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ESD and the Current Crisis of Capitalism

Teaching Beyond Green New Deals

JOHN HUCKLE

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At a time when the global capitalist economy is in crisis, UNESCO's Bonn Declaration ignores economic and political realities. I argue here for a more critical form of education for sustainable development (ESD) linked to global citizenship education. I do so by reference to the limitations of the 'green new deals' being carried out as part of fiscal stimulus packages, the alternatives proposed by ecosocialists, and the partly conflicting and partly complementary nature of forms of critical ESD based in social and cultural theory.

In late March/early April 2009, 700 participants met in Bonn at the UNESCO World Conference on ESD to carry out a stocktaking of the implementation of the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development and develop strategies for the way ahead (See *Journal of Education for Sustainable Development* [JESD] 2009, multiple articles). At the same time, leaders of the world's richest countries met at the G20 summit in London to agree on a package of measures designed to inject new resources into a moribund global economy and clean up financial markets. The summit brought anti-capitalist protestors onto the streets to draw attention to the latest crises of capitalism (the credit crunch of 2007, the financial crash of 2008 and the recession of 2009) and the need to radically reshape the global political economy so that more sustainable forms of development can be realised.

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According to its post-conference communiqué, the G20 leaders agreed to measures to reform the world's banking system, restore growth to the global economy, strengthen international institutions, boost international trade and so, 'lay the foundations for a fair and sustainable world economy' (G20 London Summit 2009). The communiqué mentions using funds from fiscal stimulus programs to build a 'resilient, sustainable, and green recovery' and of making 'the transition towards clean, innovative, resource efficient, low carbon technologies and infrastructure'. The approach might be seen as supporting the kind of Global Green New Deal (GGND) or Green Economy Initiative proposed by United Nations Environment Program (UNEP 2009), but it is long on generalities and short on specific environmental policies.

If the priorities of world leaders were to restore the world to a slightly greener version of business as usual, the priorities of the participants at the UNESCO World Conference were to reassert the value and significance of ESD in ways that largely overlooked the politics of education and sustainable development. The Bonn Declaration (UNESCO 2009), issued by the conference, locates the challenges facing humanity in the values, rather than the political economy, of unsustainable societies (para 1); fails to specify what values, knowledge, skills and competences might encourage sustainable living, participation in society and decent work (para 4); is idealistic in suggesting that education is a primary agent of social change (para 5); fails to suggest what model or models of global democracy might give expression to the values and principles it promotes (para 8); and fails to suggest ways in which current economic thinking should change (para 13).

A conference declaration can perhaps be excused such idealism on the grounds that it is designed to appeal to the largest possible audience; that it is largely rhetorical; and that all or most of my criticisms were addressed in conference sessions. Nevertheless, the declaration (which according to some conference participants was not adequately debated) fails, in my view, to identify what is surely the core business of ESD: that of encouraging learners to critically seek out, reflect on and act on those forms of political economy, democracy and citizenship that may enable all the world's peoples to live sustainably with one another and the rest of nature. It calls for critical approaches and empowerment (UNESCO 2009, para 9), but fails to provide sufficient clues as to how teachers and learners might engage productively with, for example, the kinds of debate and protest surrounding the G20 summit (para 9). The starting point for such engagement is to locate the barriers to sustainability in the structures and processes of global capitalism and to recognise the limitations of the dominant models of sustainable development and the current proposals for green new deals.

THE CAPITALIST TREADMILL IN CRISIS

Snaiberg (1980) and Foster (2002) have compared globalised capitalism to a treadmill of production and consumption. Businesses, governments and citizens, all have interests in economic growth, or speeding the treadmill to produce higher profits, taxes, employment rates and living standards. Those at the top of the social pyramid are driven by the desire to accumulate wealth, while 1.4 billion people in the developing world (one in four) lived on less than US\$ 1.25 a day in 2005 (World Bank 2009). The

treadmill moves workers from self-employment into waged work and from common land into private ownership; requires businesses to invest accumulated wealth in new products and technologies if they are to compete; manufactures consumer wants in a way that creates an insatiable appetite for more; challenges governments to balance the needs of local business to compete in the global economy (low taxation/regulation) against citizens' needs for social welfare (high taxation/regulation); and is supported by forms of mass media and education that serve to reinforce its priorities and values. The capitalist treadmill has caused our global ecological footprint to exceed the world's capacity to regenerate by 30 per cent, and if it were to continue to accelerate at the rate of the past 35 years, then by the mid-2030s, we will need the equivalent of two planets to sustain us (WWF 2008).

The capitalist treadmill periodically enters periods of crisis, or capital overaccumulation, when it proves difficult to find markets for all that is produced and profitable sources of investment for surplus capital. Over the past 30 years, during the era of the free market or neoliberal capitalism, crisis was averted by the financialisation of the economy, that is, the growth of financial institutions to support consumer credit and indebtedness and provide a range of ever more esoteric financial investments to absorb surplus capital (Foster and Magdoff 2009; Harvey 2009). Banks competed by offering loans to riskier and riskier customers and by speculating on riskier and riskier derivatives. The resulting financial, housing, consumer and asset 'bubbles' delayed a crisis of capital overaccumulation, but when the bubbles burst and many assets proved worthless (leading to the financial crisis), sources of credit disappeared (the credit crunch) and the world economy went into recession.

