

The working class and the state apparatuses in the UK and Venezuela: implications for education

Mike Cole

Bishop Grosseteste University College Lincoln, UK

Correspondence: Mike.Cole@bishopg.ac.uk

Abstract

In the Introduction to this paper, following French Marxist Louis Althusser, I briefly examine the roles of the Repressive State Apparatuses (RSAs), and the Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) in forging consensus to capitalist norms and values. The paper is divided into three parts. In the first part, I discuss the role of what I have described as the Governmental/Political RSA/ISA in the UK in promoting neo-liberal global capitalism and imperialism and forestalling social revolutionary change. In the first part I also make a few observations on the special role of the UK Monarchy. Next I consider to what extent the Educational ISA is the dominant ISA. In the final section of Part 1, I address Althusser's concept of the interpellation of subjects. In the second part of the paper, as a contrast to the political and economic 'consensus' which has been engineered in the UK, I look at current developments in Venezuela - at social democracy in action, and socialism in embryo. I also pose the question: is there a need to amend Althusser's RSA/ISA thesis in the light of these developments. In the third part of the paper, I make some suggestions as to how three important strands in the UK National Curriculum might be used to break 'the last taboo', how they might facilitate the creation of spaces for discussions in schools of the alternative to global neo-liberal capitalism – world socialism.

Keywords: socialism, Marxism, Venezuela, globalisation

Introduction

At the turn of the century, socialist scholar and revolutionary, and University and College Union (UCU) activist Tom Hickey (2000: 177) declared that young workers in Britain 'will carry, as did their forebears, a political potential of historic importance'. Hickey was referring to the role of the working class as agents of the revolutionary transition to socialism. He concluded that '[i]t is a potential, however, of which they might spend their lives in ignorance' (*ibid.*).

My initial response was one of shock and surprise that the suggestion was being made by a fellow Marxist that the British working class might be lost for socialism for up to a generation. I must now say that I think Hickey was right. The prospect of socialist revolutionary change in Britain is possibly off the cards for the foreseeable future.

To understand how and why this has happened, it is useful to look at the role in forging consensus to capitalist norms and values of what Louis Althusser (1971) has described as *the State Apparatuses*. For Marxists, *the state* is considered to be far more than 'government'. Althusser (1971: 143-4) makes a distinction between what he calls the

Repressive State Apparatuses (RSAs) (government, administration, army, police, courts, prisons) and the *Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs)* (religion, education, family, law, politics, trade unions, communication, culture).

The RSAs operate primarily by force and control. This can be by making illegal the forces and organisations (and their tactics) that threaten the capitalist *status quo* and the rate of profit. Thus, for example, restrictions are placed on strike action and trade union activities. More extreme versions of RSA action include heavy intimidatory policing and other forms of state-sanctioned political repression and violence by the police and armed forces (Hill, 2001a: 106; see also Hill, 2001b, 2004, 2005).

The ISAs, on the other hand, operate primarily through ideology – promoting the values and attitudes required by capitalism. However, it needs to be pointed out that the two State Apparatuses function both by violence and by ideology. It is worth quoting Althusser at length:

What distinguishes the ISAs from the (Repressive) State Apparatus is the following basic difference: the Repressive State Apparatus functions 'by violence', whereas the Ideological State Apparatuses' function 'by ideology'. I can clarify matters by correcting this distinction. I shall say rather that every State Apparatus, whether Repressive or Ideological, 'functions' both by violence and by ideology, but with one very important distinction which makes it imperative not to confuse the Ideological State Apparatuses with the (Repressive) State Apparatus. This is the fact that the (Repressive) State Apparatus functions massively and predominantly by repression (including physical repression), while functioning secondarily by ideology. (There is no such thing as a purely repressive apparatus.) For example, the Army and the Police also function by ideology both to ensure their own cohesion and reproduction, and in the 'values' they propound externally. In the same way, but inversely, it is essential to say that for their part the Ideological State Apparatuses function massively and predominantly by ideology, but they also function secondarily by repression, even if ultimately, but only ultimately, this is very attenuated and concealed, even symbolic. (There is no such thing as a purely ideological apparatus.) Thus Schools and Churches use suitable methods of punishment, expulsion, selection, etc., to 'discipline' not only their shepherds, but also their flocks. The same is true of the Family. . . . The same is true of the cultural IS Apparatus (censorship, among other things), etc.

