil is, as usual, in the details. The danger is that any attempt at identification will be reductive, simplistic, or just wrong. Critical educational theory has been meticulous in investigating the current state of education. A search of the literature reveals hundreds of publications examining the evidence for, and meaning of, diverse phenomena such as performativity, intensification and escalating workloads, surveillance, marketization, and commodification. Themes such as ‘gap talk’, ‘outcomes’, and regimes of standardized testing are the hallmarks of contemporary education policy across the globe, varying only a little in different political and cultural contexts.

These different practices may be understood under the rubric of modernity; the general crisis is a crisis of modernity. This paper will first outline the way in which the crisis shows itself in an educational context and then examine the precepts of modernity that underpin these manifestations. I shall then explore the notion of counter-modernity in relation to ‘enchantment’ as an oppositional mode, and in relation to the concept of child.

The problem in education

The cluster of troubling aspects of contemporary education that I list above: performativity, intensification, surveillance, marketization, commodification, and so on, has been visible for some time. Richard Sennett relates developments in school education to changes in industrial processes from the end of the 19th Century when increasing desire for predictable outcomes (products and profits) led to ever more standardized processes. As the reach of this idea stretched into civil society schools became increasingly standardized in operation and content (Sennett, 2007, p. 22). In the US, the rapidly changing social and political situation in the late 19th Century, with its population movements, high immigration levels and lack of state infrastructure, constrained the possible directions the development of the education system could take. Robert Weibe argues that Americans adopted a ‘quantitative ethic’ as a way of regaining a sense of control when everything felt as though it was spiralling out of control: ‘they tried, in other words, to impose the known upon the unknown, to master an impersonal world’ (Wiebe, 1967, p.12). This quantitative ethic – weighing, counting, and measuring – appeared in the industrial context as Taylorism, a managerial theory known through its apogee, the Ford car factory assembly line. E. L. Thorndike and Joseph Mayer Rice translated Taylor’s method for educational theory and practice (Stoller, 2015; Au, 2011), their core contention being that schooling ought to be governed by: ‘a scientific system of pedagogical management [that] would demand fundamentally the measurement of results in the light of fixed standards’ (Joseph Mayer Rice (1912) *Scientific Management in Education*, cited Kliebard, 1995). This ‘Model T approach to educational management’ (Hartley, 1990) took curricular form through the work of people such as John Franklin Bobbitt, a lecturer at Chicago University’s Department of Education shortly after John Dewey’s departure. Bobbitt

was a prime mover in the production of a pre-packaged and scripted curriculum, whose sole purpose was to increase test scores (Au, 2011). This way of conceiving of the purpose of education became hegemonic in the US, starting in 1900 and reaching a peak by 1930 (Callahan, 1962; Apple, 2004; Au, 2011).

The picture between 1930 and the present is muddy. My own brief experience of elementary schooling in the 1970s in the US was active, collaborative, fun – and I was never tested. This may have been highly localized, but it serves to illustrate that Taylorism seems to have loosened its grip on policy imperatives in the intervening years. However, the resurgence of the Taylorist approach is unmistakable from the 1980s onward (Beyer, 1985; Au, 2011). No Child Left Behind (2001) in the US, and the introduction of the National Curriculum, following the Education Reform Act (1988) in England, saw the introduction of increasingly detailed prescribed curricula and a strong emphasis on standardized testing. This same tendency was replicated to some degree in many other countries, though particular national combinations of neo-liberal and neo-conservative ideologies gave each jurisdiction its particular emphases and character. The problems caused for pupils and teachers by these emphases are significant. In terms of curriculum, there is a strong tendency to teach those things and only those things that can be tested. As Au (2011) summarizes the situation: ‘Knowledge learned for US high-stakes tests is thus transformed into a collection of disconnected facts, operations, procedures, or data mainly needed for rote memorization in preparation for the tests.’ (p.31). Pedagogical approaches are similarly impoverished by the exclusion of less ‘efficient’ and less transmissive modes: open-ended, constructivist, and student-led practices (Au, 2011, p.31).

