Focus

Educating for Paradigm Change

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In this Focus article, Peadar Kirby examines the challenges for social change posed by the current financial crisis locally and internationally. The article particularly focuses on the deeper, underlying causes of the crisis while drawing attention to the kind of paradigm change which the crisis demands of us. He specifically considers the challenge to education provision posed by the crisis and considers its readiness to support the process of paradigm change. The article then discusses the emergence of the left in Latin America and the role of education and social movements in leading action for paradigm change. It concludes by debating the larger challenges of paradigm change that now confront us and the need for development education to become a space for debate and new thinking.

Introduction

Though we talk much in contemporary discourse about social change, in fact our culture is suffused with the most naïve notions about what this involves. We live in an era, very likely already at an end, in which our basic assumptions about change are evolutionary and optimistic: our horizon of expectation is that standards of material comfort and quality of life are going to improve for ourselves and for our children. When, as is currently the case, many face a decline in income and opportunity, there seems a generalised instinct to treat this as temporary and a presumption that things are going to return to a state of continuing improvement before too long. Indeed, many of the fundamental disagreements in public debate about today’s crisis relate to how soon this is likely to happen and what means are most likely to bring it about. Development discourse, whether it relates to development theory and practice or to development education, is particularly prone to these evolutionary and optimistic assumptions, reflecting the optimism of the post-war era in which the development project was born.

This article takes issue with such assumptions through examining the challenges for social change raised by the contemporary financial crisis, both nationally in Ireland and internationally. It begins by drawing attention to some of the deeper features of the crisis, features often hidden in mainstream
analyses. In doing this, it draws attention to the nature of the paradigm change to which this crisis challenges us. In its second section, the article examines the role of education in addressing this challenge, asking how adequate are our forms of education for the transition to a new paradigm of society. Section three turns to Latin America where new left governments are leading action for paradigm change; examining the process that led to the emergence of the new left, the role of education is highlighted. However, this section also points to the tensions and contradictions that are increasingly evident as political leaders seek to lay the foundations of what some of them call ‘21st century socialism’. These tensions and contradictions, it is argued, raise questions about the nature of this new paradigm and, indeed, about our dominant notions of development. The final section focuses on the larger challenges of paradigm change that now confront us.

**Crisis, what crisis?**

The general reading of our contemporary crisis is that its origins lie in the financial sector, which, due to the deregulation of the Reagan and Thatcher era, was incentivised to indulge in ever more risky and complex speculative practices. The many bubbles through which it created wealth eventually exploded with severe effects on the wider productive economy, resulting in high levels of debt both public and private, high unemployment, austerity politics and economic recession. This was worst in those countries that went furthest in deregulating their financial sectors, Ireland being one of the very worst both in terms of the reckless behaviour of the banking sector (rivalled only by the actions of the banks in Iceland) and the extent of the reliance of the national economy on the housing sector.

As far as it goes, there is nothing wrong with this account; the problem is that it avoids the deeper structural issues that the crisis reveals, instead putting the blame on the excessive greed of bankers and the inaction of regulators. It therefore leads to the impression that with a tighter regulation of the financial sector, action to return the banks to a sustainable business model and a period of austerity to ensure the debt crisis is brought under control, society can soon return to growth and prosperity. This impression has, unfortunately, become widely accepted thereby deflecting attention from the deeper systemic causes of the crisis. In a deeper probing, the founding chairman of the UK’s Financial Services Authority (FSA) and former director of the London School of Economics (LSE), Howard Davies, identified thirty-eight distinct causes of the financial crisis, among them the deep-seated inequality of contemporary capitalism and the unsustainable levels of personal indebtedness built up by many households as they tried to maintain high levels of
consumption while real incomes were declining over time. As Davies put it, ‘the rich get richer – the poor borrow’.