(Althusser, 1971: 144-5)

The ruling class, and governments in whose interests they act, tend to prefer, in normal circumstances, to operate via ISAs. For example, introducing trade union legislation to limit the right to strike (secondary picketing for example) or limiting the number of workers allowed on a picket line 'for safety reasons' presents less problems for the State than physically attacking picket lines (that get 'out of hand'); changing the school curriculum to make it more in line with the requirements of capital, and thereby foreclosing pupil/student dissent, is less messy than sending in the riot police or the troops to deal with demonstrations that are 'threatening peace and order'. The ISAs also tend to be deemed more legitimate by the populace (Hill, 2001a: 106).

PART ONE: THE STATE APPARATUSES IN THE UK

The Government/political RSA/ISA

As we have seen, Althusser identifies a number of State Apparatuses, all of which are important. For my purposes here, however, I will concentrate in this part of the paper on what I have termed The Government/Political RSA/ISA. The Government is for Althusser part of the RSA (Althusser, 1971: 143-4), and the Political ('the political system, including the different Parties') (ibid: 144) is decidedly an ISA. As we saw in the long quotation immediately above, however, both RSAs and ISAs operate by force and ideology. It is for this reason that, while Althusser distinguishes between RSAs and ISAs, I have adopted the formulation, 'The Governement/Political RSA/ISA'.

This RSA/ISA has made seem as inevitable not only *capitalism per se*, but has also successfully hailed *neo-liberalism* as healthy, *globalisation* as part of the natural order and *US-led imperialism* as unstoppable. In order for all this to work, there is also a need for the socialism to be believed to be no longer viable. In Althusser's terms each of these are interpellations. Interpellation is the concept Althusser (1971: 174) uses to describe the way in which ruling class ideology undermines the class consciousness of the working class. For Althusser (1971: 174), the interpellation of subjects – the hailing of concrete individuals as concrete subjects – 'Hey, you there!' (ibid: 175) involves a fourfold process: 1. the interpellation of 'individuals' as subjects; 2. their subjection to the Subject; 3. the mutual recognition of subjects and Subject, the subjects' recognition of each other, and finally the subject's recognition of himself; 4. the absolute guarantee that everything really is so, and that on condition that the subjects recognize what they are and behave accordingly, everything will be all right: Amen -- 'So be it' (ibid: 182). Althusser (ibid) explains:

Caught in this quadruple system of interpellation as subjects, of subjection to the Subject, of universal recognition and of absolute guarantee, the subjects 'work', they 'work by themselves' in the vast majority of cases, with the exception of the 'bad subjects' who on occasion provoke the intervention of one of the detachments of the (repressive) State apparatus. But the vast majority of (good) subjects work all right 'all by themselves', i.e. by ideology (whose concrete forms are realized in the Ideological State Apparatuses). They are inserted into practices governed by the rituals of the ISAs. They 'recognize' the existing state of affairs ... that 'it really is true that it is so and not otherwise', and that they must be obedient.

Subjects recognize that 'the hail' was really addressed to them, and not someone else (ibid: 175) and respond accordingly: 'Yes, that's how it is, that's really true!' (ibid: 140). Their subjection is thus freely accepted (ibid: 183). Thus when confronted with the 'inevitability' of neo-liberal global capitalism, or TINA ('there is no alternative'), the response is 'That's obvious! That's right! That's true!' (ibid: 173). There is no point, therefore, to even consider alternative ways of running the world, such as democratic socialism, or even social democracy. (Of course, we must not forget that because of their material conditions of existence, participation in struggle etc., the 'bad subjects' might respond differently: 'that's most dubious! That's wrong! That's a lie').

I will deal with each of these interpellations in turn.

Capitalism as inevitable

The Political *ISA* has been spectacularly successful in securing ruling class hegemony in the UK. Not only is capitalism presented as 'inevitable', it is also hailed as natural. Capitalism presents itself as 'determining the future as surely as the laws of nature make tides rise to lift boats' (McMurtry 2000: 2). Capitalism is made to seem unalterable and the market mechanism 'has been hypostatized into a natural force unresponsive to human wishes' (Callinicos, 2000: 125). Ironically, the capitalist class and their representatives who used to deride what they saw as the metaphysic of 'Marxist economic determinism' (economic processes determine all else, including the future direction of society) are the ones who now champion the 'world-wide market revolution' and the accompanying inevitability of 'economic restructuring' (McMurtry, 2000). Capitalism is praised 'as if it has now replaced the natural environment. It announces itself through its business leaders and politicians as coterminous with freedom, and indispensable to democracy such that any attack on capitalism as exploitative or hypocritical becomes an attack on world freedom and democracy itself' (McLaren 2000: 32).

