

## Editor's Review Column

### Education Beyond Reproduction

Melinda Cooper, *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism*, Zone Books, New York, 2017. 447 pages. ISBN: 9781935408840 \$30.00 HBK

Penelope Deutscher, *Foucault's Futures: A Critique of Reproductive Reason*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2017. 261 + xii pages. ISBN: 9780231176415 \$30.00 PBK

Ezekiel J. Dixon-Román, *Inheriting Possibility: Social Reproduction & Quantification in Education*, Minnesota University Press, Minneapolis, 2017, 238 + xxviii pages. ISBN: 9781517901264 \$28.00 PBK

Sabrina E. Vaught, *Compulsory: Education and the Dispossession of Youth in a Prison School*, Minnesota University Press, Minneapolis, 2017, 382 pages. ISBN: 9780816696215 \$30.00 PBK

While it is not Melinda Cooper's primary stated aim for *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism*, her book is nonetheless helpful in avoiding what she locates as 'the trap of mobilizing a left neoliberalism against the regressive forces of social conservatism or a left social conservatism against the disintegrating effects of the free market.' (18). Ostensibly a book which convincingly shows how neoliberalism and new social conservatism are co-implicated in each other's survival and progress in the context of 20<sup>th</sup> Century and contemporary capitalism, *Family Values* analyses both the theoretical and political histories of this Janus-face of capitalism, where 'In extremis, neoliberals must turn to the overt, neoconservative methodology of state-imposed, transcendent virtue to realize their dream of an immanent virtue ethics of the market.' (63). It shows how these two distinct discourses and ideologies are 'tethered together by a working relationship that is at once necessary and disavowed: as an ideology of power that only ever acknowledges its reliance on market mechanisms and their homologues, neoliberalism can only realize its objectives by proxy, that is by outsourcing the imposition of noncontractual obligations to social conservatives.' (63). In a manner which is both erudite and theoretically convincing, Cooper lays bare the sometimes surprising and always interesting intersections of neoliberalism and new social conservatism. These intersections are particularly apparent to Cooper in the conceptual and actual relationships between family, welfare, and inherited wealth.

The resonances between the content and argument presented in this book and the field of education are manifold. Firstly, Cooper's invocation of the Poor Laws (and what she

sees as their updated revision in the discourse of family responsibility related to post-Fordist welfare reform) has important historical and conceptual connections to, for example, the purpose and practice of workhouse education in England, and its subsequent influence on the development of state education. Secondly, she specifically engages with the sharp end of the discourse of individual responsibility in the context of the problem of student debt, summarising the issue with clarity and verve:

democratization through public investment has been replaced by democratization through consumer credit, effectively transferring the costs of diversity back to the individual student and her family. The beauty of securitized credit is that it excludes no one a priori. By abstracting from class stratification in the present, it can accommodate all the differences pre-emptively simply by pricing them at variable rates and deferring repayment to some barely imaginable point in the future. In principle, we all have access to a college education, no matter how much we or our parents earn. Yet, private credit does not merely obscure the effects of class; it also actively exacerbates inequality by forcing those without income or collateral to pay higher rates for the same service. (250)

The debt then associated with this credit (also manifested in the context of private home ownership and the increasingly common return of young adults to their parents' homes) has been 'harnessed as a means of recapturing non-normative desire in the inherently regressive form of private familial debt.' (316). Reading these very tangible issues in the context of a broad and original theoretical discussion allows Cooper the capacity to step far beyond the now-tired critiques of neoliberalism which restrict its ideological repertoire as a critical object to simple and unfettered market efficiency. The rather startling conclusion one might draw from Cooper's book, for educational reflection on neoliberalism, is that the education of what is commonly called the neoliberal subject may best be conceived of as a socially conservative process, both in terms of the responsibility-oriented individual and family values imbued and the social stratifications they reinforce and enhance. One might further conclude that there is no such thing as a neoliberal subject and rather that the optimal or even simply necessary subject to be educated for a neoliberal context is, in fact, the social conservative. To assert such a straightforward conclusion without further substantial justification would be to simplify the argument and implications of this complex and important book. Equally though, it is the very possibility of drawing such radical conclusions from *Family Values* that makes it so important.

