

Beyond the Turning Point; considering the future of education

In 1982, Fritjof Capra's *The Turning Point* called for 'a new vision of reality, a fundamental change in our thoughts, perceptions and values' (1982, p.xviii). Using the work of Sorokin, Toynbee and Schumacher, Capra outlines the onset of an apparent impasse in Western capitalist societies. During the subsequent quarter of a century, his analysis has been endorsed and developed by many other writers. Taken together, these comprise a formidable argument that we are at a point of decline where we face economic, social and ecological disaster if we fail to recognise the severity of the situation and respond effectively to it.

This paper considers how far we have incorporated the need for a radical paradigm shift in our thinking into the education system and outlines some of the ways in which such a paradigm shift might take place. This means proposing a new conceptual framework for education in all its various forms; a means of opening up a discursive space for learning how the human laws we have generated and come to accept as fundamental truths, might be aligned with the natural laws we have ignored or failed to recognise for far too long.

The first section outlines the argument that Western capitalist societies have reached a turning point and reviews some of the critiques of free-market capitalism and the responses they propose. The second part considers the relevance of state education in Britain, considering its ability to encourage the sort of creative thinking which facilitates an awareness of the importance of individual human action in helping to construct new sustainable patterns of living. It is argued that one of the ways this can be achieved is through facilitating learning around patterns of human connectedness, a concept embedded within the natural world. It might also include the possibility of accepting that the extent of those interconnections go beyond our current ability to understand them. This suggests the possibility of an alternative model to the formalisation of education which has taken place over the last 50 years and a challenge to its narrow focus on individual attainment within discrete areas of learning.

Western civilisation in decline?

Written in first half of the twentieth century, Pitirim Sorokin's 'Social and Cultural Dynamics' (1937- 1941) comprises a large-scale exploration into Western history. It seeks to explain the development and decline of civilisations in terms of three cyclical value systems – the sensate, the ideational and the idealistic. The sensate value

system is materialist and sees the spiritual realm as merely a manifestation of matter. It regards ethical values as relative and sees sensory experience as the only source of knowledge. In contrast, the ideational value system sees true reality as beyond the material world, so that knowledge can only be gained through inner experience and ethical values and standards are absolute.

Where Western rational materialism is an example of the sensate, the ideational is represented by the ideas of Plato and Jewish, Christian and Muslim conceptions of God, with similar expressions in Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism. (*ibid*: 13 - 14)

The idealistic value system is an intermediate stage, representing a harmonic synthesis of the sensate and the ideational. For Sorokin, this harmonious blending of the two was an ideal stage where the cultural expressions of sensate and ideational values coexist, enabling the finest articulations of the arts, philosophy, science and technology. The flowering of Greek civilisation and the Renaissance are both times when the sensate and the ideational combined in a balanced and unified form. Sorokin plotted the way both the sensate and the ideational fluctuated in cycles of maturation and decline, so that following the Renaissance, ideational values followed a decline, as sensate values began to dominate in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution and the views of Descartes and Newton. This was accompanied by a gradual decline in religious observance and the predominance of secular belief systems. Sorokin believed that by the middle of the twentieth century, the predominance of sensate values was starting to decline and that the resulting imbalance would result in increasing levels of social upheaval. However as Capra notes, the current transformation is likely to be more dramatic than anything experienced before because both the rate and extent of change in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is so rapid.

Later in the twentieth century, Arnold Toynbee (1972) carried out another wide-ranging study into the way civilisations develop and decline, showing that civilisations reach a point of vitality, then lose their flexibility and begin to decline. At this point, society can no longer adapt to changing situations since they are unable to carry on the creative process of cultural evolution. When social systems are growing, they display endless variety and versatility but when they are in decline, they start to exhibit uniformity and a lack of creative inventiveness. This trend is accompanied by a loss of social harmony and the increasing frequency of social conflict.

