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Feminist Utopianism & Education

Educating for the Good Society

By

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PREFACE

This book has arisen from a number of different areas of interest. My original interest lay in the writings of the Women’s Peace Movement in which feminist activists and thinkers used a wide variety of utopian and speculative texts to imagine and critique alternative possibilities for the development of a more peaceful and better society. This interest was then developed in my Ph D thesis in which I examined the ideologies of gender in feminist utopian thinking. My more recent involvement in empirical research on issues of gender equality in education raised questions about the polarised debate about the education of boys and girls and about the construction of gender underpinning policy and practice in education. Time and time again, in the analysis of policy and practice, we seemed unable to move beyond a model which sets up the education of boys and girls as two competing sets of needs. In this book then I have returned to my earlier interest in feminist utopian thinking as a means of interrogating the construction of gender in educational policy and practice.

There are a number of people whose support I would like to acknowledge. Firstly, Michael Peters whose work in setting utopianism in the context of education and educational futures provided me with the frame in which I could adopt the speculative approach to the question of gender and education. This book would not have been possible without Michael’s enthusiastic response to my proposal for this speculative approach. I would also like to thank Deborah Cameron for her guidance during the original project on feminism and utopianism. I also owe a debt of gratitude to my fellow colleagues in the Teacher Development Research Group, Alastair McPhee, Margery McMahon and Fiona Patrick who allowed me time away from other projects to complete this book and to the Faculty of Education at the University of Glasgow who supported a period of study leave in which I was able to begin this book. In addition I must acknowledge the readiness of Fiona Patrick and Margery McMahon to read a draft of the book and providing invaluable feedback in bringing together ideas on feminist utopianism and education. Finally, a special note of thanks is due to Linda Cunningham for her continued support.
CHAPTER 1

FEMINIST UTOPIAN THINKING AND THE ‘GOOD SOCIETY’

Introduction

Debates on gender in education in western education systems swing from a concern for the education of girls and women to what – in some quarters – has been characterised as a ‘moral panic’ about the engagement of boys in school education and more recently, in some areas of higher education and within the education professions. However, these discussions have tended to circulate in the popular media around the pattern of the attainment of boys which has changed relative to that of girls in national examinations and this does little to explore the educational experiences and aspirations of girls and boys, women and men within western economically developed democracies. In the midst, then, of this concern expressed both in the media and in educational policy about the attainment of boys, a feminist discussion about the future of educational policy on gender might seem unnecessary. This view must be rebuffed on several counts. Firstly, it is because there is the danger of us moving to a position where the education of girls is once again being eclipsed by concerns about boys’ educational attainment – indeed that the progress of some girls is in some way to be the cause of boys’ underachievement – that we need to continue to take a critical stance both to current policy and practice and to the formulation of future policy in relation to education and gender. Secondly, we need to consider ways forward that would serve both the interests of girls and boys, women and men. Underlying the statistics are the very different experiences of groups of girls and women, of groups of boys and men: where a range of other social factors such as class, poverty, disability, race, ethnicity and sexuality intersect with gender to powerfully shape educational experiences. We seem to be in danger of moving between two extremes in educational policy and practice: the case for girls/women, the case for boys/men and implicit in each of these cases is the view that, some how one gender ‘is to blame’ for the lack of progress of the other. The formulation of policy that swings from concerns and initiatives to support the educational progress of girls and women to a crisis about the engagement of boys and young men in education is ultimately to the detriment of both genders, to the educational system and to society as a whole.

Further, we have to also recognise that on a global stage the concern about boys’ underachievement relative to that of girls is a ‘localised’ issue. Globally, women and girls do not readily access education at any level (UNICEF, 2005). Even where primary education is available, social mores, employment and economic structures,
religious beliefs and family pressures can lead in practice to many girls being excluded or limited to accessing only a rudimentary education. This has consequences both for the individual and for the wider sociopolitical order. Lack of access to education means girls and women are excluded from other opportunities afforded through educational achievement and this in turn results in the perpetuation of social structures in which girls and women remain subordinate. There is now an urgent need for us to consider alternative approaches to the issue of gender in education. In this book then I look to the debates about gender in the visions of alternative sociopolitical orders found in feminist utopian thinking.