Neo-liberalism as healthy

Martinez and García (2000) have identified five defining features of the global phenomenon of neo-liberalism:

1. *The Rule of the Market*
 - the liberation of 'free' or private enterprise from any bonds imposed by the state no matter how much social damage this causes;
 - greater openness to international trade and investment;
 - the reduction of wages by de-unionising workers and eliminating workers' rights;
 - an end to price controls;
 - total freedom of movement for capital, goods and services.
2. *Cutting Public Expenditure*
 - less spending on social services such as education and health care;
 - reducing the safety-net for the poor;
 - reducing expenditure on maintenance, e.g. of roads, bridges and water supply.
3. *Deregulation: reducing government regulation of everything that could diminish profits*
 - less protection of the environment;
 - lesser concerns with job safety.
4. *Privatization: selling state-owned enterprises, goods and services to private investors, e.g.*
 - banks;
 - key industries;
 - railroads;
 - toll highways;
 - electricity;
 - schools;
 - hospitals;
 - fresh water.

5. *Eliminating the Concept of 'The Public Good' or 'Community'*

- replacing it with 'individual responsibility';
- pressuring the poorest people in a society to by themselves find solutions to their lack of health care, education and social security.

Neo-liberalism is presented *ideologically* – as healthy competition, as freedom from the constraints of meddling and interfering governments. It is conflated with 'modernisation' and 'reform' - a wholesome alternative to 'the nanny state' and a dependency culture. On a world scale, it works also to varying degrees by repression, some of which is brute force and violence.

Globalisation as part of the natural order

Globalisation became one of the discursive orthodoxies of the 1990s and continues to hold sway into the twenty-first century. It is proclaimed in the speeches of virtually all mainstream politicians, in the financial pages of newspapers and in company reports; it is common currency in corporation newsletters and shop stewards meetings (Harman 1996: 3). Its premises are that in the face of global competition, capitals are increasingly constrained to compete on the world market. Its argument is that, in this new epoch, these capitals can only do this in so far as they become multinational corporations and operate on a world scale, outside the confines of nation states. The argument continues: this diminishes the role of the nation-state, the implication being that there is little, if anything, that can be done about it. Capitalists and their allies insist that, since globalisation is a fact of life, it is incumbent on workers, given this globalized market, to be flexible in their approach to what they do and for how long they do it, to accept lower wages, and to concur with the restructuring and diminution of welfare states.

Globalisation is, in fact, as old as capitalism itself, but it is a phenomenon that alters its character through history (e.g. Cole, 1998, 2005, 2008a). This is because one of the central features of capitalism is that, once rooted, parasitic-like, it grows and spreads. This double movement is thoroughly explored by Marx (1965 [1887]) in *Capital* and elsewhere (for a summary, see Sweezy 1997). The adoption of neo-liberal policies has given a major boost to globalisation, both *de facto* and ideologically. Marxists are particularly interested in the way in which the concept of globalisation is used ideologically to further the interests of capitalists and their political supporters (for an analysis, see Cole 1998, 2005, 2008a), of the way in which it is used to mystify the populace as a whole, to suppress class consciousness, and to stifle action by the Left in particular (e.g. Meiksins Wood, 1998; Cole, 2008a).

For Tony Blair, for example, globalisation was part of the natural order: 'I hear people say we have to stop and debate globalisation. You might as well debate whether autumn should follow summer' (Speech to the Labour Party Conference, 2005). Blair's rhetoric provides a prime example of the ideological justification for globalized neo-liberal capitalism. Like neo-liberalism, globalisation *in practice* takes on a brutal repressive mode, with capitalists touring the globe in the search of the cheapest labour it can find, or ruthlessly exploited both legal and 'illegal' migrant workers in the home country.

