

## International Education and Capitalism

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International education remains a slippery signifier with more than one potential meaning attached to it. There is enough literature to remind us of the difficulty in establishing one overarching definition (Hill, 2012; Hayden & Thompson, 2013; Bunnell, 2014) and I will not spend more ink on that here other than to say that definitions essentially span a distance between mission and operation: institutions singing the praises of diversity, education for peace and respect for others on the one hand – and private, expensive, expatriate elitist schools with little connection to the host nation creating third culture kids on the other.

### A world in trouble

However, contradictions and mixed messages aside, international schools like most educational institutions across the globe, recognise that the first quarter of the 21st Century is lurching towards turbulence and possibly disaster. Whilst it remains essential not to paint a uniquely doom-and-gloom scenario for our young learners and whilst philosophers with positivist inclinations such as Steven Pinker are keen to remind us that it's never been better (2018), statistics are worrying and it would take a particularly naive or disingenuous person to argue to the contrary. Consider this:

- "The planet's average surface temperature has risen about 1.62 degrees since the late 19th century, a change driven largely by increased carbon dioxide and other human-made emissions into the atmosphere" (NASA, 2019)
- "Globally, at least 2 billion people use a drinking water source contaminated with faeces [whereas] by 2025, half of the world's population will be living in water-stressed areas" (WHO, 2016)
- "Populations of fish, marine mammals, birds and reptiles [fell] 49 percent between 1970 and 2012. For fish alone, the decline was 50 percent". (Doyle, 2019)
- "Plastics production has increased twentyfold since 1964, reaching 311m tonnes in 2014 [...]. It is expected to double again in the next 20 years and almost quadruple by 2050". (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2016)
- In 2017, 38,000 people a year were dying early due to diesel emissions testing failures. (Carrington, 2017)

I could go on with examples of the Anthropocene paradigm human beings have created as I have in other writings (Hughes, 2018) but hopefully these figures are enough to cause worry. Let us not forget the tone of denial that characterises a number of governmental cabinets such as those of the United States and Brazil. These administrations downplay studies on the environment, claiming that they are exaggerated while they continue to plunder resources, ravaging the Amazon basin, fracking through the water table and releasing huge amounts of carbon dioxide and nitrogen dioxide into the atmosphere.

### Concern and response

How do international schools – and other types of school - respond to this? Understandably,

there is widespread consternation and a desire for action to save the planet. The International Baccalaureate has launched a movement called “Environment and humanity #environment IB” (IB, 2019) and are working on curriculum design with environmentalist Elyn Macarthur. Many schools have adopted in some way, shape or form, the United Nations 2030 Sustainability goals that articulate lofty objectives such as reducing poverty while students take to the streets to protest against climate change.

Curriculum changes reflect this concern: the International Baccalaureate’s Environmental Systems and Societies course is designed to allow students “to adopt an informed personal response to the wide range of pressing environmental issues that they will inevitably come to face” (IB, 2019).

Schools can sign up to become one of 51 thousand Foundation for Environmental Education Eco-Schools that are taking steps or have taken steps to become more sustainable in their operation, mission and structure (Eco-Schools, 2019). Initiatives include litter pick-ups, reporting for the environment, working for cleaner water and less deforestation or driving for more sustainability in industries.

### **The real cause of the trouble**

It is indeed impressive to see young people engaging in the cause of sustainability, wanting to make a difference and caring about the future of the planet. However, some time should be spent on analysing what it is exactly that is leading to the depletion of the ozone layer, the destruction of the environment and its flora and fauna. Is there some central operating system that is at the core of this mayhem?

This is where we should turn to the monumental work of the Swiss philosopher Jean Zielger (2018), the French economist Thomas Picketty (2013) and the American journalist Franklin Foer (2017). There are other sources I could point to<sup>1</sup> but it suffices to say that these intellectuals and their studies tell us enough about the crisis to understanding the root of the problem and therefore the type of reaction we should activate to save our planet.

In essence, capitalism is the cause of the planet’s state of advanced demise. We are talking about more than classical capitalism here but capitalism on steroids, neo-liberal, globalised and essentially uncontrolled capitalism. Production rates, the incessant creation of markets, extensive industrialisation and urbanisation, associated wealth inequalities and attempts at all costs to make profit margins have led us to a cannibalistic society that is on the brink of total implosion.

Here are some of the reasons why we can safely place capitalism at the centre of this situation:

#### *Drive for profit*

The behaviour of modern, extreme capitalism is unsustainable and destructive, as the 2008 financial crisis showed us. Insider trading, the selling of junk bonds and reckless behaviour by banks and investors in the name of short-term profit plunged the world economy into chaos. The post-crisis bailing out of banks by governments essentially sent out the message that such behaviour could be forgiven and therefore repeated. In isolation, this

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<sup>1</sup>Many others could be mentioned, as could a number of extremely informative documentaries such as *Hard NOx* (Gibney, 2018) and *The Corporation* (Abbott & Achbar, 2003).

might seem far from the destruction of the environment, but it is linked, for what is at the core of this is the need for profit margins at just about any moral or social cost. This excess is at the basis of all capitalist industries by definition.

### *Excess*

Productivity has become so acute that humans are exhausting the planet's resources at an exponential rate, polluting air, land and water sources in the process. Toxic pesticides, deforestation, the unethical mining of Coltan in the Congo, massive overfishing, are all driven by a desire for excessive financial gain. It is excessive because it fuels a world where wealth is distributed in a perversely iniquitous manner: nine of the richest billionaires have more combined wealth than the four billion poorest people on the planet. In other words, half of the world's population combined have the combined wealth of just nine people (Jacobs, 2017).