The critical attention given to this closely inter-related set of trends in education has been intense. A number of themes dominate. There are those that determine contemporary conceptions of professionalism: intensification, instructional efficiency, accountability, and performativity (Ball, 2003; Ballet & Kelchtermans, 2009; Ballet, Kelchtermans, & Loughran, 2006; Barrett, 2009; Bullough, Hall-Kenyon, MacKay, & Marshall, 2014; Lingard, Martino, & Rezai-Rashti, 2013; Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2013; Perryman, 2006; Suspitsyna, 2010). Some have an economic emphasis in terms of the market rhetoric of competition and choice, marketization, and neoliberal values in structural reform of school systems (Gamble, 2009; Allais, 2011; Ball and Olmedo, 2013; Connell, 2013; Gorur, 2013; Laitsch, 2013; Rowlands and Rawolle, 2013; Jankowski and Provezis, 2014; Arthur, 2015). The tools of standardisation and measurement, the ‘datafication’ of education, have received particular attention: in relation to international attainment comparisons such as PISA, benchmarks, and learning outcomes (Biesta, 2009; Gibbons, 2013; Lingard and Sellar, 2013; Stone-Johnson, 2014).

Questions of education are questions about being human, about the good, what it is to know and to understand, and how to act in the world, and these human-centred questions are alien to this clamjamfrie of control strategies. Educational theory, though always an expression of practical interest, is intimately related to ontological and epistemological concerns rather than *primarily* to technical ones. The technical questions *are* important: how does this process work in the education system, how do I make such-and-such happen in my classroom, how do we prevent this happening in our school? But these questions are based on interpretations and understandings of each situation and reflect the values and commitments of the questioner. A measure of consensus on the values-based ends of education lends coherence to the technical-pedagogical decisions made. The diverse themes mentioned above all have something in common, in that they are aspects of a technical-instrumental approach to education. And what are in fact merely means to ends are elevated to the status of ends in themselves. What Charles Taylor calls the ‘brute datum’, that is, ‘units of information ... [that are] not the fruit of judgement or interpretation’ (Taylor, 1985, p. 19), is revered in all contexts not simply as simulacra, but as reality itself. On the modern hegemony of technical-instrumental he says:

There is thus nothing wrong with the life of instrumental reason, dedicated to rational control. ... The error of Enlightenment naturalism is to have misunderstood the spirit in which life is to be lived, the basic end which should preside over it all. (Taylor, 1992, p.365)

This is a repeatedly expressed concern: that instrumental thinking has over-reached its proper place. Here is Hannah Arendt:

The issue at stake is, of course, not instrumentality, the use of means to achieve an end, as such, but rather the generalization of the fabrication experience in which usefulness and utility are established as the ultimate standards for life and the world of men. (Arendt, 1958, p. 157)

From Heidegger’s analysis of modern technology to Habermas’s theory of the rationalisation of the lifeworld, the over-reach of instrumental reasoning has been understood to be a defining feature of modernity (Habermas, 1987; Heidegger, 1993). The elevation of instrumentalism to a general purposive principle squeezes out consideration of competing diverse ends and it is this evacuation of purpose, as an expression of what is valued, that is the problem (Fitzsimons, 2002, p. 179; Higgins, 2011, p. 463). This returns us to Arendt’s argument that the crisis in education has to do with the desire to control the future. The corollary of this is what she saw as the loss of authority. Together these constitute a relationship to the past and the future that is highly distinctive of modernity, which in turn has shaped the contemporary ‘iconic child’ (Kennedy, 2013; author 2018).

Modernity

‘Modernity’ is a set of epistemological and ontological concepts, postulates and theories that makes up a distinctive paradigm characteristic of a particular geo-temporal location. The period of modernity gradually emerged from the Renaissance and reached its high point, in philosophical terms, during the latter part of the 18th Century, in the European Enlightenment. Robert Pippin makes the point that modernity is not simply a continuing chronological category but signifies an important (and irrevocable) break with past assumptions and ways of thinking (Pippin, 1999, p.17). Foucault similarly describes modernity as not a period of history so much as an attitude, a way of thinking and feeling, acting and behaving, a task, even (Foucault, 1984, p.39). This is an important point but nonetheless these ways of thinking and being can be traced over time as a rolling and developing ‘unfinished project’ (Passerin d’Entrèves & Benhabib, 1997, ch.1) .

