Review Article

Retooling the Mind Factory: Education in a Lean State

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Introduction

As Edward Herman (1999) points out: “Neo-liberal ideology pushes the idea that the market can do it all, that government is a burden and threat, and that deregulation and privatization are inherently good and inevitable” (p. 1). Giroux (1992), in challenging such ideology, emphasized the necessity of confronting the “political, economic, and social realities that construct the contexts that shape [schooling] as an institution” (p. 99). In *Retooling the Mind Factory: Education in a Lean State*, Sears adapts a Girouxian methodology to Herman’s ideological framework, and in so doing, exposes the neo-liberal “lean” instrumentalist approach to schools, citizenship, and society. Sears’ own title portends both the tone and the nature of the passionate critical challenge he brings against the concept of educational change and reform in a “lean” neo-liberal world.

Sears’ Purposes

Ostensibly a critique of the Harris-led Conservative government’s “common sense revolution” years (1995-2002) in Ontario, the scope of Sears’ work is not limited to a provincial framework. There are global implications. Sears is explicit in stating that his purpose is to expose the neo-liberal agenda that furthers market interests and eliminates alternatives. He aims to link education reform to a neo-liberal recasting of citizenship to fit into a “lean state” ideology. In the view of lean state proponents, citizens have “gained some heft during the time of the broad welfare state,” in areas such as education, pensions, unemployment insurance, and social assistance, but it is now time to shape up. Sears wants his readers to be aware of the lean state “disentitlement and deregulation” ethos which is stripping away the girth of social citizenship.

The shift to “lean,” the shedding of girth, requires educational reform. Whereas the system may have in the past focused on preparation for citizenship, Harris’ “common sense” now required it to create a focus on preparing for market relations. The state, according to Sears, is complicit with the free market in facilitating a two-step process. Using a theme first developed by Toffler (1980) in his discussion of the demise of “prosumers,” we (the producers) sell our services, and with the proceeds, we (the consumers) buy the products we produce in order to survive.

Sears’ intent is to “pierce” the commodification of education and children. He is, in fact, at war against a global neo-liberal approach to education, an approach evidenced in the Hoover Institute’s book *Education in the Twenty-first Century* (Lazear, 2002), which promotes education as serving the sole purpose of increasing the value of human capital.

Antagonist and Foil

It is tempting to think that this book is about education, but it may ultimately be about citizenship. Sears wants the reader to grasp that citizenship is the bondservant of education. As readers progress through the work, they are continually confronted with a “lean” (educationally and as a citizen) antagonist, who is often brought into clearer relief through juxtaposition with the “broad welfare state” foil. Through state-sponsored education, a citizenship of expectation (that of having personal goals met) is replaced with a citizenship of stress/responsibility (that of meeting employers’ requirements).

Sears takes us through an intricately integrated discussion of antagonist and foil, identifying the middle period of the 20th century as the apogee of liberal-humanist education and “broad welfare state” ideology. Sears cites Ontario’s famous Hall-Dennis Report (1968) as focusing on the value of citizenship over economic interests in a democratic society. “The society whose educational system gives priority to the economic over the spiritual and emotional needs of man defines citizens in terms of economic units and in doing so debases them.” In this view of things, failure is seen as failure of the system to accommodate the needs of the individual as much as the failure of the individual to meet the disciplinary requirements of the system.

On the other hand, the lean education system is typified by the Harris era in Ontario. In Chapter 2, in particular, Sears identifies the market orientation in Ontario Ministry of Education (OMET) documents. OMET’s preoccupation with foundational skills in the core subjects is strikingly similar to Gardner et al.’s *A Nation at Risk* (1983) which chased down the same reform alley a couple of decades earlier in America. The Ontario Ministry placed high value on “increased emphasis on math, language, and science,” and “required results whose meaning is made very clear by Performance Indicators” (p. 56).

Sears’ Context

Sears is a sociologist. He follows “historical sociology” methods to examine developments in school reform, within the context of the relationship between personal activity, experience and social organization as constructed over time. The reader will soon become aware of the explicitly Marxist, socialist-feminist, anti-racist, and activist ideological framework (p. 24), and, although not explicitly identified until the last chapter, the “audacious” (in solidarity with fellow “education activists,” p. 234) approach taken by Sears.

Neither the ideology nor the audacity is hidden or obscure. Before the end of Chapter 1, it becomes clear that in order for the purposes of this book to be achieved, and for it to empower a reconstructivist approach to education, there will be significantly more incisive exposé than conciliation. In the last chapter, Sears makes this explicit:

Resistance has been most effective when it has been most audacious in challenging the broader political direction of educational restructuring. This audacity is important as it allows the opposition to pierce the aura of inevitability that the government has tried to construct around its educational, economic and social policies. (p. 234)

Chapter Overview

The following discussion of individual chapters touches on several key “sub-plots” that Sears develops in order to shore up the resistance to “lean” schooling and citizenship.