He also draws attention to the weaknesses of the political system, unwilling to impose stricter conditions on financial practices as politicians were captive to a naïve belief in the benefits for society of extreme market freedom (Davies, 2010). This analysis therefore focuses on inherent features of today’s dominant form of capitalism – the profound inequalities being generated by a free market system and the ways in which political authority has become deferential to the power of these markets (namely powerful economic corporations). Nothing in the reform agendas being implemented in Europe and North America promises to address these features; indeed, as the evolution of the euro crisis illustrates only too clearly, the needs of markets are taking precedence more and more over the needs of society.

Just a few years after the crisis struck, therefore, it is difficult not to conclude that the bulk of the reform effort is designed to salvage the very model of speculative financial capitalism that caused the crisis in the first place. This form of capitalism that became dominant from the 1970s onwards is based on a financial system that is to a large extent decoupled from the productive economy and, instead of making its money from productive investments that create jobs, goods and services, makes its money from highly complex financial instruments such as derivatives (which include futures, options and swops) traded by an array of new and often unregulated actors such as hedge funds and investment banks. It has been estimated that ninety percent of global financial transactions are now speculative and have nothing to do with productive investment (Castells, 2001). This has been made possible due to the application of the microchip to financial transactions, allowing instantaneous and real-time transfer of limitless amounts of money to anywhere in the world at virtually no cost. But also implicated, of course, are the political authorities who liberalised their financial systems, often under severe pressure from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), so as to facilitate these operations.

The other major feature of the crisis that is generally overlooked means that attempts to salvage the model of speculative financial capitalism, if successful, are likely to result in a future crisis the magnitude of which will dwarf what we are now living through. Few analysts of the crisis have examined the role of energy, either in creating the model of financial and highly indebted capitalism or in sparking the present crisis. The sociologist John Urry links inflation in the price of United States (US) housing in the 1990s to the declining price of oil and claims that house price inflation, which was around
2.5 times greater than increases in per-capita income at the time, was linked to the fact that the real price of oil was falling. This meant that households could afford to spend more on housing since they were saving on fuel costs. However, as petrol prices began dramatically to increase in the mid 2000s it brought the US housing boom to a shuddering halt as it ‘tipped financially weak households over the brink’ (Urry, 2011: 84). As Urry writes:

“The house price reductions in far-flung suburbs were most marked where there were no alternatives to the car and hence there was the greatest dependence upon the price and the availability of petrol. Households were spending up to 30 per cent of their income on travel. House prices in commuter belts dropped very steeply, so much so that some suburbs came to be known as ‘ghostburgs’, full of ‘For sale’ signs. This generated a more general reduction in consumer spending, similar to 1990-1 during the first Gulf War, and it led to the escalating collapse of especially investment banks in the US and then around the world, as this house of financial cards came tumbling down” (Ibid: 85; emphasis in original).

As Urry concludes, ‘the probable peaking of oil has already had major economic and social consequences that could be a harbinger of future catastrophes’ (Ibid: 82; emphasis in original).

Richard Douthwaite’s work on money and energy helps further elucidate this dimension of today’s crisis and underlines just what a fundamental crisis it is. For him, the crux of our problem is that the relationship between energy and money has broken down. For example, gold was essentially an energy currency ‘because the amount of gold produced in a year was determined by the cost of the energy it took to extract it’, resulting in a ‘neat natural balancing mechanism between the money supply and the amount of trading’ (Douthwaite, 2010: 58). However, increasing energy prices (due to increased demand especially from countries like China and steady if not declining supply) has added new pressures to the value of money today that pose a dilemma for policy makers: either reduce the amount of money in circulation to maintain its energy-purchasing power or else reduce dependence on oil-based energy. Either option has major consequences for economic growth.

So most developed countries have resorted to debt as a way of paying for their energy needs, according to Douthwaite, who supplies figures to show that Ireland’s debt tripled over five years and had the worst external debt per
$1,000 of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) among a range of Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries in 2006. With Greece and Spain, Ireland also had the biggest balance of payments deficit at the height of the boom in 2007. For Ireland, fuel costs rose from 2.26 per cent of GNP in 2001 to 4.17 per cent in 2008 thus accounting for more and more of the country’s foreign exchange, whether borrowed or earned by the sale of exports. He concludes that ‘without equitable, locally and regionally controllable monetary alternatives to provide flexibility, the inevitable transition to a lower-energy economy will be extraordinarily painful for thousands of ordinary communities and millions of ordinary people. Indeed, their transitions will almost certainly come about as a result of a chaotic collapse rather than a managed descent ...’ (Douthwaite, 2010: 82).