There are many different focal points in the emergence of modernity and also a number of emergent threads that can be followed: political, religious, economic, technological, artistic, and creative. Significantly, it is not particularly easy to find philosophical accounts of modernity written by people who approve of it without reservation. It is probably fair to say that modernity as a construct has principally been made visible by its critics, perhaps especially in the field of educational studies. One rare sympathetic treatment of modernity in relation to education was written by the economist Dennis O’Keeffe in 2003 for the Institute for Economic Affairs. In this article he describes modernity as a combination of private enterprise and lawful government, which, he believes, has resulted in legitimating majority affluence. O’Keeffe’s account equates modernity with capitalism, specifically with free-market economics. His contention is that education remained strangely outwith the reach of Margaret Thatcher’s ‘revolution’, as a centralised command outlier in an increasingly privatised economy: ‘a deplorable socialist oddity [that] needs excision’ (O’Keeffe, 2003, p. 137). And indeed, education has become one of the most important sites of neoliberal marketization and austerity in recent years, particularly in England and the US.

O’Keeffe’s account is simplistic but not wrong. The primacy of the individual, which he figures purely in terms of private property and the expression of individual goals and desires at the ballot box, is indeed at the core of modernity, and the account accords with certain distinctively bourgeois experiences that define modernity as an epoch dominated by the middle class, with its private property, market economy, and liberal democratic institutions (Pippin, 1999, p. 9). The period of modernity is characteristically enthralled to the foundational dogma of progress, the ‘animating and controlling idea of western civilisation’ (Bury, 1920, p.vii), the notion that by means of science and technology our lives will be

better: liberated from labour, materially better off, and full of exciting new possibilities. Utopian thinking is an intrinsic aspect of modernity though utopianism is not modernity's preserve. It would be more accurate to say that utopian thinking in its secular form is one of the hallmarks of modernity. The aim of transforming society is to be realised by the apparently limitless possibilities of science and technology.

Following Baudelaire's description of modernity as 'the transient, the fleeting, the contingent', Foucault observes that 'Modernity is often characterized in terms of consciousness of the discontinuity of time' (Foucault, 1984). Modernity is a break from the past and this is true in two senses. The first sense can be seen in the linear understanding of time implicit in the notion of progress. Calinescu identifies the 'main constitutive element' of modernity as 'simply a sense of unrepeatable time' (Calinescu, 1987, p. 13). Modernity is in this sense a perpetual breaking with the past; it is crucially forward-gazing.

The second sense of rupture is epistemological. Under the epistemological conditions of modernity, what had been for most of our intellectual history highest on the hierarchy of being – the universal, God, the cosmos – is relegated to the subjective, ephemeral, unstable and arbitrary, and what is material, observable, is elevated to the most real, the most permanent. Milne describes this as the 'ontological inversion ... the attribution of what is most real to that which is last in the hierarchy of being – the material world, the realm of inert objects' (Milne, 2002). Scientific reason pursued a standard for knowledge based only on logic and direct experience. No knowledge could be derived from authority or tradition, and validation comes only from empirical experience. The past has no claim on us and its fixed norms can give us no guidance to follow. The Cartesian experiment with scepticism, forswearing appeal to trust, tradition, authority, or common sense in the quest for a pure and certain knowledge, is a crucial moment in the development of this idea. Kant's description of the enlightened mind, as one that is free from heteronomous ideas, became the manifesto for high modernity. The enlightened person would think for herself and not be bound by received ideas and in this sense the enlightened person is free: enlightenment and emancipation are for some modern humans the same thing. Empiricism is, of course, foundational to scientific knowledge, though the relationship is more complex. The positivist turn in science is a later arrival and so the two are not coextensive. Early scientists, notably Galileo, were theoretical in the sense of being contemplative. Observational method, 'the humble method of experiment and induction', followed on from Bacon's approach (Dupre, 1993, p.70). Nonetheless, these philosophical positions gave a secure foundation to modern science and technology, which took the restrictions on what counts as knowledge as given and proceeded in their project of understanding, predicting and controlling the natural world. The only authority was to be the independent mind; the only knowledge, that which could be verified

empirically. The postulate of scientific rationality is the individual: the independent and self-determining subject, and what is real is the object of the individual's empirical experience. Tradition and all that it entails: community, shared habits and inherited beliefs, is that from which the modern mind disembeds and disencumbers itself.