The current crisis can be viewed from different perspectives as a crisis of the banking system, of regulation or monetary democracy, of the continuing hegemony of the United States over the global economy and/or as a political crisis of the legitimacy of the global order (Gamble 2009).

As Gamble reminds us, a crisis is a moment of danger and transformation. Neoliberalism has now been discredited. There is a turn from the market to the state. Economic, political and ideological orthodoxies are being challenged and there is renewed debate over forms of global governance that offer more sustainable futures.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AS REFORM OF THE TREADMILL

The United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development (UNCED), held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, sought to reform the capitalist treadmill so that it would deliver sustainable development, balancing economic growth with environmental protection and social justice. The keys to such development were doing more with less, using cleaner and more efficient technologies (ecological modernisation), and global partnerships between governments, businesses and civil society organisations (notably *Agenda 21*, Rio Conference 1992). The basic dynamics of the treadmill were not questioned in the mainstream discourse surrounding sustainable development, and in an era of neoliberalism, the institutional support and economic resources it required failed to materialise.

A collection edited by Park et al. (2008) examines the weaknesses of the Rio model of sustainable development. First, it failed to grasp the underlying dynamic of the capitalist treadmill and the linked challenges of sustainability, globalisation and global governance. Deregulated growth-liberating economies were expected to be able to solve many of the problems, and where they did not, the implicit belief was that the harmful side effects of progress could be contained by political will, with nation states agreeing amongst themselves to limit impacts voluntarily. There was an emphasis on economic incentives to do good things, rather than on regulatory mechanisms on a global scale to prevent bad things, and the influence of market-based solutions on the politics of the environment and development meant that the institutions of global governance (United Nations and related agencies, World Bank, International Monetary Fund [IMF], World Trade Organisation [WTO]) did not work well in terms of sustainability.

Second, the Rio model was based on an inadequate understanding of global environment and development problems, privileging transboundary problems, which can be solved by international diplomacy, over local problems caused by flows of such things as investment, trade, resources and waste in a global economy.

Third, it overestimated the political authority of nation states and their ability to build issue-specific interstate agreements (the demands of the treadmill mean that states often lack the uncontested authority to control local access to nature or its uses). Rio redefined environmental problems as technocratic problems to be solved with further (greener) growth and existing political mechanisms of distribution and decision making. It marginalised serious questions relating to the limits of growth, global governance and intra and intergenerational equity. These reappeared with the current advocacy of a GGND.

A GLOBAL GREEN NEW DEAL

Seventy-five years after President Roosevelt launched a New Deal to rescue the United States from a crisis of capitalism, UNEP and others are advocating a GGND (UNEP 2009) with three objectives:

- Revive the world economy, create employment opportunities and protect vulnerable groups.
- Reduce carbon dependency, ecosystem degradation and water scarcity.
- Further the Millennium Development Goal of ending extreme world poverty by 2025.

The UNEP links such a deal to the transition to green economies based on valuing and mainstreaming nature's services into national and international accounts; employment generation through green jobs; and the introduction or strengthening of appropriate policies, instruments and market signals. While the G20 agreed to use funds from fiscal stimulus programs to advance such economies, Barbier suggests that their initiatives 'fall short of a major green recovery effort' (Barbier 2010). Of the US\$ 3 trillion spent worldwide on fiscal stimulus by July 2009, only 463 billion, or

15 per cent, was spent on green investments. The G20's green stimulus investments amounted to only 0.7 per cent of their combined gross domestic product (GDP), with the United States and China accounting for over two-thirds of the total (also see Robbins 2009).

Barbier notes that the impact of green investments is limited by fossil fuel subsidies and other market distortions; the lack of effective environmental pricing policies and regulations; and the failure to provide for developing economies that face worsening poverty and environmental problems as a result of the global recession. However, he argues that the G20 is the appropriate forum for coordinating and innovating international policy in support of a GGND. Conversely, Thompson (2008) suggests it is unrealistic to rely on the goodwill of those who caused the crisis to implement radical change.

A realistic approach to a GGND should acknowledge the roots of crisis in a capitalist treadmill fuelled by the greed and recklessness unleashed by neoliberalism, and acknowledge the need to socialise (rather than bail out) financial institutions and take public services such as transport, energy and water supply into public ownership. The market cannot be trusted to find sufficient funding for the transition to sustainability, nor to implement change on a sufficient scale. Only by controlling financial and state power, and establishing truly democratic forms of global governance, will ordinary people be able to realise a GGND that is in their interests—a claim supported by ecosocialists.