In Chapter 1 (The Embrace of the State), Sears exposes the perpetuation of the hegemonic state. Society is trained by the state to be ruled by the state. Chapter 2 (Education for an Information Age) highlights the polarization of the worker, as conception of task is separated from execution of task. In Chapter 3 (Education for the Nation) Sears sets out to unmask some of the false assumptions upon which the “broad welfare state” approach to education is built, including the validity of the concept of “national character.” In Chapter 4 (Education, Citizenship and Inequality) Sears identifies the contradictory nature of the struggle for enhancement of equity in a capitalist-oriented education system. He alleges that students become habituated to the naturalization of the inequities in a supposedly fair and just system. Sears is resplendent in his disdain for this kind of education. He states: “This is clearly an education that rips out tongues, suppressing the capacity to speak except in the language of the dominant group” (p. 137). This type of language typifies the zeal with which Sears attacks the antagonist throughout his book. As a result of encounters with similar language throughout the book, readers may feel that they have been affirmed or exposed, emancipated or attacked.

In Chapter 5 (Education, Gender and Sexuality), Sears argues that reorganization in the workplace as the result of new technologies and management styles of the early twentieth century has increased the employment of women, but it did not improve their independence. Sears believes this has led to a simplified description of femininity as the “ability to reconcile the competing demands of paid and domestic labour, while masculinity is defined as an unencumbered availability for paid labour” (p. 175). Chapter 6 (Children of the Market) contains a useful view of the changing world of children and the impact of commodification on their views of the realities of life. Education reform, argues Sears, centres on a re-conceptualization of childhood so that standardized teaching and testing will reveal who can be best assimilated to the purposes of commodification.

Chapter 7 (Learning Freedom) opens with a reiteration of key themes that have been explored throughout the book. Education has taken on an instrumental essence. It is a tool in the hands of the lean economy to perpetuate the servitude and polarization necessary for its goals to be achieved. Sears makes it clear (if there is any doubt left in any reader’s mind) that the only hope for “shattering the apparent inevitability of the shift to post-liberal education” (p. 233) is to mobilize “audacious” (p. 134) opposition. A variety of inequities are red-flagged for the reader. At times it feels like only the sound of hoof-beats is missing from the palpable Pamplonian fervour of the early part of this chapter. Sears indicates that in order to bring a sense of equity and justice to the classroom, authentic transformational change is required. German communist playwright and theorist Bertolt Brecht’s work is presented as embodying a pedagogy for the redemption of learning from the clutches of formal education. Learning should bridge the gap introduced by lean education between mind and body.

Intricate and Intense

Sears has a way of bringing clarity to issues that may have clouded the judgment and understanding of reflective educators interested in authentic reform. He asserts that the Harris team managed to legitimize the argument that “lean” education reform is necessary and an ideologically neutral response to the changing world. Readers who validate Sears’ perspective will undoubtedly recognize the subtle yet pervasive power that the lean state exerts on the formation of education and citizenship. The reader must keep Sears’ context in mind. Sears is speaking from a distinctly un-embedded post-liberal position that calls for a brave, even radical approach to the world outside the lean economy. This work is written for serious scholars, for those who observe the grand patterns of education and provide rationale for resistance to current trends in education reform.

Sears’ writing is theoretically deep and firmly grounded in the thinking of highly respected leftist scholars. There will be no doubt in the reader’s mind concerning his awareness of resistance thinking in the areas he addresses. The intricate and dense detailing supports Sears’ purpose (resistance to the lean state) with in-depth analysis of a series of interrelated sociological developments or sub-plots, as identified briefly in the chapter summaries above. In fact, to readers who do not consciously and continually attach the “sub-plots” to Sears’ central purpose, this work might appear as more of a phenomenography (Seppi, 1996), a somewhat free-form mapping of concepts, ideas and social phenomena. One such sociological phenomenon is the role of women in the workplace (p. 170). This issue is examined in light of: shifting pressure on women to perform different roles in the workplace; their role in the traditional family; their gender role; and the formation, typically through what are presented as coercive external influences such as male domination or lean state gravitation, of biases against women. The examination continues with the connection of women’s roles to domestic impoverishment, the reduction of welfare benefits in the lean state, the magnification of consequences for women of such developments, the ability of some women in a lean state to gain control over their bodies and lives, and the resulting impact on the family as divorce becomes more likely to be initiated by women.

Another example of in-depth analysis is the deconstruction of aspects of the male consciousness, psyche, and socialized reality. Male identity is examined in a variety of frames, including muscularity, rationalization, flight from responsibility, defensive masculinity, reorganization of gender roles, and deficit of masculine authority. The reader is then introduced to the alleged results, phenomena such as dangerous teens, right wing offensives against teen “indiscipline” (p. 177), and the culmination in a brutalizing masculinity. The reader must be particularly attuned to the overall pattern and purpose of the book to shift from the tertiary level of example and analysis back to an understanding of how this all supports the central purpose of the book.

Three Problems

Sears demonstrates an outstanding knowledge of the ideological and sociological trends in education. The ideas and claims that are put forward are well grounded

in research and experience. However, three problems of a stylistic and methodological nature may have inhibited the accessibility of this work.