Modern subjectivity is based first of all on the primacy of the rational individual. You are yourself as a mature adult, not as a domestic animal or a child who is dependent on others (Kant, 1996). The autonomous, unfettered intellect – the most profound assertion of modernity's self-understanding – is the ultimate realisation of the biblical injunction to have 'dominion over all the earth'. The human subject relates to the natural world as knower to known, subject to object, the active agent in world, invariant, and unitary. In combination with the doctrine of progress and the utopian aspirations of modernity, this modern subjectivity configures the natural world as raw material. Speaking of Bacon's approach to inquiry, Louis Dupre's (1993), description is apt: 'Bacon tends to transfer the theoretical question: In what does a thing's nature consist? to the functional one: How does it work? and ultimately to the one: What human purpose does it serve?' (p.72). In other words, the transformation of human subjectivity changes the nature of reality itself, since what is real has been redefined as what is objectifiable. This is the interpretation of modern subjectivity, which they called a 'reifying rationality' that launches the critique formulated by Adorno and Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

Counter-modernities and oppositional enchantments

Modernity was born conjoined with its critics and, as suggested above, modernity is principally known through critique, which intensified considerably at the beginning of the 20th Century. Pippin (1999) describes how in contemporary criticism, 'everywhere the figures and images had been and are again the images of death and loss and failure, and the language of anxiety, unease, and mourning' (Pippin, 1999, p.xii). At best, philosophy's relationship with modernity has been ambivalent, arising from what Charles Taylor (1989) has called 'the unique combination of greatness and danger, of grandeur and misère, which characterises the modern age' (Taylor, 1989, p. x). In the same way, the relationship between modernity and the arts has often been one of hostility; Stephen Spender describes how 'the moderns, on the whole, distrust, or even detest, the idea of progress, and view the results of science as a catastrophe' (Spender, 1963, p.x). Charles Taylor similarly says this:

The modernists found themselves in opposition to their world for reasons which were continuous with those of the Romantics. The world seen just as mechanism, as a field of instrumental reason, seemed to the latter shallow and debased. By the twentieth

century the encroachments of instrumental reason were incomparably greater (1989, p.456)

The revolution in subjectivity under modernity is described by Max Weber as 'disenchantment', a term which describes the process of the reification of the world resulting from the advent of modern science. This rests on a fundamental proposition of the knowability of the world, the belief that 'one can, in principle, master all things by calculation'. There are no unknowables only unknowns and these are only temporarily so because in principle, all things are knowable, everything can be mastered:

This means that the world is disenchanted. One need no longer have recourse to magical means in order to master or implore the spirits, as did the savage, for whom such mysterious powers existed. Technical means and calculations perform the service. This above all is what intellectualisation means. (Weber, 1989)

Adorno and Horkheimer followed Weber in understanding disenchantment as a totalising process; nothing whatsoever is left that is hidden from the human intellect, and this means nothing escapes the utilitarian designation of 'object as instrument' to fulfil the ends of an anthropological universe: 'The program of the Enlightenment was the disenchantment of the world; the dissolution of myths and the substitution of knowledge for fancy' (1972, p.3). This reified consciousness extends to the human subject herself, since the person is subject to the same principle of knowability as a tangled knot of 'events and conditions, unconscious motives and biological processes just another effect along with the objective world' (Milne, 2002). Disenchantment may lay claim to totality as a necessary adjunct of progress, but it meets with the significant objection, ironically an empirical one, that not only have magical, supernatural, and non scientific-empirical beliefs persisted in the century since Weber and the Frankfurt School, but many forms are currently recovering from a period of dormancy, bearing witness to a rift between 'the prevalent conceptions of the world and our actual sense of being present, which is grounded in the cosmic sense' (Milne, 2002).