Feminists have used the genre of utopian writing to explore ideas about gender and social change. Feminist utopian writing can be seen as ‘a space to speculate’ (Wolmark, 1993) where feminists have imagined, constructed and interrogated understandings of gender and the implications of these for the development of the ‘good society’. In feminism the ‘good society’ is defined broadly in terms of the liberation of women but there is considerable variation in how such a society would be structured and how it would be achieved. A critical question explored in these writings is the process by which there could be a ‘willed transformation’ of society (Williams, 1980) particularly through the agency of women in order to achieve the ‘good society’. In utopian writing, education has been constructed as one of the means of bringing about ‘the good society’ but importantly within feminist utopian writing and thinking what we understand as ‘education’ is itself being transformed. In feminist utopian thinking, side by side with a critique of formal educational institutions, there is an attempt to think more holistically about the relationship between the educative process and the achievement of women’s self-determination both individually and collectively to bring about a realignment of gender relationships in the sociopolitical order. The central purposes of this book are to interrogate the different constructions of gender within feminist utopian thinking and explore critically the implications of these for future educational policy and practice.

Milojevic (2005) suggests that the “…Golden Age of feminist visioning belongs to the second wave of feminism starting in the west in, roughly 1960s and culminating in the 1980s” (p 131). Indeed during this period, a significant body of work was produced generating a range of visions of alternative futures. However, examples of feminist utopian writing cover a much longer historical period. Feminist utopian writing is a substantial but diverse body of work with texts being produced at various points historically when issues related to the position of women in society have come to the fore in the political imagination. This book draws from feminist utopian writing produced over a long historical period; the earliest ‘feminist’ utopian vision we will look at here is Mary Astell’s *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* which was published in 1696. My intention in examining a range of feminist utopian texts is not to retreat to some nostalgic construction of a golden age of women’s education whether in convent of the middle ages, the ‘bluestocking’ era, the girls’ grammar schools of the 1950s and 60s nor even those educational opportunities – formal and informal – fostered in the ferment of the early years of women’s liberation. Instead, we can look to these writings to explore issues that continue to be of significance in relation to gender and education today particularly when ‘gender fundamentalism’ (Kenway, 2004) is becoming prevalent.
as earlier gender reforms are being derided and dismantled. Further, feminist utopian thinking has continued to develop particularly in discussions associated with ‘third wave feminism’ (Baumgardener and Richards, 2000) and with ‘cyberfeminism’ (Hawthorne and Klien, 1997). In both these developments in feminist thought, questions relating to gender have been raised that are of significance to education. It is important to acknowledge the richness of the debate within feminist utopian thinking in relation to both the wider question of the construction of the ‘good society’ and the more specific issue of the educative process, particularly in the light of the current polarisation of views and consequent educational policy in relation to gender and educational achievement.

The position of this book is feminist, notwithstanding the contested nature of that term and the different positions that co-exist in feminism. It is difficult to discuss ‘the feminist position’ in relation to education in anything but the very broadest of terms. The discussions in feminism about education are far more wide ranging than is, perhaps, popularly assumed and reflect wider debates about the concept of ‘gender’ and our understandings of what it means to be a woman/girl. Rather than problematize the diversity of positions in feminism, the intention here is to actively engage with these different positions to consider educational futures in relation to gender and education.

THEORETICAL APPROACH

In this book, I develop an interdisciplinary perspective in order that the diversity of positions in feminism in relation to gender, education and future policy and practice can be explored. I, therefore, need to consider more closely, what is meant by ‘interdisciplinary’ in the context of this book. The study of women in academic subjects has expanded rapidly since the beginning of second wave twentieth century feminism in the late 1960s. However, problems are created by the bureaucratic organisation of academic institutions where, for example, the study of women in the discipline of psychology becomes separate from discussions about women and the law or women and education. Much of the work is dispersed and diffused across a range of disciplines leading to circumstances where debates and knowledge generated within specific academic disciplines do not come together. The particular focus of this book is to contribute to discussions about gender and educational theory, policy and practice by bringing together different strands to explore the construction of gender in feminist utopian thinking. To do this I draw on ideas from across a range of academic disciplines: psychology, philosophy, sociology, literature, cultural studies as well as education. My intention here is partly echoed in Bowles’s (1983) characterisation of the approach to knowledge adopted in Women’s Studies: “[o]ur aim is boundary crossing, a move away from this narrow disciplinary specialization (p 40). Notwithstanding this, interdisciplinary approaches can be reduced to an eclectic approach picking up a range of loosely connected ideas, discourses and debates within separate disciplines.

