Stereotyping the Poor: Why Development Educators Need to Challenge the Myths of Austerity

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We are living through what is arguably the severest economic depression since the 1920s with accelerating unemployment, flat-lining growth and rising poverty levels across Europe. Governments inside and out of the Euro zone have responded to the crisis by cutting public expenditure and welfare spending and increasing taxes; a formula described by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) as 'fiscal consolidation' that aims to limit borrowing and, above all, stimulate growth. Amid growing concerns that these economic stimulus policies are resulting in 'economic deterioration' rather than the green shoots of recovery, the IMF has cautioned against further austerity measures (*New Statesman*, 24 January 2013) and has 'slashed' its global growth forecast for 2013 (*Financial Times*, 9 July 2013).

A worrying trend in the public debate on the recession, particularly among decision-makers and in the media, and which should concern development educators, is the increasing use of stereotypes that are designed very specifically to blame the poor both for their own poverty and the wider economic malaise. 'Shirkers', 'skivers' and 'scroungers' have all too evidently and readily entered public parlance to denote the idle working-class, content to coast on benefits rather than do a day's work. For example, a graph capturing the number of times the word 'scrounger' is used by UK newspapers from 1994 to 2012 shows a spike in usage from just over 500 at the start of the 2008 recession to 3,500 in 2012 (Edwards, 2013). And yet a recurring element of government austerity measures in Europe has been cuts in social welfare protections with the UK announcing 'the biggest cuts in state spending since World War II' and the Irish government taking €4 billion out of public spending in 2011 (BBC, 21 May 2012). The narrative accompanying these cuts is that government belt-tightening is needed to navigate the choppy waters of recession but is often fed to the public under the cover of myths and stereotypes linking the state burden of the poor and unemployed to economic stasis.

A recent European Commission 'Staff Working Document' on development education suggests that 'Developing a better understanding of development challenges requires, inter alia, the development of analytical and critical skills' (2012: 4). These skills better equip citizens to understand the 'complex and interconnected aspects of development' toward 'democratic participation in development efforts' (ibid: 4-5). Paulo Freire described this process as the 'awakening of critical consciousness' enabling people to enter the historical process as 'responsible subjects' rather than oppressed objects (1970: 18). Demystifying the world and the causes of inequities and injustices has therefore been a central tenet of development education practice for over forty years and we need to apply its critical thinking skills in response to the wave of austerity measures being implemented across Europe. This article considers some of the ways in which the poor are being targeted by stereotypes and austerity measures in Britain and Ireland and argues that development educators should take up their educational cudgels to challenge the myths underpinning economic decision-making.

Skivers and Strivers

In a speech to the 2012 Conservative party conference the British Chancellor, George Osborne, asked 'where's the fairness for the shift worker leaving home in the dark hours of the morning, who looks up at the closed blinds of the next door neighbour sleeping off a life in benefits?' (*Guardian*, 11 April 2013). In a divisive, demeaning speech Osborne said 'We speak for all those who want to work hard and get on' which appeared to suggest that those out of work were idle and settled for a life on benefits (Conservative Party, 2012). Anna Coote and Sarah Lyall from the New Economics Foundation regard Osborne's contrasting of the 'strivers' as hard working, reliable and socially responsible with the jobless as unreliable and unproductive 'skivers' as 'pure fiction'. Coote and Lyall suggest that 'people hardly ever choose to be in or out of work', something determined by the wider economy. They add that Osborne's comments ignore the legion of unpaid carers at home and in the community without whom 'the economy would grind to a halt' (*Guardian*, 11 April 2013).