While *Family Values* reveals the cross-pollination of superficially opposed political and ideological discourses, as well as highlighting the potential traps for critiques of neoliberalism or social conservatism from the left, Sabina E. Vaught's *Compulsory: Education and the Dispossession of Youth in a Prison School* gives voice to some of the individuals most ill-served by either ideology. For Vaught, 'to understand the massive state apparatus we call public schooling, we have to understand its consanguineous apparatuses, prison schooling chief among those.' (2). *Compulsory*, then, is a critical ethnography which 'appropriates and disrupts; it colonizes and challenges' (3), and in so doing, 'responds to and puts forth a charge for change. It suggests that power can be mapped across complex dimensions of societal context and that, therefore, praxes of power can potentially be disrupted, interrupted, transformed, or cultivated.' (4). It is the story of Lincoln prison (Lincoln Treatment Center),

and, more specifically, Lincoln prison school, which Vaught reads ‘as an illustrative, paradigmatic institution, not as an isolated site [...] as a window onto the massive institutional practices of juvenile schooling, knowledge production, and incarceration in the United States’ (19). Un-sanctimoniously autobiographical, theoretically agile, and, perhaps most importantly, extremely sensitive to the problematic power relations experienced in the processes of conducting the empirical ethnographic research, Vaught has produced an urgent narrative.

While it might be somewhat hyperbolic to compare *Compulsory* to the texts of two Nobel laureates, not least because its writing style is self-consciously (and, I think, appropriately) unliterary, this book certainly has more than a little in common with Svetlana Alexievich’s *Cherobyl Prayer* and *Second-hand Time*, as well as even Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s *Gulag Archipelago*. This is not only in terms of its careful reproduction and integration of the narratives of prisoners into an important socio-critical work; there is also a striking sense of its reflection of an undertow of absent (or gestural rather than effective) cultural conscience evoked throughout. A harsh counter-narrative to the sustaining myths of both neoliberalism and social conservatism, Vaught supplies further, and perhaps in some ways even stronger, ammunition for the argument made by Cooper in *Family Ties*. Equally, by engaging with pedagogical issues in an often absurdly fraught context (where, for example, one of the prisoners takes a career-interest assessment which suggests he should join the police), Vaught is able to supply important insights for pedagogy more broadly:

The humanizing feature of institutional interactions is always extremely partial and double-edged. Even deliberately liberatory critical pedagogical projects, which this was not, that take humanizing as one of their central praxes have to be considered in light of the compulsory, repressive total institutions in which they are taken up. To begin to disrupt power on the Inside or Outside or to be “liberatory,” the pedagogical relationships formed cannot – intentionally or not – ameliorate the harshness of compulsory schooling in a manner that blunts insight. (212)

The stories Vaught relates are dense, interconnected, theoretically informed, consistently depressing, frequently unsettling, sometimes even funny – but only in a manner where the humour of the prisoners reflects an ability to see through the nonsense of their incarceration and its injudiciously exerted educational imperatives; something of a gallows humour, but for young men who are being told their lives are being made better through their experience. Throughout Vaught suggests that, even if it is in many ways more apparent at Lincoln, there is a dark undercurrent to compulsory schooling generally. For her, what she calls ‘Removal’ is ‘a strategy to abort the knowledge-sharing, collective generations that produce vibrant counter-publics’ and it is ‘effected through the state’s most massive compulsory apparatus: state schooling. Students are Removed physically as their homes are made sites of school-driven intrusion and intellectually as they are subjected to meaningless or hostile captive educational performances.’ (321). A serious and far-reaching accusation which, at the very least, poses significant questions to all of those who would defend compulsory schooling. And even if we do find it, overall, more defensible than Vaught suggests we should, how then might we respond to the huge amount of incriminating evidence she provides?

Striking out in a much more explicitly philosophical vein, Penelope Deutscher’s *Foucault’s Futures: A Critique of Reproductive Reason* describes itself as being ‘a book about

Foucault's children', present but often ignored in much of his major work; who 'become the base for a broader reconsideration of Foucault's work on families, procreation, parenting, "optimal" child raising, and the projection of futures as conjoined with specific forms of responsibility – for individuals, societies, and populations.' (1). Education, as a concept, practice, or reference, is never brought to the front and centre of Deutscher's argument, and is barely present in the margins. Unsurprisingly, though, the questions she *does* ask, and the provisional answers provided to them, offer much to theoretical reflection on education. Engaging in a critical strategy which attempts primarily to draw together a range of prominent theoretical trajectories, observing what they have to offer one another – as opposed to the more common strategy of highlighting differences, often in the implicit process of deciding the 'winner' – Deutscher has produced a text which is far more than simply good secondary literature on its more famous subjects. This is not to say she approaches her subjects uncritically. In fact, at the same time as drawing positive productive elements from their work, she also, at least in my understanding, consistently locates and mobilises their repeated oversimplifications of maternity and childhood.