It will argued in this paper that many aspects of education policy mirror this pattern of decline instead of responding to it; exhibiting uniformity where there is a need for diversity, inhibiting creativity by making education into a product which can be reduced to a system of accountability, restricting the learning process to a means

of promoting ever more economic growth. Perhaps however the underlying tendency of modern education to dehumanise the learner is of most concern; measuring efficiency in terms of 'through-put', rationalising the size of schools so that they no longer reflect the needs of the local community, insisting on post-16 provision without a thorough consideration of the range of learning needs this seeks to meet, claiming to be providing student-centred learning in university environments that are overburdened with the kind of bureaucratic procedures that militate against the best interests of students.

Writing in 1973, E.F Schumacher's 'Small is Beautiful' included the subtitle 'A Study of Economics as if People Mattered'. He was one of the first to use the phrase 'natural capital' and he refers to the short-sightedness of treating fossil fuels as income items when they are clearly capital items. He draws attention to the fundamental flaw in Marx's labour theory of value in that it fails to recognise that although we have made some of the capital which enables production to take place, this is only a fraction of the capital provided by nature. As he says, no business would be viable if its ability to produce was based on consuming its capital, yet we have consistently used finite sources of raw material as a source of income. In the past, our consumption of these finite resources was relatively small-scale, however since the middle of the twentieth century that consumption has increased rapidly and we now see that consumption spiralling out of control with the onset of global development, fuelled by a fundamentalist belief in the legitimacy of an endless pursuit of economic growth.

Richard Douthwaite develops this point in 'The Growth Illusion' (1999) challenges the accepted belief that economic growth needs to be maintained in order to lift people out of poverty and enable them to have a better quality of life. He argues that increases in GNP (Gross National Product) bear no direct relation to the quality of life that people experience. Therefore, a higher volume of trade does not necessarily improve the livelihood of most of the population or the ecological sustainability of the environment and may actually serve to further disadvantage those who are already disadvantaged. He provides a vivid example to illustrate his point. There is no doubt that the mass planting of spruce plantations in the U.K. following the Second World War increased the volume of trade, since more trees were grown, cut down and sold for timber and wood pulp. However, this creation of an ecological monoculture was seen by many as having a depressing effect on areas of natural beauty as well causing actual damage to the environment. We have now realised it is better to recycle paper and so steadily the conifer plantations are being replaced by deciduous trees or mixed woodland, resulting in a more pleasing

environment and providing a habitat for animals, birds, insects and plants. He says that the main reason economic growth is proposed as the only way forward is that capitalist enterprise needs to constantly expand to avoid going out of business; an increasing concern with accelerated patterns of global development.

Schumacher showed how the obsession with economic growth as an indicator of social well-being and the under-valuing of natural capital, was combined with limited thinking about the associations between size and prosperity. In simple terms, the notion of 'economies of scale' tends to marginalise the interests of individual human beings. He showed remarkable prescience in anticipating the exponential growth in the size of corporations that took place during the last decades of the twentieth century and the scale of the human and environmental damage they could cause. We have come a long way from Adam Smith's hopeful assertion in his Theory of Moral Sentiments that no-one would behave in the market in a way that would result in a loss of their public esteem. Free-market orthodoxy has compromised human interests through a competitive urge to maximise profits by expansion and aggregation. Schumacher compares Western materialism, where the standard of living is measured by the amount of consumption, with the notion of a Buddhist economics which would measure the standard of living by the amount of human well-being. If we continue to pursue unlimited economic growth and measure people's well-being by how much they consume, we set up a pattern of constant competition over scarce resources, at a time when we need to nurture a more developed understanding of our mutual interdependence and our place within the natural environment.

Free-market policies extol the virtues of the market, yet Capra (1983 : 201) shows that the concept of the market-place, as a space with a life of its own, carrying out activities separate from the concerns of individuals and the communities where they live, is a relatively recent development in human history.

Until the sixteenth century, there was no isolation of purely economic phenomena from the fabric of life. Throughout most of history food, clothing, shelter and other basic resources were produced for use value and were distributed within tribes and groups on a reciprocal basis. A national system of markets is a relatively recent phenomenon that arose in seventeenth century England and spread from there all over the world, resulting in today's global marketplace. Markets of course had existed since the Stone Age but they were based on barter, not cash and thus were bound to be local.