Understanding the full nature of the crisis we are living through, and the many factors that impact upon it, is therefore vital if we are to find solutions that are socially just and equitable, and sustainable. It is clear that there are now at least two fundamental challenges to the dominant paradigm of development that has emerged from the industrial revolution 250 years ago and been implanted throughout the world in the nineteenth and especially the latter part of the twentieth century. One is the relationship between the political and economic systems and, in particular, the issue of which of them is dominant; the second is the role of cheap energy in fuelling a growth-based economy. How these link with the growth of a speculative financial form of capitalism that has built up enormous levels of debt particularly in those countries that are most intensively locked into this high-growth model, may be complex but it is certainly a central factor in the crisis. Our future as a global society therefore depends on recognising that it is our central paradigm of development that is in deep crisis and on moving to a new paradigm. It is this challenge that brings the role of education to the fore.

**Challenges for Education**

A central role for education has always been to socialise people into the dominant culture and development model, making these appear ‘normal’ and inculcating the disciplines to allow people to live within their constraints. Development education focused on socialisation into the worldview of the project of international development that emerged as a successor to the system of European colonialism after the end of the Second World War. This was essentially a project that purported to be attempting to help the majority of countries in Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, Latin America and the Pacific to ‘catch up’ with those countries that had developed more industrial economies and, based on this, societies that were deemed more ‘modern’. In its more
progressive versions, development education brought issues of economic, social and cultural inequality to the fore and sought to ensure that processes of development benefited disadvantaged groups in society. However, both mainstream and progressive versions presumed a model of evolutionary economic growth that would eventually lift the majority out of poverty and offer a better standard of living to them.

Yet, education has never been wholly subservient to the society it served. It has always produced challenges to the dominant orthodoxies and been a space for inculcating alternatives to the ‘common sense’ of the era. Different eras have therefore posed different and varied challenges for educators. At a time when religious institutions dominated society, education was the space in which new ideas emerged often at great personal cost to those developing and teaching them. Similarly, it was educators who pioneered the methods of scientific enquiry that came to challenge the dominance of speculative philosophical approaches to the generation of knowledge. In more recent decades, educators have developed new social scientific approaches that have greatly deepened our knowledge of society and of processes of social change. All of these developments, though they emerged from the educational sector, went on to exercise major influence over public thinking and policy development. Education, therefore, as well as socialising people into dominant paradigms, is the space in which these paradigms have been challenged and new paradigms emerged. We can say that educators, being closely attuned to the intuitions and aspirations of emerging generations, are often the first to pick these up, deepen and systematise them, and seek to respond to them. And, of course, this is always done in an active and often very vibrant interchange between educators and their students. Education must always be essentially dialogical.

Paulo Freire is a towering example of such an educator. When I interviewed him in his apartment in São Paulo in the summer of 1980, he emphasised that many of those who purported to use his theories completely misunderstood them because they failed to realise that the objective was people’s liberation rather than the correct implementation of Freirean theories as outlined in the books he wrote. ‘I sometimes come across a praxis with the name “conscientisation” but which is really very manipulative’, he told me. ‘What I’m referring to are very paternalistic types of teaching activity. They might be called “conscientisation” but really they have nothing to do with it. They imply, despite how well-meaning those who use them might be, the preservation of the status quo, divorcing so-called poor people from the process of liberating themselves’ (Kirby, 1988: 59). This is an essential insight which
can be applied to all education: what matters is nurturing people’s curiosity and critical insight so that they become powerful and wise change makers in their own right, not the ‘correct’ communication of some previously defined body of knowledge. The former leads to paradigm change whereas the latter reinforces dominant paradigms.