The thought of Giorgio Agamben, Judith Butler, Lee Edelman, Jasbir Puar, Jacques Derrida, Roberto Esposito, and, of course, Michel Foucault, is productively scrutinised in the light of 'a repeating phenomenon: the liminal making of women's (biopoliticized) reproductive life as principle of harm, death, or precariousness' (39). This phenomenon is provided with further elaboration as Deutscher's argument progresses:

We have seen the long history in which women become biopolitical agents of life (of three enfolded types of life: potential pregnancies, actual pregnancies brought to term, and children's lives considered to enfold the futures of family, population and nation). The counterpart is their intensified counter-role as impediment to these futures. Thus we have also seen the imbrication of these formations of women as "principles of life" in their counterpart: if they can deliver life, they can withhold, harm, or impede it and they can deliver "death" in all the corresponding variants. (153)

In contradistinction to the narratives supporting this historical phenomenon, Deutscher maintains that 'we should maximally foreground that we do not know what procreation is, by means of a genealogical making strange of its problems, politics, interests, identities, lives and deaths, vitalities and mortalities.' (101). This 'genealogical making strange' is ultimately related to a self-consciously Foucauldian argument that 'there are contingent ethics in relation to concurrently coalescing objects for concurrently forming agents or microagencies or collective agents.' (190). This leaves little doubt that Deutscher's Foucault has a lot to offer educational reflections which do not balk at the necessary complexity of their critical objects. It perhaps also raises particular questions, worthy of further critical elaboration, around the biopolitical context and implications of mothers' perceived and actual roles in educating their children. And further, perhaps extending the symbolic associations of maternity to allow for insight into the possibly 'maternal' role of educators in society. How are, for example, the rhetorics of motherhood replicated and transformed in the context of schooling? Equally, how do the expectations of and attacks on mothers play out in relation to those institutions and individuals also responsible for raising children?

These types of questions are not too distance from those asked by Ezekiel J. Dixon-Román, *Inheriting Possibility: Social Reproduction & Quantification in Education*. Parenting, more generally is examined as

one of the primary influences of teaching, socializing, and shaping the body, parenting performativities constitute one of the most substantial forms of inheritance. Although falling short of determining it, parents (and grandparents) do what they can to enhance or maintain the social legacy of the family. The more they have and the more they are privy to, the more they are able to pass on to their offspring. Thus, the “hard work” of privileged offspring is already advantaged by the taken-for-granted sociocultural and historical legacy they were born into. The materiality of these taken-for-granted permeate all dimensions of life, including parenting and SAT scores. (114)

As this passage indicates, Dixon-Román presents a strong theoretical and empirically informed case for a more nuanced, complex and thorough understanding of context in education. He traverses a broad territory, from important discussions of the necessary contextualisation, rather than outright rejection, of the significance of ‘grit’; to references to figures from popular culture, such as Common and John Legend; and quantum physics; to engagements with contemporary theorists such as Alexander G. Weheliye, Hortense Spillers, and Sylvia Wynter, who offer a means to ‘more adequately account for the processes of power and racializations of the body/flesh.’ (84). The primary purpose and means of the text, though, is ‘an alternative ontology, epistemology, and methodology that attempts to carve out a space within critical inquiry for quantitative methods.’ (xi). As such, Dixon-Román provides an important example of how original and provocative theoretical research and be complemented carefully and productively by empirical research.

Reproduction for Dixon-Román, though, is less to do with mothers than with the reproduction of social inequalities and injustices through education. In many ways a strong counterpart to Vaught’s *Compulsory, Inherited Possibility* shows the ways in which data is used to structure and determine the educational present and future in a manner which actively de-contextualises for the purposes (or at least with the consequences) of re-entrenching already existing privileges and power dynamics. Dixon-Román’s concern is with how data might be engaged with in a manner which challenges these predicable outcomes. As much an argument against ‘a hermeneutics of suspicion toward quantification’ (175) exhibited, presumably, by those drawn more to theoretical argumentation, *Inherited Possibility* is a timely contribution both in terms of the evidence it provides and arguments it makes. As do the other three texts here under review, it shows what the concept of reproduction and the critical engagements and new conceptualisations it provokes, both explicitly and implicitly, still has to offer educational thought and practice.