It might be said that we have been seduced by the prospect of affluence into patterns of consumption that are not in the interests of individual well-being, nor of communities or the environment. Capra insists that human laws are not natural laws and so to mistake affluence for well-being may prove to be a fatal error. We have learned to value the ownership of private property and wealth to a point where we do not see a problem with the unrestrained pursuit of self-interest. Neo-Liberals have been highly selective in their readings of Adam Smith, seeming to have overlooked his pre-requirement of a moral sensibility in market endeavour. Moral censure of business practice is only applied externally through pressure groups, not from within most large corporations.

The belief that humans are naturally self-seeking is a characteristically modernist viewpoint and one that ignores a deep sense of community that has existed for much longer. Capra's discussion of the original concept of private property serves as a timely reminder of a lost sense of commonality.

An important principle in all early societies was that of 'house-holding,' the Greek *oikonomia*, which is the root of our modern term economics. Private property was justified only to the extent that it served the welfare of all. In fact, the word 'private' comes from the Latin *privare* ('to deprive') which shows the widespread ancient view that property was first and foremost communal. As societies moved from this communal, participatory viewpoint to more individualistic and self-assertive views, people no longer thought of private property as those goods that individuals deprived the group from using, but actually inverted the term, holding that property should be private in the first place and that society should not deprive the individual without due process of law.' [1983 : 202]

In developing increasingly secular societies, we have lost a sense of the importance of the Christian and pre-Christian ethics which sustained social groups over thousands of years. By over-emphasising the acquisition of material goods, the merits of expansion and importance of competition, we have encouraged the acceptance of values that are both dangerous and unethical. What used to be seen as the sins of gluttony, pride, selfishness and greed have become advertising strategies, encapsulated in seductive slogans like 'Because you're worth it.'

Modern Western societies are based on a system of capital accumulation that theorists from Marx onwards have seen as having an in-built tendency towards instability. While there may be some dispute over this, there is little doubt that free-market capitalism favours those who are affluent. Successive United Nations Development reports show ever larger disparities between rich and poor, both within and between countries. In a globalised environment, this is unsustainable unless we are willing to continue to coerce poorer countries into accepting their lot. The rapid proliferation of systems of communication is making this ever harder to achieve.

Although capitalist economics are unlikely to be replaced by an alternative system for distributing scarce resources, there is a growing body of thought that indicates the urgent need for a move towards new forms of capitalist enterprise, which value both natural and human resources. If Sorokin and Toynbee are correct in asserting that civilisations demonstrate their imminent decline through an inability to respond creatively to changing situations, then such a change becomes even more crucial. Any education system which claims to be sensitive to current imperatives needs to recognise this if it is to offer patterns of learning that are relevant to future generations; it has a responsibility to provide learners with an environment that nurtures creative thinking and values human connectedness over competition.

In 'Natural Capitalism', Hawken *et al* (1999), set out ways of re-thinking capitalist enterprise by respecting and learning from the natural order of things, describing what capitalism would look like if natural capital was properly valued. They use the phrase 'natural capital' to describe the resources and ecosystems of the living world as a contrast with the current form of capitalism, the ecosystems of natural capital are valued at zero. They look back to the original conceptions of capital like those used by the economist Ricardo who emphasised the basic value of land. The concept of natural capitalism seeks to return to and expand this to include the whole of the natural world, not just where you grow crops or graze animals but the whole of the ecosystem which regulates atmosphere, climate, rainfall, fertility and so on. This broader concept also includes human capital in the sense of what makes us human and makes life worthwhile; those aspects which generate a feeling of community, create loving and caring families, which develop beauty, honour, integrity and creativity. If we do not value 'human resources', if we treat them as just another source to be exploited, then we diminish society's ability to support the wider purposes of being human. Economics is supposed to serve human ends, not the other way round. At present, free-market industrialised capitalism is both diminishing the natural world and depleting the proper functioning of human society. It is argued

here that the British education system's response to this situation is superficial and inadequate.