First, while in-depth analysis is appropriate, Sears may have crossed the line in some instances between analysis and tedium. He weaves a sometimes tortuously constructed, or at least esoteric, fabric of the foregrounding and backgrounding elements that contribute to the evolution and elevation of the lean state. The many-sided issues that support his key points seem often to become more important than the central themes of the chapters. To Sears' credit, the backgrounding lays a foundation on which his claims about the agendas of the Harris government ring true. For example, by the time Sears arrives at the statement by the Ontario Jobs and Innovation Board (OJIB) that: "A better future, then, requires that we break with the past...we are at a moment when history has little to offer us" (p. 114), the reader has been enthusiastically forewarned concerning the impending replacement of historical culture with technological culture. Nevertheless, there is frequently an intense and rapid unfolding of the errors of the Harris Conservatives, interwoven with key themes of the undergirding Marxist ideology, that makes it hard to keep all the pieces in order and connected. To be fair, occasional real-world examples such as events in an Ingersoll plant or a quotation from Harris give some relief from the staccato of ideas and premises.

Second, Sears doesn't always give a thorough critique of both sides of the issue. Early in my reading of this book, I felt angry at the lean state, but as I progressed through the pages and issues, I became somewhat inured and even dismissive of what I came to think of as Sears' rants. While the presentation of tightly packed sociological themes and arguments may be a legitimate approach to convincing the reader of the value of his response to the lean state, some readers may nonetheless be irritated by this "cheerleading" approach. For instance, Sears, in one of his digressions, ends up critiquing the physically lean person as a product of the lean state. His comments are intended to contribute to a serious examination of the issue, yet there are no alternate considerations regarding the benefits of either figurative or literal leanness. Another unbalanced reporting example arises in relation to Sears' comments concerning the crackdown on Toronto transit fare cheaters. This is presented as an example of a "harsh racial dynamic" (p. 19) that is consistent with a lean disciplinary regime. Yet, readers of Malcolm Gladwell's *The Tipping Point* (2002) will recall his commentary concerning the reclamation of the New York City subway system from fare cheaters and hooligans for the safe use by public transit riders. In Gladwell's view, anarchy is indefensible. Sears leaves the reader wondering, not about the legitimacy of anarchy, but about the legitimacy of Sears' own beliefs concerning anarchy.

In relation to gender roles, Sears leaves no room for consideration that such roles might be influenced by psychology and physiology. In relation to the critique of administration, Sears does not recognize its positive functions such as dialogic leadership, facilitation of diversity, and empowerment of joint effort. As a result, the reader may be left with the impression that for Sears, the hammer of social activism may be turning too many issues into nails.

Third, on some issues, the rhetoric attains levels that move beyond the "audacious" to the shrill. In such cases the real danger is that the reader may not

be able or inclined to step past the emotional intensity to give the issues the legitimate treatment they deserve. Throughout his book, Sears declines to give direct prescriptive statements regarding the difficulties of schooling in either the broad welfare state or the lean state education system that he exposes from within the ideological context of the book. Yet, when he writes on sexuality in schooling, he becomes prescriptive: "There seem to be two steps that would remedy [the sexual repression of official school culture]. We must..." (p. 186). Sears' prescriptive approach in this case is accompanied by inflammatory language. He generalizes about the "viciously heteronormative environment" (p. 186) when speaking about the school system. The "reign of terror" (p. 186) of schools in relation to the issue of student sexuality is equated with the purposive position of the "chaste official heterosexuality of the school" (p. 186). This may not ring true for readers familiar with recent policy and vision statements of school jurisdictions across the country.

In a separate example, Sears discusses the gendered and economic roles of the traditional family. The brief deconstruction of gender roles may leave many readers grasping for supporting evidence. The traditional family is dismissed, out of hand. Inconsistent with Sears' methodology throughout the book, there is only a "sketch" (p. 160) overview of the evidence supporting this radical stance. In other sections, Sears has painstakingly articulated the research and supported conclusions about education reform, the welfare state, vested interest responses of governments, and so on. On this issue, however, the foundation is missing. The reader may be left with the feeling that Sears has moved beyond the disclosed (reasoned) activist framework to a reactionary response.

Conclusion

As a result of Sears' sometimes "intense" approach, some readers may come to view this book as more of an ideography than a practically meaningful response to schools. On the other hand, Sears presents a solid deconstruction of the neo-liberal education system and lean citizenship that may not be available elsewhere. The sometimes overwhelming ideological purity may seem to some to be a difficult line to toe, especially for readers who find themselves on the front lines of pre-service teacher education programs. I find hope for a practical response to this book when I view Sears as a radical reconstructionist, aligned to the ideological left of Theodore Brameld (1904-1987). Through the reconstructive energies that may be stirred by Sears, we may be a step closer to realizing and activating our intellectual, technological, and moral potential to create a world civilization of "abundance, health, and humane capacity" (Brameld, 1959, p. 19) for all.

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Glenn W. Rideout
The King's University College, Edmonton