

Text name: *Educational Futures: Dominant and Contesting Visions*

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What distinguishes hegemonic futures narratives from other, counter or alternative, ones is their capacity to convince others of the inevitability of a particular future. (Milojevic 2006 65)

In *Educational Futures: Dominant and Contesting Visions* educational futurist Ivana Milojevic has written a compelling and readable volume. Here I shall provide a brief description of the contents, while giving an overall evaluation of the volume. There is not space here to offer a complete examination of all parts of the volume, so I shall focus upon what I consider to be the most salient points. The text is particularly useful in that it highlights some of the strengths and typical problems with critical futures. The problem that I shall focus upon in the latter part of this paper is Milojevic's representation of East and West.

The text

The title is a good indication of what lies within the covers. This is a critical futures text, where ideas and images about "possible, probable and preferred futures" (p. 2) are examined. It "provides an overview and detailed analysis of arguments about where education, particularly state-based education systems, is and should be going" (p. 4). Yet as Milojevic states, it is neither about prediction nor prescription. Instead she sets out to destabilise the dominant narratives and offer alternative perspectives from other largely silenced discourses.

The book is divided into four parts. In part one Milojevic outlines historical futures discourses in education. This includes an analysis of

how constructs of time and the future have been used to colonise and educate "the other." Several alternative histories are outlined with indigenous and Eastern concepts featuring heavily.

In part two Milojevic highlights the two most dominant narratives in contemporary state education - globalisation and "cyberia" ("WebNet"). These are two closely related discourses according to Milojevic. Modern education - and particularly globalised education - is criticised as being "essentially practical training for a globalised market place" (p.57). The central issue with these images of the future is that they tend to be seen as "*the future*" (p.64) rather than as one of many possible futures.

Milojevic's approach is not simply to criticise the dominant discourses and highlight the benefits of alternatives. Rather she outlines the strengths and weakness of all the dominant and contesting visions. This approach gives the text balance. The weakness of such an approach is that the detached perspective often leaves the reader in a space of uncertainty. Which of these discourses, and in what combination, represents the best way to take us forward? Typical of critical futures, Milojevic chooses not to take a definite stance. A related problem is that the text at times becomes descriptive, as Milojevic outlines numerous theorists regarding the particular subject matter at hand. Nonetheless it does provide a sound review of related literature. The text will therefore prove valuable for researchers and educators looking to gain an overview of the relevant discourses.

In the third part of the book Milojevic posits three alternative approaches to education - the indigenous, the feminist, and the spiritual. These represent important perspectives which are still largely absent from cotemporary public education. The final section then attempts to weave all the visions together and looks to the

possible future of an expanded discussion of state education in The West.

The feminist vision, according to Milojevic, challenges the patriarchal presuppositions of the dominant educational discourses, highlighting the importance of emotional connection, nurturing, and internal transformation (pp. 146-147).

Milojevic remains critical of utopian thinking, but maintains that is it nonetheless important. She believes in the importance of "eupsychia" - "a prescriptive and improved imagined state of not only collective but also individual being" (p. 50). This includes the psychic and spiritual unfolding of the individual (p. 54).

However the text clearly privileges certain religious perspectives. For example Milojevic's discussion of spiritual alternatives focuses upon Eastern (especially Indian) and new age perspectives. The role of traditional religious approaches is left unclear. Milojevic leans away from conventional religion. Quoting O'Sullivan (1999) she writes:

Religion does not only attempt to institutionalize spirituality; in many instances this is done 'for the perpetuation of the institution rather than for the explicit welfare of the individual' (p.191).

The three alternative education approaches are in many ways related, as Milojevic herself states. They remind us that the future is not inevitable, that there are other options available to educators in the present age. This I feel is the greatest value of this book. Let us not forget that - as Milojevic states bluntly - all education is informed by cultural values.