Imperialism as unstoppable

As far as imperialism is concerned, that the United States is involved in major new imperial adventures, for example, in Iraq and central Asia, is being recognised by a wide spectrum of political opinion, with wide support from neo-Conservatives, and condemnation from some political liberals and others, and of course Marxists (Cole, 2008a; see Cole, 2004 for information on the political affiliation of these various writers). That the Blair Government was involved by way of fawning ideological acquiescence and support, along with substantial material support in the way of troops must surely be widely accepted. I have discussed at length elsewhere (Cole, 2008a) the vicissitudes of US imperialism - save it to note here that, despite massive opposition, principally by way of street demonstrations, the US and British ruling classes get away with imperialist adventures, simply because most people think they cannot do anything to stop it. Necessary as they are, demonstrations are just that – a protest about what is happening. Demonstrators do not expect world imperialist leaders to say, 'ok, you're right – we'll pull out of Iraq and Afghanistan'. Indeed we are told that the 'war on terror' goes on until there are no more terrorists. In reality, of course, the so called 'war on terror' begets more terrorism, which in turn used to legitimate the continuation of the 'war on terror' and so on and so on.

The material effects of imperialism, of course, entail states in their most repressive, most brutal, most uncompromising modes, with respect to both the imperial subjects, and with respect to the (young) occupying troops – the modern equivalent of cannon fodder.

Symptomatic of the success of the Government/political RSA/ISA is the fact that pro-imperialist Gordon Brown (in his first face-to-face meeting with Bush in April, 2007, Brown stressed there would be no change of policy in Iraq or Afghanistan) has, despite personal differences between himself and Blair, seamlessly replaced Blair as prime minister.

Socialism as no longer viable

While neo-liberal global capitalism is portrayed as healthy, normal and inevitable, and imperialism is perceived as unstoppable despite massive opposition, socialism is portrayed as something that is aberrant, as something that happened in the past and *failed*, and will not happen again. Thatcherism bears much responsibility for this. The collapse of the Soviet Union was used to back up the claim that socialism is no longer viable. Socialism was portrayed as synonymous with Stalinism. Congruent with her success in championing the free market as the only viable way to run economies was the apparent success with which Margaret Thatcher seemed to wipe socialism off the agenda of political change in Britain - essential if Britain were to move in the direction of labour market compliance and labour flexibility. Following the late 1980s revolutions in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, Marxism, Thatcher argued, was now extinct and outmoded. Therefore the Labour Party was now also extinct and outmoded. It is precisely the success of this formulation which projected Tony Blair, a neo-liberal, to centre stage - a saviour of the Labour Party - but only if the Labour Party became reformulated as 'New Labour'.

'New Labour' was coined as part of an orchestrated campaign to distance the party from its socialist and (radical) social democratic roots, to 'modernize' it - in other words, to establish an unequivocal pro-capitalist base for itself. For Blair, the 'founding principle of New Labour' was 'the partnership we have tried to build with [business] . . . and it will not change' (*Guardian*, November 6, 2001: 2). This underlines why Blair, described and reported in Britain's most popular tabloid by Margaret Thatcher as 'probably the most formidable Labour leader since Hugh Gaitskell' (*Sun*, July 21, 1995), in 1995 abandoned the anti-capitalist

clause IV from the party constitution – for Blair a crucially important step forward, and signalling the future direction that ‘New Labour’ would take. In the same year, in Hayman Island, Australia, Tony Blair declared to Rupert Murdoch and the world that ‘the era of the grand ideologies, all encompassing, all pervasive, total in their solutions - and often dangerous - is over’ (Blair, 1995: 12). What Blair meant was that the grand ideology of socialism is over, and that the grand ideology of capitalism is now the only option. He repeated this belief in his aforementioned speech to the (British) Labour Party Conference, on October 2, 2001, when he declared that ‘ideology . . . in the sense of rigid forms of economic and social theory . . . is dead’ (*Guardian*, October 3, 2001: 5). Again, the subtext is that *socialist* theory, not capitalist or neo-liberal theory, is dead.