Jonathan Porritt's 'Capitalism as if the world matters' [2007] offers a more holistic model and extends the analysis provided in 'Natural Capitalism'. He argues that we are heading towards a global catastrophe unless we are able to find imaginative solutions to the problem. He sees the possibility of creating a sustainable future within a global market economy; employing strategies that work in harmony with the natural environment and promote human well-being. He challenges the orthodox and limited view of capital as comprising merely land and machines and money. Instead he sets out a model of five forms of capital – Natural, Human, Social, Manufactured and Financial. While the Manufactured and Financial capital are the familiar components of economic theory, the inclusion of Natural and Human and Social Capital involves a far more holistic framework.

Natural capital is seen as not only the basis of production but life itself since it describes '...any stock or flow of energy that yields valuable goods and services.' So Natural Capital includes 'resources (both renewable and non-renewable), sinks which absorb, neutralise or recycle waste and services such as climate regulation. Such a model tries to encompass the whole impact of economic activity, not just offer a partial view. The addition of Human capital is particularly important for this present discussion since it 'consists of health, knowledge, skills and motivation...as well as an individual's emotional and spiritual capacities...(so that)...investment in education and training is central to a flourishing economy'. This suggests not just more education – merely repeating the word, as Blair did, is not enough. This is not a time to offer more of the same, in the manner of neo-liberal market fundamentalists applying their deregulatory policies ever more rigorously in the face of their apparent failure. Instead we need to facilitate learning in new directions, enabling individuals to make connected learning, based on a critical awareness of a situation that requires their urgent consideration.

Social capital describes the 'structures, institutions, networks and relationships which enable individuals to maintain and develop their human capital in partnership with others, and to be more productive when working together than in isolation.' (2007 : 139) With some notable exceptions, it is hard to see how our education encourages the development of such a conception of social capital. Schools, colleges and universities are expected to compete with each other in order to secure a share of the market for their services. Failure to do so is met with punitive 'naming and shaming' rather than a recognition that such 'failures' do not occur in isolation and that we have an over-arching responsibility for the circumstances in which such

difficulties occur. If we are to 'develop human capital in partnership with others' we need to support and encourage improvements in provision rather than looking for cheap targets to attack in a questionable attempt to show how well 'quality and standards' are being maintained.

Naomi Klein's 'The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism' (2007) is a further recent critique of free-market capitalism. She picks up the link between free-market policies and fundamentalism, showing how their closed pattern of thinking means that they cannot co-exist with other belief systems. It has been suggested that the patterns of social breakdown that have been associated with the imposition of neo-liberal economic policies are the result of a fundamentalist intransigence, the belief that there is only 'one true way' to economic prosperity. Don Mitchell has coined the phrase 'market fundamentalism' with Neo-Liberals holding a

'deep belief in the sanctity of the so-called free market [which] insulated them and their followers from challenge or debate. Facts that set out negative social realities regarding poverty and inequality are dismissed as distortions of society caused by interference with the market.' (2004: 119)

The social and economic crisis that took place in Chile in the mid 1970s, following the implementation free-market principles, has been blamed on unwillingness of Milton Friedman's 'Chicago Boys' to undertake a critical examination of the actual human outcomes of their policies. Their response in the face of spiralling unemployment and the proliferation of soup kitchens throughout Santiago was to apply free-market principles more rigorously, on the naïve assumption that 'If it ain't hurting, it ain't working.'

Klein finds evidence to suggest the 'disasters' which have taken place in many locations ever since, are not the result of incompetence or mismanagement but are part of the way the capitalist system functions by requiring constant growth and short-term profits, along with a resistance to any attempts at environmental regulation. Drawing comparisons between Chile under General Pinochet, Russia under Yeltsin and Iraq following the fall of the Saddam regime, she reveals a consistent pattern of neo-liberal market reform, combined with the 'cleansing' of an alternative policies, so that the ensuing crisis becomes an opportunity for a 'pure' form of economic development.