Another major educator of the same generation as Freire is Thomas Berry. His analysis of education focuses on wider horizons than that of Freire but is similarly critical of its destructive effects. Education, for Berry, ‘became more an external conditioning than an interior discipline, more a training in manipulative techniques’ and functional to the imperatives of our scientific-technological age. ‘The creators of the scientific-technological age had only minimal awareness of what they were doing. The industrial civilisation that came to dominate this period has required some centuries of functioning before its creative and destructive aspects could be revealed in any effective manner’ (Berry, 1988: 94). We are now facing a transition from this manipulative age to establishing a new and more sustainable relationship with the biosphere on which our survival depends. This is the challenge for education today: ‘Education must be a pervasive life experience. Yet formal education must be transformed so that it can provide an integrating context for the total life functioning’, he writes, enabling people to understand ‘the immense story of the universe’ and especially their role in the next phase of that story (Ibid: 96-97). For Berry, therefore, the paradigm change that education has to assist, is a fundamental transition away from a narrow scientific-technological civilisation that is destroying the planet towards a wholly new and mutually nurturing relationship between the human venture and the rest of the biosphere. And, as he tellingly puts it: ‘At such moments of cultural transformation, the educational process must go through a period of groping toward its new formal expression’ (Ibid: 96).

If education is the space in which dominant paradigms are challenged and new ones nurtured, then the acute social, economic and cultural crisis through which we are passing raises central questions for educators. Where, in our extensive forms of organised education from the formal to the informal sector, do we find examples of liberatory education that challenge the dominant paradigm of change and create the conditions for exploring a new paradigm? For many working in the formal state sector, it is acutely depressing that, at the very time when education needs to explore new possibilities, it has been battered into complete subservience to the dominant neo-liberal, commercial paradigm that is the fundamental cause of the crisis. As Berry puts it, ‘the university may be one of the principal supports of the pathology that is so
ruinous to the planet’ (Berry, 1999: 76). And, it appears, the more acute the crisis gets the more determined are policy makers and educational managers to ensure that education serves no ends other than equipping students to succeed within this paradigm. The great fear is that we are educating young people for a world that is fast disappearing and failing to equip them with the critical thinking and practical skills to prepare them for a world of acute crisis and fundamental change.

While such a critique of education is shared by many educators, at least in the university sector, what is perhaps less widely appreciated is just how serious this crisis is. For not only is a new generation being denied an education to prepare them for the world they will live in, but society itself is being robbed of the space which is essential if it is to begin to face the fundamental challenges that now confront it. As outlined briefly in the previous section, we are amid the breakdown of a model of development based on high levels of debt but part of the reason for this debt is the increasing price of the model’s principal source of energy, namely oil, which is beginning to run out. This, then, alerts us to the fact that things can never return to ‘business as usual’ simply because the era of cheap energy, on which our present model of development was built for the past 250 years, has come to an end. Added to that, is the related challenge that our energy-intensive model of development has emitted such high levels of greenhouse gases that it is altering the climate in very dangerous and unpredictable ways.

Predictably, in a technology obsessed society, our instinct is to seek solutions in technology while neglecting the social structures in which such technology is embedded; one obvious reason for this is that we would like to think we can adjust to the challenges we face without the wrenching change in values, lifestyle practices and social structures that will profoundly impact all our lives. It is very revealing that we like to think we live in a scientific age in which we make decisions, both private and public, on the best of evidence. However, when that evidence is screaming at us that we cannot go on living as we have done we bury our heads in the sand and live as if the evidence of peak oil and climate change did not exist. This predominant social response indicates the failure of education to provide the spaces in which these challenges can be discussed, their implications for how we organise our economies and societies critically and thoroughly examined, and responses generated. Yet, this is only being done on the margins and superficially; by and large, our forms of education are failing society as they remain far too subservient to the dominant paradigm and therefore are unable to provide the critical space to begin incubating a new social paradigm.
**Lessons from Latin America**

The one region of the world where paradigm change does seem to be taking place is Latin America. Contradicting all the presumptions of neo-liberal thinking, country after country began electing left-wing governments from the late 1990s onwards so that some ten countries are now ruled by the left, and countries like Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador are experimenting with what their presidents call a ‘21st century socialism’. While major debates are taking place among social scientists about just how significant are the changes taking place in the region, a consensus is beginning to emerge that this is not just a minor modification of the neo-liberal model that has been dominant in the region for three decades but that a fundamental change of model is taking place, even though the contours of the new emerging model are not yet clearly visible (Wylde, forthcoming).