The special role of the monarchy

In addition to the Political/Government RSA/SA, the monarchy in the UK continues to make a major contribution to the ideological role of the State, in that it ‘normalises’ a massively hierarchical society. As Althusser (1971: 138) has argued, above the ensemble of state apparatuses is ‘the head of State, the government and the administration’. Althusser (*ibid*: 154) has also pointed out that ‘the English bourgeoisie was able to ‘compromise’ with the aristocracy and ‘share’ State power and the use of the State apparatus with it for a long time’. This ‘arrangement’ continues, albeit in modified form, up to the present day. In the UK, the head of State is, of course, the Queen. The Monarchy, though not as popular as it used to be – ‘Princess Di as the fairy princess’ – is still thriving. The royal family continue to receive mass attention in the media, much of it favourable. Their outrageous activities are normalised and condoned. For example, the vast wealth they have, their private planes and boats, the large number of servants they employ are all generally portrayed as ‘necessary’ for such important people, who are seen as an ‘asset’ to the nation. If one of the princes spends thousands of pounds on a night out – when Prince William split up with Kate Middleton in April 2007, he racked up a £11000 bar bill in one night - this is reported neutrally by the tabloids, as ‘understandable’. The aristocracy and the monarchy are not under any imminent threat of extinction. The Queen receives £7.9 million per year from taxpayers via the Civil List, while the income due to the heir to the throne, The Prince of Wales’s Office from the Duchy of Cornwall (created in 1337 by Edward III) amounts to £14.067 million (The Duchy of Cornwall, 2006).

The educational ISA – the dominant one?

I have attempted to demonstrate the importance in the forging of capitalist hegemony of the Government/Political RSA/ISA, and to a lesser extent, the significance of the Queen as head of State, and the rest of the monarchy and the aristocracy in legitimising hierarchies. For Althusser, however, it was the educational state apparatus that was paramount. As he put it, whereas the religious ISA (system of different churches) used historically to be the major ISA, the ISA ‘which has been installed in the *dominant* position in mature capitalist social formations ... is the *educational ideological apparatus*’ (Althusser, 1971: 153). Althusser argued that schools are particularly important for inculcating the dominant ideology, since no other ISA requires compulsory attendance of all children eight hours a day for five days a week. Althusser suggested that what children learn at school is ‘know-how’ – wrapped in the ruling ideology of the ruling class. Gordon Brown’s (2002) declaration, in a speech embracing ‘inevitable globalisation’, that teaching the ‘entrepreneurial culture’ should start in schools (*The Guardian*, March 29th, 2002) serves to uphold Althusser’s contention. Indeed, from September 2005, new funding of £60 million a year was made available from the DfES to support a new scheme to promote enterprise education in all English secondary schools. Ken McCarthy, a school governor at Swanlea School – a hub school in the Schools'

Enterprise Education Network (SEEN) – noted that the scheme provided ‘skills and attitudes required for the modern workplace’ (DVD viewable at DfES, 2007). SEEN aims to support ‘all schools to embed an enterprise culture’ (DfES, 2007). In addition, in the light of the inquiry by Lord Leitch in 2006, which warned that Britain’s competitiveness and economic growth would suffer by 2020 unless the workforce was better trained (Lepkowska, 2007: 1), a new secondary curriculum is scheduled for introduction in September 2008, which, according to Lepkowska is ‘part of a major overhaul of teaching at key stages 3 and 4 to make sure that every pupil is motivated and engaged in class and ultimately prepared for the workplace’.

In portraying capitalism as the norm, and keeping discussions of socialism out of the school curriculum, and the teacher education curriculum (Hill, 2007), education is indeed a prime ISA. In the UK, for example, ‘education, education, education’ was, as is well known, New Labour’s main mantra. From a Marxist perspective, it is possible to identify both a *Capitalist Agenda for Education* and a *Capitalist Agenda in Education*. The former relates to the role of education in producing the kind of workforce that is currently required by global capitalist enterprises, and is thus about making profits *indirectly*, while the latter is about making profits directly (for analyses, see Cole, 2008b; Rikowski, 2005; Hatcher, 2006). The *Capitalist Agenda for Education* is clearly part of the ISAs, whereas the *Capitalist Agenda in Education* is part of the accumulation process at the economic base.

The businessification of schools is about to intensify. In a speech to the City of London in June, 2007, Gordon Brown stated that if Britain was to meet the challenges of globalisation, improving education and skills had to be the priority: ‘[i]n future every single secondary school and primary school should have a business partner - and I invite you all to participate’ (Gordon Brown cited in BBC, 2007).

This is not, of course, to say that there is no resistance from educational workers. Althusser (1971: 158) was well aware of this. As he put it:

I ask the pardon of those teachers who, in dreadful conditions, attempt to turn the few weapons they can find in the history and learning they ‘teach’ against the ideology, the system and the practices in which they are trapped. They are a kind of hero. But they are rare.