The notion of disaster capitalism is not a complete explanation of the problems facing global capitalism, however Klein provides a disturbing number of correlations between environmental crises and aggressive free-market policies. In Sri Lanka and

Indonesia, the 'clean-up' operation following the tsunami saw land which had previously supported fishing villages sold to developers to build hotels for the tourist industry. The destruction of New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina provided the opportunity to dismantle public education and introduce private schools. Even where capitalist enterprise is not directly responsible for disasters, it is quick to exploit the situation to create private profit, instead of following strategies which promote human well-being.

Klein shows how 'shock therapy' is used as a deliberate means of imposing free-market policies by neutralising resistance to them. The systematic acts of intimidation carried out by General Pinochet in Chile are compared with the policies used more recently in Iraq. Both clear the way for the introduction of a 'free-market' and unconstrained profit-taking by favoured corporations like Halliburton and Blackwater. Klein's analysis imbues the critiques offered by Capra, Hawken *et al*, Porritt and many others with an even greater sense of urgency.

Even so, it is important to recognise that despite the considerable amount of evidence which assumes that the capitalist practices have taken over global commerce, an alternative view is growing that the extent of capitalist enterprise has been overstated; that the concept of the hegemonic, totalising reach of capitalism is based on a series of assumptions that overlooks the extent of non-capitalist activity. Julie Graham and Katherine Gibson offer what they refer to as a 'Feminist Critique of Political Economy' as a subtitle to 'The End of Capitalism (as we knew it)' (1996/2006). Proposing a deconstruction of the hegemony of capitalism, they

'...open up a discursive space for the prevalence and diversity of non-capitalist economic activity world-wide...[attempting to produce]...a language of economic difference...rendering visible and intelligible the diverse and proliferating practices that the pre-occupation with capitalism has obscured...'
(2006: p. x)

In the context of the present discussion, J.K Gibson-Graham's re-evaluation of the extent of capitalism, suggests a central role for education in its broadest sense, with their project aimed at 'cultivating subjects who can desire and inhabit non-capitalist economic practices' through the notion of building 'community economies.' They outline the existence of a far more diverse economy than the notion of globalising capitalism allows for; one that includes the alternative markets of local trading systems, co-operatives and barter as well as non-market transactions like household exchanges and gift-giving. These alternative markets can involve both

waged and unpaid labour and open up a space for activity on a human scale with the potential for individuals and groups to begin to re-construct the world around them.

Colin Williams' 'The Myth of Capitalism' (2006) follows a similar pattern of resistance to the notion of our becoming overwhelmed by global capitalism. He challenges the assumption of social life increasingly mediated through capitalist activity by looking at the lack of evidence for this actually taking place. He is concerned that we are being encouraged to accept the reality of capitalist profit-taking intruding into our lives, particularly when the myth is often promoted by those with a vested interest in such an enterprise. Like J.K Gibson-Graham, Williams seeks to replace the illusion of a commodifying world by highlighting the considerable amount of economic activity which is not motivated by profit and he explores ways to legitimise and extend these to facilitate more non-capitalist practice.

In a globalised environment, both the spread of capitalist activity and the notion of alternative economies are of immediate concern. It is argued here that if the education system is to take a genuine responsibility for helping to generate a sustainable future for its citizens, it has a duty to respond by initiating the means for gaining an awareness of the factors which threaten that future and the possibilities which exist for trying to ensure more favourable prospects for coming generations.

Re-thinking the future of education

Toynbee links social decline with inflexibility and the tendency to offer a uniform response to situations which require creativity and innovation. What is at issue here is the extent to which the current system of education values conformity. and it can be argued that many learning environments appear to encourage the accumulation of knowledge rather than genuinely creative thinking.