What Richard Jenkins (2000) calls the 'diverse array of oppositional enchantments': belief in luck and fate; recent arrivals from Asia (Buddhism, Hinduism and Taoism), New Age and neo-pagan spiritualities, meditation and yoga; holistic, non-conventional healing, are widespread, mainstream, and growing in Western countries (Lee and Ackerman, 2002; Landy and Saler, 2009). These are mostly 'distinctly modern forms of enchantment' (Landy & Saler, 2009, p. 713) that permit the coexistence of the secular and religious in different contexts (Heelas, 2005, p. 307), a process that Christopher Partridge describes as the 'confluence of secularization and sacralisation' (Partridge, 2004, p.4).

Though Protestantism is implicated in the creation of the modernist attitude (Thomas, 1971, pp. 50-74), it should be remembered that less than half the Christians in the world are in fact Protestant. This is significant in considering the scope of disenchantment because Catholic spirituality, along with that of Eastern Orthodoxy, retains a strong sense of the sacramental, that is, the secular as a revelation of the presence of God. It is this that leads Andrew Greeley (2000) to assert that ‘Catholics live in an enchanted world’, a sensibility that tends to see ‘the Holy lurking in creation’ (p.1).

Lee and Ackerman (2002) propose that the process of world mastery itself created a problem of meaning and purpose, which led to the development of new spiritualities (p. 6). They go further and suggest that there is an ‘immanent power’ in the world, a ‘powerful irrational force for change’ that stands opposed to rationalization, or at least to its universal application. This is an unfortunate example of question begging, but the observation that the modern mind is not fully on board with modern secularism seems well-founded. As Christopher Partridge says:

The late modern mind is, if not post-secular, certainly haunted by the feeling the reality is not quite as stable as privileged discourses in the West have taught us to think. There is a feeling, not far from the surface, that the rejected discourses of folklore contain more than a nugget of truth. (C. Partridge, 2016, p. 40)

Whether we want to go quite as far as some writers who have excitedly declared ‘a rising tide of spirituality’ (Partridge, 2004, p.38) or simply remember that the sacramental never actually went away (Greeley, 2000, p. 1), the claim that modernity, rationalization, or disenchantment itself, is universal or totalizing may have been exaggerated. Even the tendency toward disenchantment is questionable.

All of this points to something beyond Charles Taylor’s helpful distinction between cultural and acultural theories of modernity (1995). Taylor argues that the dominant explanations of modernity rely on the idea that its processes do not belong to a particular culture or habitus, but rather that they can be applied to any particular culture. Whatever the cultural input, the output will always be modernity. Contrary to this, he proposes that modernity is, in fact, sustained by its own ‘spiritual vision’ and the acultural explanation ignores the ways in which different culturally specific understandings of the world deeply affect the way in which key notions of modernity such as secularism or individualism impact upon each group. Taylor points to the existence of ‘modernities’ rather than a monolithic ‘modernity’. I would argue that this stops short of acknowledging the true extent of the opposition to modernity’s harsh discipline. What Taylor calls ‘ethnocentric projection’ which corrals the reader into this hegemonic group with the pronouns ‘we’ and ‘our’, is arguably the domain of a rather

smaller clique rather than a whole culture or era. It is the case that, from its beginnings, the 'attitude of modernity has found itself struggling with attitudes of 'counter-modernity' (Foucault, 1984). If we prefer Taylor's cultural theory of modernity - the idea that Western modernity 'might be sustained by its own original spiritual vision' (Taylor, p.26) - then understanding its contemporary scope raises the question of the means by which modernity was spread. This suggests a very different story of cultural conquest, both through the violence of colonialism and, internally, through the suppression and eradication of diverse spiritualities and traditional practices. The disenchantment of the Western world did not happen by peaceful, intellectual dissemination alone. From *The Hammer of the Witches* to the Highland clearances and suppression of the Gaelic language, old spiritualities were sometimes the collateral casualties of other battles for land and political domination. It is also possible that 'oppositional enchantments' are just that – a form of opposition to modernity's reductive and powerful claim to dominance. It is not a coincidence that the modern environmental movement has strong links to nature-orientated belief systems such as paganism.