Osborne's cabinet colleague, Iain Duncan Smith, the Work and Pensions Secretary, has contributed to the stereotyping of the poor by suggesting that 'the biggest indicator of child poverty identified by members of the public was not income but having a parent addicted to drugs or alcohol' (*Guardian*, 31 January 2013). This view of child poverty is seemingly contradicted by a recent report by UNICEF on child wellbeing (April 2013) showing the UK ranking sixteenth (on a par with Hungary) on child poverty. Kate Pickett of the Equality Trust believes that this ranking reflects an unequal distribution of wealth, a lack of social mobility and political failings. She adds that if government ministers believe that children 'are only poor because their parents are feckless and workshy, they're [also] wrong – the majority of poor children live in working households' (*Guardian*, 8 May 2013). The Joseph Rowntree Foundation estimates 'that under current policies, over a million more children are expected to be in poverty in 2020 than in 2010' at a cost of £29 billion each year to the Exchequer (2013). This statistic betrays the Conservative-led government's notion that 'We're all in this together' and suggests that poverty not only blights the lives of young people – denying them opportunities for education, employment and self-development – but also adds to the tax burden needed for additional spending on welfare, housing and social security. In short, austerity measures exacerbate rather than ameliorate poverty levels and contribute to economic inertia.

Why austerity?

So, what are government ministers trying to achieve by characterising (or caricaturing) the poor, as Deborah Orr (*Guardian*, 2 February 2013) puts it, 'as a kind of self-inflicted moral freak show, to be examined, gawped at and despised'? Well, the obvious answer is that the government wants to shift the debate on poverty away from the structural causes of inequality and the failings of their policies to address them by drawing public opprobrium toward the 'social cost' of the unemployed. But then why not change course away from the disastrous path to austerity toward more interventionist, Keynesian-styled remedies to economic stagnation designed to create employment and increase economic output? In venturing an answer to this question Susan George suggests that the economic elite have done nicely out of the recession through reduced wages, weakened trade unions and enhanced privatisation with 11 million 'High Net Worth Individuals' collectively controlling $42 trillion in today's economy. She adds that this economic leadership is 'entirely subservient to the desires of finance and the largest corporations' and remains faithfully wedded to neoliberalism despite the glaring evidence of its failings (*New Internationalist*, 29 July 2013).

A common platitude from the European political and economic elite post-2008 is the notion that there were no alternatives to the socialising of private debt and bailing out of failed financial institutions. Perhaps most famously, this strategy resulted in the Irish state assuming responsibility for the toxic debts of all private banks and agreeing an €85 billion loan from the Troika of the European Commission, European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund (*Irish Times*, 11 November 2010). In 1992, the Maastricht Treaty recommended that public debt should never be greater than 60 per cent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and yet between 2006 and 2010, Ireland's debt soared to 276 percent of GDP (*New Internationalist*, 29 July 2013) reflecting the distorting effect of the decision to bailout the banks. The absence of alternatives to this disastrous course of action is another myth promulgated by successive Irish governments to justify the strong medicine of austerity.

The folly of the bailout was fully revealed when it emerged that socialising the debt of the notorious Anglo-Irish Bank, could total more than €47.9 billion by 2031 which is equivalent to 30 percent of Ireland's GDP (Anglo: Not Our Debt, 2012). Anglo was totemic of the reckless casino capitalism that contributed to the spectacular unravelling of the Irish economy and had no intrinsic value to wider society. The suggestion that there was no alternative to the burdening of the Irish public with the toxic debt of such a disgraced institution is a fully exposed myth. The country has been enraged by the disclosure of taped telephone conversations between bank executives arrogantly predicting a state and European bailout, fully aware of the consequences of their fraudulent activity for the bank employees, the Irish economy and its people (*Irish Independent*, 13 July 2013). As Fintan O'Toole suggests, 'The bankers' verbal strutting is rooted in a simple truth: the Irish banking system had already got away with a monumental fraud on the State' (*Irish Times*, 30 June 2013). This truth is recognisable across these islands.

It is worth contrasting the gargantuan sums committed to banks that have failed society as a result of 'light touch regulation' by the state and its regulatory institutions with the Minister for Social Protection's undertaking to stamp out 'welfare fraud and abuse'. In March 2013, Joan Burton pledged to review over one million social welfare claims and boasted of savings of €669 million in 2012 (Department of Social Protection, 2013). This figure is a mere trifle compared to the burden foisted on the tax payer for bailing out the banks and yet the minister has promised a 'zero-tolerance approach towards welfare fraud' (ibid). The response to the crisis in Ireland appears to have been one of rewarding the culprits who precipitated the recession and penalising the poor who are most vulnerable to its consequences. According to Social Justice Ireland (2012) 15.8 percent of the Irish people live in poverty and 14.8 percent are unemployed. Moreover, 29.1 percent of households at risk of poverty in 2012 were headed by someone in employment which is an indication of depreciating wages in recessionary Ireland. These statistics point to a socially polarised Ireland with widening inequality and this is underlined by a 2013 European Anti-Poverty Network Ireland report which found that the top 1 percent of the Irish population held 20 percent of the wealth, the top 2 percent controlled 30 percent and the top 5 percent disposed of 40 percent of private assets.