West, East and stereotypes

One point that I would like to take up with the text is its representation of 'The West'. For example Milojevic finds that The West has forgotten indigenous, feminist and spiritual education. Yet as one who has lived and traveled widely throughout East Asia, such a criticism is not exclusively relevant to modern Western education systems. It may come as a surprise to those filled with romantic images of the Far East, but in Beijing, Shanghai, Tokyo, Seoul and Hong Kong, Milojevic's educational alternatives are even more distanced from mainstream education than they are in the West. These Eastern cultures seem all but completely possessed by cyber culture, materialism and the push for greater globalisation. Schools are dominated by rote learning, are heavily text-book based, teacher-centred, and there is an almost-obsession with "the test."

There may be a temptation to (once again) blame the West for the increasing materialism and left-brained, linear ways of knowing that now dominate state education in East Asia. We might suggest that Asia is simply copying Western-style society and education.

The issue here - and with postcolonial interpretations in general - is whether the West is itself being stereotyped and partially misrepresented in these depictions. Consider the following statements made by Milojevic:

Lawlor argues that it is thus western logical habits that cause us to fall into static, uniform, quantitative interpretation and make us fail to see qualitative process-related differences (p.480).

Milojevic also points out that indigenous critiques of contemporary education find a central focus upon "western knowledge and education" (p. 174). Further, as with so many other critiques of Western ways of knowing, Milojevic finds unfeeling Cartesian rationalism as the defining

thrust of Western cognition (p. 147). Finally she follows Griffiths as she concludes:

The current hegemonic approach to time can be described as western, Christian, linear, abstract, clock-dominated, work orientated, coercive, capitalist, masculine and anti-natural. (p. 223)

Yet is such an approach to history and time - and these preferred way of knowing - predominantly and peculiarly *Western* at all? Chinese ways of knowing are often seen as being based on holistic concepts such as the Taoist yin and yang, and Lao Tzu's fluid water metaphors (e.g. Capra 200; Jiyu 1998; Talbot 2000). But there is a tendency to romanticise this. My experiences (having taught in schools in Taiwan, urban and rural mainland China and in Hong Kong) have led me to conclude that such ways of knowing are (sadly) largely extinct in modern public education in the greater China region. The figure below of a teacher's desk in a Hong Kong School emphasises what has become of modern Confucian education. Text books, rote learning and cramming for exams dominate pedagogy.

The key is that in Chinese culture at least, the linear, patriarchal, verbal/linguistic and mathematical approach to education has a long tradition which precedes Western influence. Within Confucian education, the copying and memorization of the classics formed the basis of an education system that was literally designed to create products that would fit neatly into an "harmonious" society. In particular the emphasis was on producing public servants for the state (Fairbank & Goldman, 2006). Passing the examination for the public service could lead one into the higher strata of Chinese society, and scholars were revered. Candidates were literally placed in neatly

arranged box-like cubicles to do the public service exams (Gardner, Kornhaber, & Wake 1996), epitomising the conformist, linear and boxed-in ways of knowing. The examination system was seen to be of greatest importance, and able students put themselves to the task of memorizing vast amounts of information for a purpose no greater than regurgitating it in the public service exams (Fairbank & Goleman 2006).

To this day a virtual obsession with examinations stifles Far Eastern public education to a degree difficult to contemplate in The West. Finally, it should be noted that the proportion of Chinese tertiary students presently majoring in maths and science is several times greater than that of developed Western nations such as the United States (Friedman, 2006). From my experience, pantheistic, mystical and indigenous ways of knowing are totally absent. Further the Chinese degradation of the environment and subjugation of Tibetans and indigenous peoples proceeds at breakneck speed.

Of further consideration in being more accurate to the concept of "The West" is that if we look at the history of Western civilisation we find a long tradition of mystical and intuitive ways of knowing that have spanned numerous cultures from the time of the ancient Greeks to the present day (Anthony 2006; Tarnas 2000). Even the fathers of modern science such as Newton, Galileo and Kepler held deeply mystical conceptions. According to Kepler himself, astronomers were not mere observers:

... in all acquisition of knowledge it happens that, starting out from the things which impinge upon the senses, we are carried by the operation of the mind to higher things which cannot be grasped by any sharpness of the senses (quoted in Huff 2003 p 353).