What is important for the purposes of this article is to appreciate the process that resulted in governments coming to power committed to a change of paradigm and the role that education played in this process. Understanding the process draws attention to the importance of a mobilised citizenry, the emergence of which characterises Latin America like no other region in the world over recent decades. As political scientists Philip and Panizza acknowledge in their recent book on the new left, as the power of the military has waned, ‘the importance of mass protests in shaping the outcome of institutional crisis has made mobilised civil society the new moderating power of Latin American politics’ (Philip and Panizza, 2011: 41; emphasis in original). Yet, these authors fully appreciate that what is needed is far more than simply spontaneous protest in resistance to particular governmental actions; for civil society to be effective, it must be a permanent presence turning grievance into concrete and realisable political, economic and social demands that help to unite a wide cross-section of citizens. It is the ability of civil society to do this that marks out Latin America and that explains the rise of the new left throughout the region:

“Underlying socio-economic factors and political opportunities are important but insufficient factors in explaining the resurgence of movements of mass protest. The social movements’ new role cannot be properly understood without taking into consideration the collective action strategies, institutional environment and framing processes that made it possible for localized social movements to expand their political reach and to challenge the political order” (Ibid: 50).
Silva has offered the most detailed analysis of how this process happened over about two decades in Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador and Argentina, and why it did not succeed in Peru and Chile (though in both countries this now seems to be changing). This analysis focuses attention on what distinguishes these new movements from the labour movement, traditionally seen as the backbone of social protest:

“People come together around a shared identity of place (village, indigenous community, working-class neighbourhood or barrio) intertwined with shared cultural and material concerns. Equally novel is the fact that these organizations joined streams of national mobilization and that their contentious action has significance beyond the locality” (Silva, 2009: 269).

In doing this, he adds, they challenged ‘theories that argue that their heterogeneity and precarious livelihood strategies absolutely prevent the development of their associational, not to mention collective, power’ (Ibid). What is clear therefore is that new forms of empowered action have emerged from the grassroots which have been able to find common cause in identifying neoliberalism as their common enemy, across the many class, ethnic, gender and ideological issues that inevitably divide them. In doing this, they have not followed any pre-set blueprint, indeed they have defied the accepted wisdom that such forms of empowered common action could not emerge from such heterogeneous sources.

What none of these analysts examine is the contribution of the practices derived from the work and influence of Paulo Freire on creating the conditions, particularly the empowered and socially aware consciousness, that is a necessary precondition for these movements to emerge. Yet, for anyone who has experienced at first hand the widespread impact of these practices throughout Latin America, this is an obvious dimension requiring attention. For Freire’s work is oriented precisely towards fostering a consciousness that probes social reality to identify fundamental causes, that develops the ability to respond in a creative and novel way to the injustices identified, that links people and groups to each other in a broad horizontal awareness of common cause, and that fundamentally inculcates a deep sense that people have power and through this power fundamental change is possible. All of these are precisely the dimensions that are identified by political scientists as the surprising and novel features of the contestatory social movements that have so dramatically changed the political landscape of Latin America and led the world in challenging the dominant neo-liberal paradigm.
Yet, of course, these processes are also full of tensions as is inevitable in any process of contesting power. Central to these tensions in today’s left-led countries in Latin America is just how far one goes in challenging the dominant neo-liberal paradigm. Essentially, one can identify two competing alternatives emerging. All agree on the need for more state direction of the economy, more social investment and more recognition of multiple identities, especially in countries with large populations of indigenous origin. However, where real differences are emerging is in the balance to be struck between economic development and environmental protection. Recent examples from Ecuador and Bolivia have highlighted these. In a forthcoming book, de la Torre highlights the differences that have emerged between the left-wing Ecuadorian government and indigenous and environmental groups over attitudes to mineral extraction: while the former sees this sector as providing jobs and economic development, the commitment of the latter to create a new relationship between humans, nature and development lead them to oppose the government’s plans (de la Torre, forthcoming).