As Coyner (1983) cautions: “[w]e cannot take the research about women willy-nilly from its sources and string it together, expecting the result to be coherent” (p
Further, some interdisciplinary approaches can be limiting: interdisciplinary programs and projects do not normally contribute theory and method; they apply theory and method, to solve local ‘problems’. To address this criticism Coyner argues for the development of Women’s Studies as an academic discipline in its own right” (p 54) and so Coyner continues:

[w]e may have stumbled on our treasure unaware. We started with concern about sexism. But what we have discovered in women’s culture, and what we suspect about the way we will see knowledge itself when we look through our women’s eyes, is certainly far bigger than what we expected and far more dramatic” (p 54).

At one level, this proposition is attractive as it helps to delineate the scope and distinctiveness of feminist scholarship as a new academic area. However, such ideas need to be treated with some considerable caution. The notion of ‘women’s culture’ can suggest an essentialist construction of what it means to be a woman: that there are some universal attributes forming the basis of a distinctive women’s culture from which to generate knowledge and on which to base a definitive version of an alternative future sociopolitical order. Rather than the construction of a monolithic ideal of what it means to be a woman, what is evident in feminist utopian thinking is the interrogation of a range of positions with regard to the construction of gender.

One of the features of feminist utopian thinking is that feminists have used a variety of disciplines and media to explore, develop and critically appraise alternative sociopolitical orders: feminist utopian thinking can itself be characterised as interdisciplinary. Additionally, one of the features of feminist utopian writing is intertextuality where ideas are shared across not only different disciplines but also different genres of writing with the common enterprise of imagining and analyzing critically alternative sociopolitical orders. Discussions about the development of alternative sociopolitical orders can be seen to be taken up by writers within different disciplines and different forms of writing including literary works, high theory, polemic writings and genre fiction where the common attribute is the speculative quality of the work. Rather than seeking a pre-determined social system, feminists have been able to form, critique and re-form possibilities for a different social order in which women will be liberated. My intention in this book then is not to stitch together in an arbitrary manner a range of diverse ideas into a definitive and seemingly coherent vision of a single educational future but to consider critically visions of alternative sociopolitical orders that have been generated within feminist utopian writing and consider the implications of these for the future development of educational policy and practice. The potential of feminist utopian thinking can be illustrated by examining briefly some classic examples of educational utopias. In these we see the relationship between definitions of what it means to be a person and the educative process in shaping this to achieve an alternative and better society.
EDUCATIONAL UTOPIAS

The term ‘utopia’ is very much subject to debate. Importantly there is no definitive vision of a ‘utopia’ but what we have are competing visions of the ‘good society’. This diversity is illustrated by McKenna’s (2001) development of different models of ‘utopia’: end state model, anarchist model and a process model and in each of these, education is conceived of differently. The end-state model can be characterized as the aspiration and efforts to achieve the perfect and ideal society. End-state models seek to establish the perfect state and education becomes a form of social conditioning to ensure that inhabitants have those qualities and desires needed to achieve this perfect state. Further, the ideal state becomes one of stasis; all efforts are focused on maintaining the status quo and what follows is the all too easy slide into totalitarianism.

An example of an ‘end-state’ educational utopia is B.F. Skinner’s *Walden Two* (1976) in which he uses the utopian genre to envision the resultant good society created by an alternative form of education emerging from the principles of operant conditioning. In Skinner’s (1976) view, for social change, what is needed is not a new political leader or a new kind of government but further knowledge about human behavior and new ways of applying that knowledge to the design of cultural practices (p xvi).

*Walden Two* is intended to explore the social consequences of behavioural engineering. Writing about the publication of this novel in 1948, Skinner indicates that he decided “to write an account of how I thought a group of, say, a thousand people might have solved the problem of their daily lives with the help of behavioral engineering” (p vi) when behavioural engineering was “little more than science fiction” (p vi). What we are provided with in the novel is a vision of a self-sufficient community with a consciously experimental approach to shaping human nature through its educational processes. Frazier, the utopian leader of *Walden Two*, explains: “we encourage our people to view every habit and custom with an eye to possible improvement” (p 25). Through operant conditioning they have been able to create individuals whose behaviour ensures a harmonious and productive community. The ‘curriculum’ in the early years of childhood includes controlled problems designed to develop self-control and to motivate children. These are simple, everyday situations but are intentionally constructed to reinforce specific behaviours that conform to the ideals underpinning this community. It was through this form of an educative process based on behaviourist principles that, in Skinner’s view, a good society could be developed. However, maintenance of the end-state ideal becomes paramount so any means of attaining this idea is regarded as legitimate and further, any change is deemed as ‘degenerative’ and must be avoided at all costs.