Ways to initiate discussions in schools on the democratic world socialist alternative to global capitalism are discussed in the last section of this paper.

PART TWO: THE STATE APPARATUSES IN VENEZUELA

Social democracy in practice/socialism in embryo

If I am right that the formation and development of class consciousness in Britain has been forestalled for the foreseeable future, where in the current era might Marxists look to for inspiration and guidance? In the rest of this paper I discuss the initiatives of the socialist government of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela. In Venezuela, neo-liberal capitalism is not seen as ‘inevitable’, nor indeed is capitalism itself. President Hugo Rafael Chávez Frías is against neo-liberalism and imperialism. As he remarked in 2003:

In Venezuela, we are developing a model of struggle against neoliberalism and imperialism. For this reason, we find we have millions of friends in this world, although we also have many enemies.

(cited in Contreras Baspineiro, 2003)

Chávez talks about globalising socialism, rather than global capitalism:

Faced with the outrageous excesses of the powerful, our only alternative is to unite... That's why I call upon all of you to globalize the revolution, to globalize the struggle for... freedom and equality.

(cited in Contreras Baspineiro, 2003)

In January, 2007, the utilities sector and the country's largest telecoms company were nationalised, and in May, 2007 Chávez took control of four major oil projects worth \$30 billion (PDVSA, the state oil company has held majority control since 2005). Also in May, 2007 Venezuela pulled out of the IMF and the World Bank.

The *Misiones*

Central to the Bolivarian Revolution are the 'Misiones' – a series of social justice, social welfare, anti-poverty, and educational programmes implemented under the administration of the Chávez government. The Misiones use volunteers to teach reading, writing and basic mathematics to those Venezuelans who have not completed their elementary-level education. In addition, they provide ongoing basic education courses to those who have not completed such education, and remedial high school-level classes to millions of Venezuelans who were forced to drop out from high school.

The Bolivarian University of Venezuela (UBV) is particularly significant in the struggle for social justice. Previously the luxurious offices of oil oligarchs, UBV has opened its doors to thousands of students. This programme's goal is to boost institutional synergy and community participation in order to guarantee and provide access to higher education to all high school students. UBV, which recently had its first 1078 graduates (70% of which are women) has to be seen in the context of the established university system in Venezuela. Like many others in Latin America, it has traditionally primarily served a limited, better-off section of the population. Access for the poor majority has been extremely restricted, partly because of the financial costs of university study, but also because of a deeply entrenched system of corruption and patronage governing entry procedures etc.. Since 1998, the government has raised the number of university students in the country from 366,000 to 1,200,000. This is a genuine widening participation initiative.

Chávez has announced that he aims to create 38 new universities in the current phase of the "Bolivarian Revolution". The state universities go out to the people in the *barrios*, as well as the people coming to them, with the government aiming for more than 190 satellite classrooms throughout Venezuela by 2009.

The Misiones are not confined to education. Other Misiones are concerned with health, providing a free service to the poor by giving access to health care assistance to 60 per cent of the excluded population through the construction of 8,000 Popular Medical Centres: providing a doctor for every 250 families (1,200 people), increasing the life expectancy of the population, and contributing to a good standard of life for all.

Yet other Missions aim at assisting the sport skills of students, senior citizens, pregnant women, people with disabilities, and anyone wishing to improve their standard of life and health, and include high performance sport, and vocational training for work. There is also a Mission which sells food and other essential products like medicines at affordable prices, along with a massive programme of soup kitchens (British Venezuela Solidarity Campaign, 2006).

Crucially, there are Missions to restore human rights to numerous indigenous communities, and to hand over land titles to farmers in order to guarantee food for the poor and to foster a socialised economy and endogenous development (*ibid*).

Finally, Negra Hipólita Mission, one of the newest created by the National Government, was launched on January 14, 2006 in order to fight poverty, misery and social exclusion; a new stage in the struggle against inequality. The Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela is committed to set Venezuela free from misery (*ibid*). For a full description of the Missions see the see British Venezuela Solidarity Campaign (2006) viewable online.

Social democracy and socialism: is there a need to amend the RSA/ISA thesis?

