

Critical Mass

Preface: This short article was written by Phil Badger and Glenn Rikowski in late 1996. In the light of developments in education policy in recent years; specifically the rise of Academies (where sponsors can have an important say in the moral climate or ethos of schools), the proliferation of faith schools and the continuing debate on multiculturalism (see Cole, 2007; and Sen, 2006), the relevance of the themes and issues in this article has, if anything, increased. It has been reproduced here in its original form. Our original institutional affiliations are in place too.

References

Cole, M. (2007) *Marxism and Educational Theory: Origins and Issues*, London: Routledge.

Sen, A. (2006) Multiculturalism: an unfolding tragedy of two confusions, *Financial Times*, 22nd August, p.13.

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The kids, it seems, are on the rampage, out of control – in serious need of moral re-direction. But when people talk of the moral decline of society, of young people out of control and of the need for moral education to set things right, we have a duty to ask what they see as the form and content of such education. We may suspect that some, although not all, of the more reactionary supporters of moral education mean something akin to moral drilling sessions with teachers taking the role of ethical sergeant-majors and children endlessly repeating or writing out phrases such as “Thou shalt not steal”.

Obviously, this image is extreme and only the most unreflective and ignorant apostles of “morality” in education would advocate such a

practice, but it is less the promoters of moral education and more the less critical elements of their audience with whom we need to be concerned. We may suggest that "moral drill" will be ineffective just as the rote-learning of other subject matter often is because it is forgotten outside the classroom door or the school gate. Yet if we are ourselves challenged to say what form moral education should take then we may suspect that the moral drill brigade will be alarmed by our inevitably liberal answer.

Moral education, if it is to have any effect, must encourage children to assess values and to internalise them or not on the basis of that assessment. Young people need to claim *ownership* of values for themselves, and this means turning moral issues into a practical subject which asks them to confront the complexities of moral issues armed with their intellect and the task of trying to do the right thing. This approach would no doubt cause consternation to certain parts of the political Right because it questions the notion that morality is a series of commandments carved in stone and suggests that a questioning attitude is itself desirable.

Such liberal ideas may be castigated by some as not being part of the answer to the problems we face but the cause of them. Liberalism, it will be argued, is fatally allied to moral scepticism and relativism and, as such, is the enemy of social peace and moral consensus. Such a reaction is however fallacious. In truth, the conservative reaction to the liberal case is borne of the ultimate belief that, as Samuel Butler put it: "The foundations of morality are like all other foundations: if you dig too much about them the superstructure comes tumbling down".

The conservative instinct is that giving rational grounds for our values is impossible, and that therefore to attempt to explore our values is folly. Tradition and its unquestioned acceptance are the bedrock of a stable society from the conservative viewpoint. The problem with this is that while such a position may be satisfactory in a society in which the pace of social change is slow, and social mobility is severely constricted, it is not credible in the *laissez-faire* cultural melting-pot in which we now live. The whole context of advanced industrial society in its Anglo-American form is ruthlessly individualistic and engenders anti-traditionalist values which undermine notions of "community" and settled values. In this situation, the heady mixture of free market economics and social traditionalism which we associate with modern British Conservatism is bound by its incompatible ingredients to curdle horribly.

The alternative – for contrary to infamous assertion there is one – is to embrace a liberal rather than a conservative model of values and

to further acknowledge that it is the Right who suffer most from moral scepticism in their reluctance to “dig around in the foundations of morality” for fear that we will discover that the whole house is built on sand. ‘Liberalism’, of course, is a very broad church. There are some pews we would not wish to sit on. Certain species of liberalism, especially those varieties which cling to notions of ‘market freedom’ and the privatisation of public goods, are wholly deficient as tools for framing a new moral discourse for education. At best, such liberalisms result in taking the rising academic subject of ‘business ethics’ seriously. At worst, they cultivate forms of ‘market nihilism’ (where the only ‘values’ are those resting on Money and market advantage), the celebration of greed or the cynical moralisation of economic advantage and privilege. We would advocate a liberal analysis of the place of moral debate within the classroom which would not stop when it encountered entrenched economic and social interests.