The second model that McKenna (2001) conceptualises is that of the anarchist model of utopia. Education is no longer constructed as an educational system with formalised authority held by the state but instead is conceived of as a communal and participatory educative process in the hands of the learner. She argues that for
this form of education to be established requires a shift in outlook brought about
not just by a shift in the material conditions of life but through change in values,
beliefs and habits, that is ‘transvaluation’. In this the reconstruction of education is
not based on ‘authority’, whether this defined in terms of an individual’s power or
expertise in a specific area, but instead through communal discussion and debate
from which the underpinning premises of the educative process emerge.

Communal discussion is the keynote of A.S. Neill’s experimental school
Summerhill where all decisions are made at the school meeting at which all pupils
as well as teachers can contribute to the process. Summerhill is based on the
importance of freedom and the development of happiness. A.S. Neill (1962) argues
that though society is faced with enormous social ills, “it does not want …to lose
its sickness” (p 10) having resisted social change and improvement. Neill,
continues, that in the current sociopolitical order therefore, “our task as teachers is
to fight against a mass psychology” (p 10) where everyone is the same. For him,
a school that makes active children sit at desks studying mostly useless
subjects is a bad school. It is a good school only for those uncreative
citizens who want docile, uncreative children who will fit into a
civilization whose standard of success is money (p 19-20).

Neill’s educational utopia is based on a specific view of human nature in which the
child is essentially good not evil and so the core of the educative process is to
enable the child to be free. Summerhill could be described, as an anarchist model
of an educational utopia in McKenna’s terms where there is a radical change in
values, beliefs and habits particularly where authority for learning which is located
not in the teacher as is traditional but in the child.

McKenna’s third model, a process–model of utopia is based on John Dewey’s
(1966) model of democracy. The realization of an ideal society is not the primary
objective but instead the task is one of engaging actively in social experimentation,
which requires critical intelligence and which in its turn requires active citizens.
Education, therefore, has a central role. One of the aspects of process model
utopias is its critical and experimental nature. The critical and experimental
characteristics are evident in Robert Owen’s intentional utopian communities
developed in Great Britain in the early nineteenth century as he and his followers
combined socialist and communitarian politics to establish of alternative
communities such as New Lanark in Scotland, UK and New Harmony in Indiana,
USA. Within Owen’s experiments, education played a vital role. As part of his
critique of the contemporaneous society, Owen in ‘Essays on the Formation of
Character: A New View of Society’ written between 1813-14, saw two social ills:
firstly, most of the population did not have access to education and secondly,
the far greater part of the remainder of the community are educated upon the
most mistaken principles of human nature, such indeed, as cannot fail to
produce a general conduct throughout society, totally unworthy of the
characters of rational beings (Owen 1968, p 42).

A significant development is evident in Owen’s thinking. In New Lanark in
Scotland, Owen introduced not just a school but extensive childcare facilities with
a clear educational purpose and access to learning for the workers in the mill—both women and men. Though these efforts were enlightened for that period, this was, as Kolmerten (1998) argues, evidence of Owen’s “reform-minded benevolent patriarchy” (p16) rather than a radical reconstruction of society. The development of a system of childcare and schooling, for example, was partly intended to reduce the mother’s ability to develop ‘bad habits’ in the child.

When Owen transferred his efforts to other intentional utopian communities in USA and England the goal became one of creating a truly egalitarian utopian society, a central tenet of which was gender equality. By 1824 Owen was involved in the establishment of the utopian community of New Harmony in the USA, at which point, he created “…on paper at least, a blueprint for women’s liberation” (Kolmerten 1998, p 27). Owen saw these alternative societies as a way of sweeping aside the three evils of private property, religion and marriage, all of which were obstacles to the achievement of an egalitarian society (Taylor, 1985). In this process model of utopia, the intellectual work of examining critically the experiences within the evolving new sociopolitical order was vital. Debate, discussion, reflection were the driving forces in trying to realise an alternative way of structuring society. Thus in New Harmony education was not limited to a narrow definition of schooling. Instead, education was the formative process by which New Harmony could evolve from being a Preliminary Community—a staging post in the process of social change—into a ‘Community of Equality’, the utopian community. New Harmony became the gathering point for a number of intellectuals who sought a role in the conceptual development of this experimental society, if not in the day-to-day tasks of sustaining a community. Education involved adults and children of the community as well as the intellectual leaders. Issues and possible alternatives were being constantly debated in the community through lectures given by Owen and others and by the writings in the New Harmony Gazette. Although the community was short lived, what is important in Owen’s experiments and writings and in the writings of his followers, is the possibility of social change. Further, he highlighted education as one of the means of bringing about social transformation at a point in history when the foundations of an educational system to serve an industrialized economy were being laid which would strengthen a stratified society (Davis, 2006). Owen saw education not as the acquisition of knowledge and skills for work but as a process of character formation arguing that:

children can be formed collectively to have any human character…they partake of that plastic quality, which by perseverance under judicious management, may be ultimately moulded into the very image of rational wishes and desires (Owen 1968, p 49).