The Missions are, of course, classic examples of social democracy, somewhat akin to the policies and practice of the post-war Labour Governments in Britain. What distinguishes the Bolivarian Revolution, however, is that these reforms are seen both by the Chávez Government and by large sections of the Venezuelan working class as a step on the road to true socialist revolution, since for Chávez '[t]he hurricane of revolution has begun, and it will never again be calmed' (cited in Contreras Baspineiro, 2003). Elsewhere, Chávez asserted: 'I am convinced, and I think that this conviction will be for the rest of my life, that the path to a new, better and possible world, is not capitalism, the path is socialism, that is the path: socialism, socialism' (Lee, 2005).

At this point it is useful to return to Althusser and the Marxist theory of the State. In classical Marxist theory, the capitalist state must be overthrown rather than reformed. As Althusser (1971: 142) put it:

the proletariat must seize State power in order to destroy the existing bourgeois State apparatus and, in a first phase, replace it with a quite different proletarian, State apparatus, then in a later phases set in motion ... the end of State power, the end of every State apparatus.

However, Althusser's analysis did not extend to the possible existence of states which advocate their own destruction. As Chávez proclaimed at the World Social Forum in 2005:

We must reclaim socialism as a thesis, a project and a path, but a new type of socialism, a humanist one which puts humans, and not machines or the state ahead of everything. That's the debate we must promote around the world (my emphasis).

(cited in Hearne, 2005)

More recently (8th January, 2007), Chávez has created 'communal councils' and has referred to 'the revolutionary explosion of communal power, of communal councils' (Socialist Outlook Editorial, 2007). This is a project for rebuilding or replacing the bourgeois administrative machinery of local and state governments with a network of communal councils, where the local populations meet to decide on local priorities and how

to realise them (*ibid.*). ‘With the communal councils’, Chávez said, in perhaps his most clearly articulated intention to destroy the existing state:

we have to go beyond the local. We have to begin creating... a kind of confederation, local, regional and national, of communal councils. We have to head towards the creation of a communal state. And the old bourgeois state, which is still alive and kicking - this we have to progressively dismantle, at the same time as we build up the communal state, the socialist state, the Bolivarian state, a state that is capable of carrying through a revolution.

(cited in *ibid*)

‘Almost all states’, Chávez continued, ‘have been born to prevent revolutions. So we have quite a task: to convert a counter-revolutionary state into a revolutionary state’ (cited in Piper, 2007a: 8). The communal councils are intended to bring together 200 to 400 families to discuss and decide on local spending and development plans. Thirty thousand communal councils are intended, and provide, in the words of Roland Dennis, an historic opportunity to do away with the capitalist state (cited in Piper, 2007a. *ibid.*)

If it is the case that genuinely supports socialist revolution from below, which will eventually overthrow the existing capitalist state of Venezuela, then, for Marxists, he must be seen as an ally. Whether he is or not, however, is less important than the fact that he is openly advocating and helping to create genuine socialist consciousness among the working class. For example, swearing in the new ministers, in the wake of his landslide presidential election victory, late in 2006, Chávez declared that they will be in charge of pushing forward his government’s project of implementing ‘21st century socialism’ in Venezuela (Wilpert, 2007), which Chávez defines as ‘fundamentally human, it is love, it is solidarity, and our Socialism is original, indigenous, Christian and Bolivarian’ (cited in Hampton, 2006). More recently, Chávez advised all Venezuelans to read and study the writings of Leon Trotsky, and commented favourably on *The Transitional Programme*, which was written by Trotsky for the founding congress of the Fourth International in 1938 (Martin, 2007). Trotsky’s pamphlet begins with a discussion of the objective prerequisites for a socialist revolution.

Trotsky’s concept of ‘the permanent revolution’, Chávez went on, is an extremely important thesis. Chávez underlined Trotsky’s idea about the necessity for conditions for socialism to be ripe and expressed his view that this is certainly the case in Venezuela (*ibid.*). Chávez continued:

Trotsky points out something which is extremely important, and he says that [the conditions for proletarian revolution] are starting to rot, not because of the workers, but because of the leadership which did not see, which did not know, which was cowardly, which subordinated itself to the mandates of capitalism, of the great bourgeois democracies, the trade unions.