What bearing do these ideas have for our understanding of childhood? Children are clearly recognisably human and equally obviously alien to the adult world and its concerns. The conflict involved in our understanding of the child is teased out in a variety of ways in the form of belief about children's potentials and capabilities, rationality and unreasonableness, romantic ideas of their innocence and wisdom, and supernatural or paranormal beliefs about their spiritual status and receptivity to magic or 'other worlds'. We can see this in the notion of Limbo, the mediaeval church's solution to children's liminal relationship to sin and salvation, in the literary trope of the child with access to magical worlds, which ends with the onset of puberty, and in supernatural horror films like *The Exorcist* or *The Omen*, in which a child becomes a vehicle for paranormal evil. There is a photograph which circulated on social media showing an infant latching onto a bronze bust. Most people seem to see it as a funny and sweet mistake made by a child too young to know the difference between a bronze and a living breast. Alternatively it could be seen as a child engaged in an act of pure self-absorbed sensuality even though he recognised that the breast was substantively different. These two ways of understanding rest on different 'spiritual visions' and represent a choice between modernity and resistance, allowing something to be retained as open, uncertain, imaginative, and enchanted.

The child of the Enlightenment is comprehended as incomplete, unfinished, defective in knowledge and reasoning because she lacks what Honneth calls 'purposive consciousness', the state of mind of instrumental reason (Honneth, 1993). Childhood is the period of recapitulation of modernity: through persuasion, mockery or violence, the child is

incrementally relieved of her ‘facility to believe, impatience to doubt, temerity to answer, glory to know, doubt to contradict, end to gain, sloth to search, seeking things in words, resting in part of nature’ (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1972, p. 3). The child in this photograph is laughed at, albeit with affection, but the course of modern childhood is marked by episodes of a sterner discipline; and the end is enlightenment.

Early interest in child developmental theory ran concurrently with the emergence of anthropology as a distinct discipline. And the idea that the child’s development mirrored the evolution of the human species was a natural supposition. It seems indisputable that, as Gagen (2007) puts the case: ‘the construct does violence to children’s competence and their right to be valued on their own terms’ (p. 17). But also, included in the idea that children are somehow like our pre-modern selves, is the possibility that we can learn something about the way in which people came to leave the enchanted world and assimilate to modernity by thinking about the processes of disenchantment in modern childhood.

The idea that culture is learned is commonplace but the processes of enculturation have received little attention. The dominant idea is one of transmission: ‘children as vehicles into which culture is poured’, and there has been some recent criticism of this in terms of an appeal to acknowledge children’s agency and children’s culture (Hirschfeld, 2002). This is quite right and benign, but the process of enculturation in relation to modernity is one of discipline, sometimes even violence. Children are the strangers within, our own *barbaroi*. Their transition to adulthood is achieved, at least in part, by damping down their proclivity toward the fantastical, sacramental, sensual, and hedonistic, directing their attention away from self-forgetful engrossment to the purposeful and instrumental, and by designating their ways of thinking as ‘error’.

An objection to this proposed understanding of children is that it might converge with ideas that dehumanise them (Gagen, 2007). The deeply embedded anthropological assumption of ‘the Original child’ or the savage child - ‘automatic, instinctive and irrational’ - carries a history of marginalisation and othering, in the same way that these ideas served racialized imperialism and colonialism, a way of ‘keeping children outside the gates’ (Kromidas, 2014, p.426). The danger of dehumanising children is a real one, but the theory of recapitulation I am endorsing is not one of evolutionary progress but of the specific cultural history of Modernity. This is an observation of a similarity between the way in which the central principles of modernity were propagated historically and the way in which this may be seen to be paralleled in modern child-rearing. The alternative, if there is one, is not some ‘crazily nostalgic attempt to re-enchant the natural world’ (McDowell, 1996, p. 72) though some recent curriculum innovations such as ‘values education’, mindfulness, or under-delineated

concepts like ‘well-being’ can be interpreted as attempts to fill the gaps left by a system fixated on data and performance. Paul Standish describes these efforts as a ‘false re-enchantment’ and a ‘standing temptation’: too often in schools these ideas are adopted without context or understanding, resulting in a thin graft of the ‘touchy-feely’, compartmentalised mysticism, a supposed antidote to the problems caused by the intensification of expectations (Standish, 2016, p. 110). A return to pre-modern principles is not an option; as Dupre states, ‘history carries an ontic significance that excludes any reversal of the present’ (Dupré, 1993, p.6). But the disenchantment of the world was never in fact total: there has always been resistance and, what is more, the process of modernisation has to be repeatedly re-enacted in the upbringing and education of each child.