Theorists like Horkheimer trace this back to the impact of a trivialised – perhaps infantilised media which operates on short attention-spans, sound-bites and a reluctance to encourage deeper critical thinking and it can be argued that thinking in much of higher education is constrained within predictable, finite parameters. The possibility of thinking 'What if?' is subsumed beneath the need to try and ensure that 'At the end of this module, the student will be able to'. We need to ask whether learners are being equipped to face situations which require innovative solutions to problems. If education is really to be a flowering of understanding, we may have to address the current impossibility of saying that we don't really know what the student will have made of all the learning they are being offered. It may be more productive to

say that every attempt has been made to stimulate their thinking in ways they can make sense of – so that at the end of this module the student's learning may have gone off in all manner of unpredictable directions, depending on the meanings that they constructed around the learning they achieved and the connections they made with life as they understand it.

We need to question the continuing relevance of a National Curriculum which is based on frameworks that have outgrown their relevance and do not encourage creative problem solving in collaboration with others. There is no doubt that the 1988 Education Reform Act has improved the overall standard of education with more students gaining GCSEs at higher grades and better A Level results year on year. However, this pursuit of 'excellence' has been achieved at the cost of worrying trends in school exclusion, truancy and absenteeism for those who cannot compete with a more standardised educational market-place. The government's attempt to micro-manage the education system, exerting centralised control over schools, has resulted in them being less able to initiate and sustain genuinely inclusive strategies. The 'modernisation' of the education system has resulted in a culture of accountability and audit and its aggressive implementation implies a lack of trust in the integrity of professional educators. This modernising agenda and its goal of achieving employability is driven by the demands of the marketplace but we have to question whether education policies which are not inclusive are compatible with the notion of a learning society.

It may be time to explore the possibility that an underestimated aspect of education is an understanding of the need for learners to find the creative space to integrate their understanding of what is being learned into relevance for their own lives. In this way we can begin to actualise the potential for human behaviour to reconstruct the world. If we begin to develop individual understandings of the importance of creating sustainable ways of living, we can begin to share those meanings and use our interactions as a basis for aligning human behaviour more closely with the natural world; not only creating more stable environments but also restoring human dignity.

If we fail to maintain the current relevance of learning as a means of generating human well-being, we run the risk of simply producing more potential employees. In 'Feminist Praxis', Liz Stanley outlines the concept of 'alienated knowledge' which she uses to describe the tendency for male researchers to proliferate studies which do not refer to the needs and interests of women. This serves to remind us that it is always suspect to assume the relevance of the knowledge being promulgated. To avoid this complacency, education needs to

engage in a constant process of critical reflection, carried out as part of a reflexive learning dialogue with the learner.

At the same time, there is an urgent need to examine ways to promote human connectedness rather than persisting with learning environments that generate competition. Of course there is the demographic imperative of promoting 'employability' in the context of an ageing population and improving individual qualifications and skills is an essential part of workforce development. However it is also important to encourage a sense of shared purpose through collaboration in meeting this challenge.

This discussion has tried to question the continuing relevance of a modernist mind-set which assumes that the human laws it has set in place are inviolable, by revisiting Fritjof Capra's 'Turning Point' as well as more recent analyses of the capitalist society. It has challenged the Hobbesian assertion of the primacy of human self-interest as well as partial readings of Adam Smith being adopted to provide an excuse for individual greed. These frameworks have been used as a means of beginning to examine the ability of the education system to meet present needs.

In many ways, we have lost a sense of wonder and humility over the limits of our ability to understand the complex interconnections of the world around us and in doing so, we have started to threaten our continued existence. Jonathan Porritt is right in placing education at the heart of the transformation process that we need to undertake and he finds much already to commend in terms of education for sustainable development. Encouraged by the rallying cry of the World Social Forum that 'Another world is possible' he provides us with a fitting postscript.

'Two priorities emerge as regards 'education for sustainable development' on the formal curriculum: competing for space and funds to find creative and intelligent ways of enabling young people to learn and experience what it means, in practice, to be a citizen of our living Earth; and making sure that all places of learning embody that heightened awareness about responsibility to the world and its people in their design, construction, management and engagement with their surrounding communities'

(2007 p.332)