Whilst some might argue that poverty and starvation are lower than they were in the past, we are still living in a world where despite the fact that the planet has the capacity to feed over 10 billion people (Holt-Gimenez et al., 2010), many on the planet suffer and die from starvation.

### *Resource Distribution*

Picketty (2013) explains that this rampant wealth inequity is at a historical high point: we have superseded the last great wealth chasm between rich and poor of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. He explains in his analysis that the relationship between income access and asset holdings is inverse: in other words, the more assets there are in society, the less opportunity there is for those outside of the patrimony of those assets to access wealth. Today we are in a world of monopoly and concentration of power. This means that the mega-rich have to contend with fewer checks and balances or moral responsibility. The worrying element of this state of affairs is that it loads onto itself: wealth begets wealth and so there is every reason to believe that through time resource distribution will become more and more acutely iniquitous in its distribution.

### *Intellectual Centralisation*

Foer in his alarming but brilliant *World Without Mind* (2017) analyses the meteoric rise of the GAFA group (Google, Apple, Facebook and Amazon) through the lens of an ideological premise whereby the aim of so-call big tech, born in the post-hippy utopian dream world of Silicon valley, was to create an alternative world order, a type of global village as McLuhan called it where individuals could free themselves of rigid state-run protocols and connect with each other in a medium that would itself become a type of extension of consciousness. This has led to the ambitions of Google to design artificial intelligence that will have the algorithmic power to outperform a human brain.

Ironically, this dream of an alternative world order has led to huge globalised mergers (Google has bought up over 200 companies) and a much more homogeneous world order than ever before.

### **The end of agency**

At face value these analyses might not appear to present a coherent explanation for the planet's environmental demise, but they do and this is how. We are entering into an era where giant monopolies, extreme concentration of power and wealth are at an unprecedented high whereas the internet and search engines have taken individual agency

and critical thinking to an all-time low.

It is of little wonder that the world looks at Brexit and Trump with a mixture of apathy and helplessness: not only have we lost faith in the ability of people to rise up and topple systems that seem unfair, we are lulled into complacency by algorithms that pre-empt our wishes and serve us what we want before we have even started looking for it. This centrally controlled opiate of the people will not lead to insurrection. After all, why bother about the environment when there's Netflix and Spotify to lull you to sleep with an endless consumption of entertainment? And when the resources of this planet are split between the obscenely rich and the desperately poor with a steady hollowing out of the middle classes, who will find the means to battle the system?

### **The reality in International Schools**

How far will schools go to criticise the monopolies of economic and ideological power that reign over the globalised world? Whilst many are impatient to parrot the type of language that emanates from organisations such as Google and Apple ("maker space", "open space", "genius hour" etc) and drive home the importance of white collar neo-liberal skills such as creativity and group work (part of a "networked" society and so-called "21<sup>st</sup> Century skills" base), few have the courage to openly critique these organisations and what they stand for. After all, most international schools are serving the children of a globalised clientele who are paying hefty fees in order to have their children "internationalised" or somehow socialised into tomorrow's global elite. The majority of international schools are sponsored by major multinationals with vested interests in the status quo.

A glance at the International Baccalaureate Business and Management guide shows that there is some effort to do more than merely supply students with the tools to become rampant venture capitalists. The guide states that "the course encourages the appreciation of ethical concerns, as well as issues of corporate social responsibility (CSR), at both a local and global level" (IB, 2014, p. 6). The International Baccalaureate economics guide, on the other hand, has fairly vague objectives around markets, macro and micro-economics (IB, 2010, p. 6). In any case, neither guide appears to design any real critical approach to the contemporary capitalism on steroids that we are living out in today's age, to expose the pernicious and cynical effects of its consequences on humanity and the planet.

Although the International Baccalaureate is working with Ellyn Macarthur on a circular economy approach that it claims is embedded in much of its guide and curriculum work, this is an example of trying to offer some sort of softening of profit making but without rocking the boat too much, without coming clean on just how violent modern capitalism is. Finding a way of sustaining capitalism through a tempered approach is not the same thing as acting to destroy it. The approach appears to be a type of peripheral excavation, marrying the incongruity of profit making and environmental custodianship in a lightweight approach but ultimately leaving us with a contradiction.

### **Deep change**

If international schools really do care about making the world a better place and are worried about the destruction of the planet, and if education is the most powerful tool we have to change the world, then our approach to capitalism should be more transparent and critical through the structure of the economics courses we teach and the way we teach history and ethics. Our students need to understand how consumerism works, how they are manipulated by advertising, the ethics of major multinationals and, either as consumers or

as future leaders, how they can battle against capitalism. This can take a number of forms: refusing to buy certain products, refusing to download certain apps, exposing the dirty tricks of certain industries, not entering the rat race, informing and educating others about the effects of modern globalised, irresponsible capitalism or even taking legal action against multinationals.

It is important for young people to read Marx to understand the dynamics of capitalism as well as more contemporary approaches to the excesses of neo-liberalism such as those found in the prose of Noam Chomsky, the late Howard Zinn or Naomi Klein. It may be difficult to conceptualise what alternative there is to capitalism but this should not lead us to quietism: when something is wrong in its ethics and structure, we should combat it in any way possible.

If international schools do this they will be closer to the mission that the first international schools laid out almost 100 years ago, which was for a peaceful world where human dignity, diversity and respect were central.

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