ECOSOCIALISM OR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AS REPLACEMENT OF THE TREADMILL

Dickenson (2003, 2009) argues that the capitalist treadmill should be replaced by a green socialist economy in which coordinated participatory planning (Albert and Hahnel 1991), at all levels from the local to the global, fosters solidarity and self-management while avoiding the undemocratic features of state socialism and social democracy. By producing for need rather than profit and by using appropriate technology, such a society would lower ecological footprints, free people from the treadmill of work and consumption, remove causes of inequality, exploitation and conflict and end the alienation that fuels consumerism. New forms of global governance and democracy, together with new forms of environmental, ecological and global citizenship (Dobson 2003; Monbiot 2003) would enable the world's peoples to live fairly and securely within ecological limits.

Advocates of such ecosocialism (Kovel 2007) are now found supporting socialist and green political parties around the world and some were amongst the anti-capitalist protestors at the G20 summit in London. Their radical theory and forms of resistance have been examined by Gilbert (2008) but at the core of their beliefs is the need for a gradual and persistent redistribution of wealth and power within and between societies; the use of state power at national and global levels to reshape economy and society; and the desirability of the associated new kinds of work, lifestyles, democracy and citizenship. While anti-capitalism is essentially a movement of urban western society, it has links to a wider movement of global resistance (Kingsnorth 2004).

CRITICAL EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Referring back to the Bonn Declaration, we can now suggest that a realistic, rather than idealistic, ESD should locate the challenges facing humanity in those structures and processes shaping the global political economy. It should foster the values, knowledge, skills and competences required by citizens who are capable of critically assessing arguments and policy prescriptions from across the political spectrum, and acting on those they personally and collectively find to be most rationally and ethically defensible. These might include the ideas of market fundamentalists, national protectionists, regulatory liberals, cosmopolitan liberals and anti-capitalists (Gamble 2009) and/or those contained under an alternative typology offered by Held and McGrew (2002). Such ESD is close to global citizenship education (Huckle 2008). It allows learners to explore what model of global democracy might best promote sustainability and recognises that such a model may challenge current economic thinking by promoting economic democracy alongside political and cultural democracy.

Readers wishing to implement a critical ESD linked to global citizenship education should consult the Open Spaces for Dialogue and Enquiry (OSDE) website (OSDE 2009a). This site suggests that ESD should explore the relationships between global/local sustainability issues and languages, worldviews, social practices, power, knowledge, identity, citizenship and intercultural relations. The methodology outlined on the site allows learners to engage critically with different perspectives on sustainability issues, think independently and make informed and responsible decisions. It draws on positivist, structuralist and post-structuralist readings of texts of all kinds, enabling learners to establish their truth value, the intentions of their authors and the assumptions on which they are constructed (OSDE 2009b).

A related article by Andreotti and de Souza (2008) outlines four pedagogical and educational tools. Educational Tool 4 examines ideas about education and society and prompts learners to compare and contrast education with a social reconstruction focus to that with a difference focus. ESD practitioners will recognise debates between supporters of ESD based in structuralist or critical social theory (that seeks to question dominant power and knowledge; arrive at 'true' conclusions; and so promote social and environmental justice) and ESD based in post-structuralist cultural theory (that acknowledges multiple ways of understanding the world; explores the origins and implications of ideas; and seeks to create dispositions towards dialogue, systems thinking and critical engagement). The two are part conflicting and part complementary, but neither is adequately reflected in the Bonn Declaration which has an essentially humanist focus (ESD to promote consensus, equality, rationality and 'right' conclusions).

A RETURN TO BUSINESS AS USUAL?

By September 2009, there were signs that the world's major economies were emerging from recession. World leaders meeting in Pittsburg agreed that the G20 would replace the G8 as the body responsible for global economic cooperation and mapped out a new economic order in which countries will be urged to cooperate to avoid building up excessive trade deficits or surpluses. The IMF will regularly analyse

whether the economic policies of the G20 are consistent with ‘sustainable and balanced trajectories for the global economy’, but there are no penalties for countries that behave irresponsibly, and the Financial Stability Board (a prototype of the world’s first financial monitor that works alongside the IMF to provide early warning of macroeconomic and financial risks) has a tiny secretariat, no formal powers and no formal provisions to allow citizens or independent experts to influence its thinking.

The Copenhagen summit in November 2009 failed to produce a legally binding treaty to limit climate change since member states were unable to reach the unanimous agreement required under the UN framework convention on climate change. By February 2010 it was becoming clear that pledged reductions, under the accord devised by a small group of countries, were insufficient to put global development on a low-carbon pathway and given the economic and diplomatic difficulties facing the US and China, some doubted whether the replay, set for Mexico in November 2010, would take place.

The World Economic Forum, held in Davos in late January 2010, recognized that ‘economic recovery was weak, governments were skint, financial regulation inadequate, and global unbalances untackled’ (Elliott 2010: 24). Regulatory and cosmopolitan liberals continued to urge greater investment in green new deals (SICSWS, 2010; UNEP 2010) but most politicians and commentators gave their arguments limited attention as they sought to restart the treadmill or return to business as usual. The current crisis of capitalism is not yet resolved and as the majority bears the costs in terms of unemployment, public spending cuts and increased taxes, ESD has a role to play in both explaining the crisis and exploring both reformist and radical social alternatives.

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