Myth becoming 'reality'

Despite the strong economic data linking austerity to increased poverty there is growing evidence that stereotypes used by governments and the media are hitting home. In a UK context, research by the Trades Union Congress (TUC) published in January 2013 'found widespread ignorance about spending on welfare, the reality of unemployment, the generosity of benefits and the level of fraud'. Among the myths detected in the research was that on average people think: '41 per cent of the entire welfare budget goes on benefits to unemployed people, while the true figure is 3 per cent'; and '27 per cent of the welfare budget is claimed fraudulently, while the government's own figure is 0.7 per cent'. The poll found that 42 percent of people believe that benefits are too generous and 59 percent that it has created a 'culture of dependency'. These statistics suggest that the stereotyping of the poor is having its desired effect and influencing public attitudes despite the government imposing a 1 percent cap on benefits until 2016 (*Guardian*, 8 January 2013). Even by the government's own assessment, the decision to cap benefits will hit the poorest 10 percent of households hardest and represents a *de facto* cut in income (*New Statesman*, 8 January 2013).

A briefing by Church Action on Poverty and Oxfam in May 2013 called 'Walking the Breadline' estimated that 500,000 people are living on food parcels in the UK and found that 'cuts and changes to the welfare system are the most common reason for people resorting to food banks'. The report adds that 'There is clear evidence that the benefit sanctions regime has gone too far, and is leading to destitution, hardship and hunger on a large scale'. It is not by chance that this growing dependence on food banks in the UK has coincided with 'the most swingeing programme of cuts and tax increases for 90 years' (*Guardian*, 26 February 2013) as 'slash and burn' economics have been waged to disastrous effect. Earlier this year the International Monetary Fund (IMF) released research 'suggesting that it had significantly underestimated the damage European austerity would do to EU growth rates' (2013). The research argues that European governments 'need to deprioritize debt reduction in favour of measures that actually boost economic growth' (ibid).

Challenging the narrative of austerity

Development practitioners who have worked in the global South are no strangers to the narrative of austerity that has often accompanied the implementation of economic disciplining measures by international financial institutions (IFIs), most notably the World Bank and IMF. The debt crisis in the global South beginning in the 1970s afforded IFIs opportunities to implement (some would say enforce) neoliberal reforms known as structural adjustment programmes which included reductions in social spending, the removal of tariffs on imports, privatising public services and reducing the role of the state in economic management (Prashad, 2012). The effects of these programmes were disastrous to the development of poor countries, many of whom today remain shackled by debt which has afforded considerable latitude to the IFIs in influencing their economic course.

We are seeing a similar pattern emerge in the global North, particularly Europe, in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis with the IMF emerging as a dominant player in the 'restructuring' of bankrupt economies. The narrative of austerity accompanying the crisis in the global North is that public spending needs to reined in, borrowing needs to be reduced and the social welfare budget needs to be trimmed. Development educators should use the history of the global South and the effects of structural adjustment to challenge the austerity trajectory currently adopted by the majority of European states. Rather than allow governments to heap blame for economic inertia on the poor, we need within the development education sector to challenge the myths of austerity which appear to have a growing acceptance within wider society. Paulo Freire suggested that 'By means of manipulation, the dominant elites try to conform the masses to their objectives' (1970: 128). Through critical consciousness, our knowledge of development and commitment to social justice, development educators can enable learners to interrogate the 'communiqués' dispatched by elites , often through a compliant media, designed to defend the indefensible. Development educators have an important bridging role in civil society in which they link the local and the global and enable learners to recognise the global influences on their lives. This role has assumed a special importance in the current global recession and part of this role involves strengthening social protections for the vulnerable and ensuring that they are not made scapegoats for the failings of economic policy-making.

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