The irony is that even as Milojevic (following Krishnamurti) critiques dominant Western education because its focus upon "information and

knowledge" does not lead to "intelligence", "goodness" or "flowering" (p.201), the same critique is now even more relevant to education in China and East Asia, where the spiritual has been leached from the curriculum. The discrepancy arises because Milojevic draws heavily upon Indian thinkers such as Krishnamurti, Sri Aurobindo, Tagore, Gandhi and Sarkar. These men taught and wrote much of their work before the economic explosion of East Asia in the latter decades of the twentieth century.

I therefore see the need to make a clear distinction between the Indian episteme and the current East Asian episteme, and especially to acknowledge the social and economic developments of Asia in recent years. This in no way illegitimizes Milojevic's essential argument that spiritual, feminist and indigenous perspectives may be enormously beneficial in modern education. It simply means that (ironically) hyper-capitalistic East Asian cultures themselves are the ones that are in most need of such perspectives.

The issues highlighted here are equally relevant to an emerging domain of futures studies - integral futures. This field tends to valorise the spiritual and The East, drawing heavily from the work of Ken Wilber. Such figures as Sohail Inayatullah, Richard Slaughter, Chris Reidy, Marcus Bussey and myself can be said to be influenced by, or actively involved in this field (see the *Journal of Futures Studies* May 2006 to read all these theorists). Ivana Milojevic has also been influenced by this movement, and uses the term "integral education" to describe a curriculum more deeply imbued with holistic and spiritual perspectives. The key point I wish to make here is whether such a movement (and critical futures literature in general) is tending to romanticize and champion the exotic and alternative - in Milojevic's case The East, indigenous cultures and feminist perspectives? I find Friedman's (2005) critique of transpersonal psychology for these very same issues to be relevant here. It must be noted that Wilber (2000) himself has

drawn great inspiration from the transpersonalists and Eastern philosophy - and his followers have been accused of being a "cult" (Bauwens, n.d.).

In conclusion to these concerns I would like to state that from my direct experience in working in education in The East and also in Australia, New Zealand, and visiting schools in the United States, I strongly believe that our terms of cultural reference need clarifying and upgrading in the twenty-first century. The world can no longer simply be dichotomised into West and East. With the increasing prosperity of Asia, the power shift that has begun may continue to a point where Asia will drive the world's economy within a few short decades (Friedman 2006). The dramatic social shifts in Asia which are accompanying these changes mean that references to The East as a culture founded upon spiritual and mystical precepts is now more stereotype than actuality. It would be something of an irony if Integral Futures were to take greater influence in The West in years to come even as Asia continues to "Westernise." We may find at some point that futures conferences are filled with "Eastern" mystics from Western countries and "Western" theorists from Asia.

Final remarks

Despite these significant issues, Milojevic's work is recommended. It highlights the important role of critical futures studies. Without the identification of the hegemonic and contesting discourses in education those hegemonic discourses will tend to remain implicit, invisible and viewed as inevitable.

Milojevic stops short of offering a definite prescription for our educational ills. Instead she concludes with a list of questions. She believes that an engagement with the central questions she posits and a deeper reflection upon "the full diversity of worldviews" and ways of

knowing will lead to the greatest beneficial changes in education and society (p.257). This leaves the reader less than certain about where she stands. Yet such an uncertainty may well be a necessity for any revision or shift in perspective and paradigm. It may be that the didacticism that tends to be inherent in dominant social, political and educational narratives is what prevents us from broadening our visions. Discomfort and unease may be the price we have to pay as we challenge our imagined futures.

Milojevic has made a solid contribution to pedagogical theory here. Personally I would like to see such a text form part of teacher training in B. ed, Dip. ed and masters courses. Future teachers and educational administrators should be engaging with these issues. As Milojevic indicates (p.45), our images of the future guide our current actions. Finally, according to Milojevic a paradigm shift is beginning whereby indigenous and Eastern conceptions of education are becoming more accepted (ibid.) As Kuhn (1970) so aptly pointed out, paradigms delimit not only particular domains of enquiry, but also the kinds of questions that are permissible. Milojevic broadens both the domains of knowledge and the range of possible questions. The possibilities might be uncomfortable to consider and the choices destabilising - but this is by necessity.

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