In Bolivia, while the left-wing government of Evo Morales has deep roots in the country’s powerful indigenous movement, Schilling-Vacaflor and Vollrath conclude that ‘the compatibility between extractivism and a Vivir Bien (living well) regime (including harmony between nature and society) has increasingly been questioned’ and they give examples of standoffs between local communities and government agencies on these issues (Schilling-Vacaflor and Vollrath, forthcoming). The reference to Vivir Bien relates to the fact that the country’s new Constitution declares this to be the primary aim of the state. What essentially we see emerging is a more fundamental paradigm clash between those sectors of the left who see their project as being a more socially just version of modern technological society and those who see the urgency of moving beyond that paradigm into a society based on a more balanced relationship between human activities and environmental sustainability.

**Taking Paradigm Change Seriously**

In essence, therefore, we face a challenge not just of paradigm change but of disputing, at a most fundamental level, how far that change must go. Indeed, this is what makes our age so unique. Our human civilisation has passed through a number of very wrenching changes of paradigm, going back to the early settled societies of Mesopotamia, central and southern Mexico and the Andes, and China. Most recently, we have moved from feudalism to capitalism and, within the latter, from a largely agrarian capitalism to an industrial capitalism. The principal challenge to the latter has come from the socialist tradition and, indeed, there was the claim for most of the twentieth century that
a new socialist paradigm was emerging in communist-ruled countries. The collapse of these countries and the promise that for some they embodied, resulted in the naïve belief that the era of paradigm change was at an end in Francis Fukuyama’s famous ‘end of history’ claim. But what is unique about the present moment is not that our hubris led us for a brief moment to believe that paradigm change is no longer necessary but, rather, that our mental map of what kind of paradigm change is needed is in dispute.

The socialist tradition continues to provide a very telling critique of the inequalities that are a systemic part of capitalism and so to inform one set of principles to guide a transition to a new paradigm. Indeed, the collapse of real existing socialism as it used to be called has given new life and creativity to that tradition, nowhere more evident than in Latin America. However, might such a new paradigm be enough? This is what is in dispute as some draw disquieting attention to the fundamental challenge to our industrial societies posed by peak oil and the ever more intensive emission of greenhouse gases that are changing our climate in ominous ways. For those who take this challenge seriously, what is urgently required is a far deeper paradigm change, to a steady-state economy using far lower levels of energy and achieving low-carbon ways of producing and consuming goods and services. As with any true paradigm change (such, for example, as the transition from the Roman Empire to the Middle Ages, or from subsistence agriculture to industrial society), the contours of the new society are only perceived in the faintest of ways.

Kirby and Murphy outlined the paradigm options that now face Irish society as a developmental social-democratic model or an ecological or ethical socialist model (Kirby and Murphy, 2011: 205-7) and they identified various sectors of civil society that espouse these models, though often only vaguely. However, as this paper has argued, what will be crucial in developing society’s awareness of these options and what they entail, and in empowering society to act so as to move decisively towards paradigm change, will be the contribution of education. Development education is particularly challenged to rethink what development means in this new context and how to expand its horizons and become a space for debate and new thinking. Environmentalists also are challenged to move beyond what is often a narrow ‘green’ agenda to join debates about political economy models and how we move to a new paradigm in a constructive way. Fundamentally, we all need critically to examine the often optimistic and evolutionary assumptions we have about social change and to realise that paradigm change is a process of very fundamental struggle which more often than not involves great upheaval, destruction and violence. What can make the difference between collapse and transition is education; perhaps
never before have educators been more challenged to provide the spaces for society to grope towards a new future, to use Berry’s telling and very accurate term.

References


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