In the end, the problem of order in our present situation is not one that we can solve by introducing the odd lesson on civics or the like, but it is one which may be partially addressed by giving a central place to moral education within the curriculum in compulsory schooling and 16-19 education and training. However, there are evident problems with the sort of top-down approach as developed by the National Forum for Values of the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority (SCAA). The ‘shared moral values’ outlined by SCAA – in the areas of society, relationships, the self and the environment – must be critically assessed and appropriated by young people themselves if they are to gain ‘ownership’ of these values. The application of SCAA’s New Moral Commandments for young people requires then to think about the economic, social and political environment they live in if they are to make informed moral decisions. Young people also need to handle the difficult issues surrounding the clash of moral principles – and SCAA’s list of moral values readily suggests possible sources of moral dilemma and contradiction. To be fair to SCAA and the Values Forum – and particularly to Nick Tate, its Chief Executive – they have realised that moral education alone is not enough. Tate’s advocacy of a Critical Thinking A-level is in line with our escape route out of the moral educational maze.

Moral education, then, needs to be supplemented by two additional educational inputs: critical thinking skills and a renewal of social studies in the curriculum. The former is essential for analysing moral dilemmas and conundrums thrown up by everyday life. Some leading employers support the development of critical thinking education on this score. Social studies would provide students with an understanding of the context in which moral principles relate to

moral behaviour and actions. There are problems with this line of thought. First, on critical thinking, cadres within the Conservative Party and the educational right brigade would wish to place substantial caveats around the notion of 'thinking' (keep it safe, constrained and bounded by the 'higher' values of family and nation) and would balk at anything 'critical' (thou should be uncritical of British economic and social arrangements). Secondly, social studies and critical analysis have been on the run – especially in post-compulsory education and training – for the last twenty years. There is no sign that this trend will be reversed. These *retro* features of the British educational landscape point towards the need to view the whole 'moral education debate' more broadly in terms of political economy.

As we see it, the issues at stake are wider and more fundamental than have been acknowledged thus far and connect to our future success as a society in both social and economic terms. British society, as Will Hutton has argued, is mired in the inadequacies of its own political economy and the roots of that inadequacy lie in the exclusion, either voluntary or compulsory, of so many of our citizens from political and economic life. The existence of a large group of individuals who see themselves as politically powerless and socially and economically helpless is potentially disastrous in a whole range of ways. Politics may be too important to be left to politicians but the average young citizen feels that he or she has nothing or little to say to them or *vice versa*. The standard of political debate reveals contempt for the intelligence of the population and the media's endless search for the sound-bite makes sustained argument almost impossible. In such a context, it is all the more important that we develop the critical faculties of our young people so that we begin to demand and deserve better from those who lead us.

Recent results from projects promoting accelerated cognitive development through a problem-solving approach to science topics show that the development of thinking skills in one area can and does spill over into an enhanced performance in others. We may suspect that this would be the case with critical thinking skills, which are anyway the foundation of success in so many traditional academic subjects.

The problems that face us are not to be laid at the door of education alone, as has been attempted by various governments over the last twenty years in relation to the so-called "skills deficit", but should properly be seen as systemic. It is no good us developing critical thinking for citizenship if our political and social frameworks do not admit of the activities of citizenship. What is

needed is a movement towards an educational future in which moral education, critical thinking in education (and beyond the school gate) and, finally, a renaissance in social studies teaching and learning are key driving forces. Such an approach would be part of a more general programme of moral and political renewal which transcends both 'traditional' and 'market' forms of moral discourse. Neither should we distribute these educational goodies only to those doing A-levels. We are in need of a critical mass rather than an enlightened few.

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This article is also available at **The Flow of Ideas** web site, at:
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