These three examples of different types of utopias illustrate the relationship between utopian thinking and the creation of alternative formations of education.
UTOPIA TODAY

The potential of utopian thinking in helping to generate other possibilities in socio-political policy including educational policy and practice is being recognised today. Two examples of this development are firstly the ‘The Real Utopias Project’ in the USA and ‘Robust Hope Project’ (2006) in Australia. ‘The Real Utopias’ project at the University of Wisconsin is an ongoing project exploring different aspects of social policy. Wright (2005) in his overview of the project argues that “the belief in the possibility of radical alternatives to existing institutions has played an important role in contemporary political life” (hypertext) and the purpose of this project is to “sustain and deepen serious discussion of radical alternatives to existing social practices” (hypertext). The Real Utopias project illustrates the materialist thread of utopianism:

What we need then, are ‘real utopias’, utopian ideals that are grounded in the real potentials of humanity, utopian destinations that have accessible waystations, utopian designs of institutions that can inform our practical tasks of muddling through in a world of imperfect conditions for social change (Wright 2005, hypertext).

The project since its inception in 1991 has dealt with a diverse range of topics including ‘Deepening Democracy’, ‘Market Socialism’ and ‘Gender Egalitarianism in Work and Caregiving’. Education is scheduled to be the focus of a forthcoming project.

Ideas derived from utopian thinking have been developed within a specifically educational context with the Robust Hope project being developed at the University of Western Sydney. Robust Hope is defined as having:

a futures orientation and a turning away from any sense of hope as something naïve, to a rootedness in evidence based experience. Robust Hope has psychological and sociological dimensions. It affects society and the individual and thus it operates at both a societal and individual level (Whitton 2006, p 13).

The focus of this project is to develop a conceptual tool to examine critically public policy and to allow the generation of policies which can be socially transformative – that is that hope as ‘robust hope’ is seen as something that can be attained.

These examples of current projects drawing on the tradition of political thought of utopianism where the possibility of willed transformation towards a good or at least better society is held to helps illustrate the potential of utopianism and utopian thought to consider one of the areas in education where current policy seems stuck in a paradigm where the needs of one gender are set against the needs of the other gender. Feminist utopian writings deal specifically with the question of gender and the construction of the ‘good society’. In this book we will look to this body of work to explore different ideological constructions of gender and the implications of these ideas for education.
UNDERPINNING IDEAS

As this book takes an interrogatory stance, it is important both to highlight and to problematize some of the key ideas underpinning the discussion. There are three terms embedded within the title of the book that we will examine here in turn in order to outline the focus and position taken in the book:

1. educating for the good society
2. the educative process
3. feminist utopian writing.

EDUCATING FOR THE ‘GOOD’ SOCIETY

At one level, there is a clear future orientation in an education system that prepares children and young adults for their future lives and roles in society and seeks to enhance the vocational or leisure lives of those adults who later return to education. However, it could be argued that this is preparing the learner to fit into the existing social and political structures. Embedded in the term of ‘educating for the good society’ is another view of the educational process and the future: education is not simply about reproducing the dominant sociopolitical order but is a means to social and political change. As we have seen with the three examples of educational utopias, there are contrasting ideas of the ‘good society’ which raise questions of how we define ‘good’.

A vision of a ‘good society’ is clearly value-laden incorporating the specific ideological position of the creator of that vision. Though the idea of the ‘good society’ would, in feminist writings, be broadly related to the liberation of women, within this there are some sharp differences based upon contrasting understandings of the construct of ‘gender’. Kristeva, (1991) in her influential essay ‘Woman’s Time’ (first published in 1979), identifies three constructions of gender, each of which has a different sociopolitical outcome. Firstly, there is a vision of the good society where sociopolitical structures and systems are established to guarantee women’s access to traditional male dominated areas resulting in a society where women gain entry into previously exclusively male arenas. Secondly, there is a vision of the good society which is woman-centred: ideas of femaleness and femininity underpin the sociopolitical order and practices which lead to the predominance of women politically and socially largely in their own separate communities but, in some instances, within the wider society. Thirdly, there is the vision of the good society where gender no longer has any social significance thus potentially creating a gender equal society. Each of these positions has an impact on how we conceive of and conduct the educative process.