Conclusion

In the midst of many worrying contemporary threats to democracy, human rights, and the natural world that should be anathema to the dogma of progress (though, like most dogmas, it has proved remarkably resilient to contradiction) we are tempted to use education as an instrument to deliver the progress we still, despite everything, desire and believe in. In this ‘state of emergency’ we feel what Gershom Scholem calls the ‘enticement to Messianic action’ (1971, p.15): another manifestation of the will to dominate and control, in this case of, and through, children. However benign the urge to act in this way is, the effect will always be to close down the possibility of change and to ‘strike from the newcomers’ hands their own chance of the new’ (Arendt, 2006, p. 174). The irony of this is that we end up using the same ideas that are at the root of our original problems, and our concept of child supports our reasoning.

The study of childhood has been dominated by the psychological and sociological paradigms of development and control respectively. Ryan (2012) suggests that this ‘bio-social’ nexus is being superseded by an emerging second wave of positions deriving from postmodernist continental philosophy. Whilst this rejection of binaries, the blurring and merging of boundaries, categories and identities to form a less determinate and constrained conception of childhood has obvious attractions, it is not clear why dualistic or binary thinking is wrong unless a reductive and dogmatic single-mindedness is at work. Other phenomena are understood through different models or lenses, each bringing their insights so why should the ‘lack of clear-cut separation’ between these approaches trouble us, if in fact childhood is best understood as a ‘hybrid form’ (Prout 2005, p.3) and so can be understood as a phenomenon that is both developmental and cultural? The importance of ambiguity, non-linearity and indeterminacy lies not so much in an escape from binary thinking, but in the recognition of the ways in which certain paradigms are too easily instrumentalized: formulating notions of progress and strategic control through the development and socialisation of children.

The exposure of the prejudices of modernity undercuts what appears to be self-evident and natural: dogmas of progress and triumphalist historicism, faith in technology and the reifying rationality of instrumental reason, hubristic modernism. These ways of thinking and believing are what drives the ‘crisis in education’. Recognising these distinctive hallmarks of modernity in our thinking about education opens up ways of critiquing what is, and imagining what could be.

Our understanding of society can include what is unstable and unpredictable, not by merely accommodating or domesticating disruption but by welcoming it as a vital sign. Conceptions of culture that are dialectical, in which children take their place as both inheritors of complex traditions and inventors of new ones are more robust than those that either imagine homeostatic transmission or neglect the induction of children into the cultures of their birth.

The philosophical study of childhood has not shown much interest so far in perspectives that recognise childhood’s profanity. These can be found in psychiatry in the work of Melanie Klein, for example, and in anthropology in the notion of the changeling (Lancy, 2008) but here the child’s transgression is really pathological and an aberration. Jenks (1996) is a rare exception in childhood studies: in his chapter *Childhood and Transgression* he points toward possible avenues for alternative thinking about childhood, particularly in relation to Foucault, and, with a much lighter touch, George Bataille. Bataille is promising and needs further work.

The recovery of the transgressive, enchanted, anarchic, and irreverent in our concept of childhood adds an important dimension to childhood studies. If the crisis in education has its basis in modernity then technical solutions will not significantly alleviate or end the crisis. However, any effort to gain understanding of the crisis as a meaningful whole is a political act because it questions and destabilizes what happens to be the case. We need to attempt to let go of our need to control and predict, a need that gives rise to uncritical utopian thinking that too frequently finds expression in education, and instead allow what Iris Murdoch described as ‘an attentive patient delay of judgement, a kind of humble agnosticism, which lets the object be’ (Murdoch 1992, p. 377). Openness to the playful, sacramental and enchanted is perhaps the most crucial form of resistance to the ways of thinking and being that have become axiomatic under the conditions of modernity.

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