(cited in *ibid*)

For me, this statement is indicative of Chávez’ belief in the importance of grass roots working class consciousness and action. Martin agrees:

[s]ince Chávez started talking about socialism in January 2005, this has become a major subject of debate in all corners of Venezuela. Chávez’s statement that under capitalism there was no solution for the problems of the masses and that the road forward was socialism represented a major step forward in his political development. He had started trying to reform the

system and to give the masses of the Venezuelan poor decent health and education services and land, and he had realised through his own experience and reading that this was not possible under capitalism.

(ibid)

In the last few months Chávez has become increasingly impatient at the delaying tactics of the bureaucracy and the counter-revolution in Venezuela. He has made clear that when he talks of building socialism, he is talking about doing it now, not in the long distant future (ibid.). In his comments about Trotsky he stressed the point:

Well, here the conditions are given, I think that this thought or reflection of Trotsky is useful for the moment we are living through, here the conditions are given, in Venezuela and Latin America, I am not going to comment on Europe now, nor on Asia, there the reality is another, another rhythm, another dynamic, but in Latin America conditions are given, and in Venezuela this is a matter of course, to carry out a genuine revolution.

(cited in ibid)

Leading figures in some of the Bolivarian parties have refused to join in Chávez' new United Socialist Party, the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) formed two weeks after his election success on 3rd December 2006, fearing the development of revolutionary consciousness among the workers. To one opponent's statement that he was in favour of a 'democratic socialism', Chávez replied that the problem was that 'I am a socialist and he is a social-democrat', and he added, 'I am in favour of revolutionary socialism' (cited in ibid).

In talking about the need for a revolutionary leadership Chávez also quoted from Lenin on the need for a revolutionary party in order 'to articulate millions of wills into one single will', which 'is indispensable to carry out a revolution, otherwise it is lost, like the rivers that overflow, like the Yaracuy that when it reaches the Caribbean loses its riverbed and becomes a swamp' (cited in ibid.). Chávez argued that PSUV must be the most democratic party Venezuela has ever seen, built from the bottom up, inviting all the currents of the Venezuelan left to join.

He also insisted that it must not be dominated by electoral concerns, nor by the existing leaders of the existing coalition parties. He criticized the way the Bolshevik Party in Russia came to suffocate rather than stimulate a battle of ideas for socialism, noting how the marvellous slogan of 'all power to the soviets' degenerated into a sad reality of 'all power to the party'. For Chávez, this points towards precisely the kind of mass, democratic, revolutionary, political organisation that is needed (Piper, 2007b). Capitalists and their political supporters are intent on spreading disinformation about the Chávez Government. In particular, there are numerous attempts to label the Government non-democratic or 'dictatorial'. In actual fact, according to a survey released by the Chilean NGO Latinbarometro (Wilpert, 2006) apart from Uruguay, Venezuelans view their democracy more favourably than the citizens of all other Latin American countries view their own democracies. Moreover, Venezuela is in first place in several measures of political participation, compared to all other Latin American countries. The percentage of citizens surveyed who indicated satisfaction increased more since 1998, the year Chavez was elected, than any other country. The percentage expressing satisfaction increased from 32% to 57% in those eight years. In terms of political participation, Venezuelans indicate that they are more politically active than the citizens of any other surveyed country.

As Martin (ibid) concludes:

[t]he political thinking of Chavez is in tune and reflects the conclusions drawn by tens of thousands of revolutionary activists in Venezuela, in the factories, in the neighbourhoods, in the countryside. They are growing increasingly impatient and want the revolution to be victorious once and for all.

PART THREE: IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATION IN THE UK: THE LAST TABOO

Chávez devoted a May 15, 2005 call-in television programme to education. Attending the inauguration of a new high school, he presented a 'new educational model for a new citizen'. In direct contrast to Gordon Brown's view (cited above) that teaching the 'entrepreneurial culture' should start in schools, for Chávez, competition and individualism in schools must give way to unity and solidarity. 'We are all a team, going along eliminating little by little the values or the anti-values that capitalism has planted in us from childhood' (Chávez, cited in Whitney Jr., 2005).

Great strides have been made over the last decade in the UK with respect to promoting equality of opportunity and equality of gender, 'race', disability and sexuality in schools, in further, and in higher education, in terms of legislation (Nixon, 2007), and, to some extent, in the curriculum itself. However, capitalism is not directly discussed, nor are the values that it promotes addressed in a critical analytical context. Moreover, social class, except in the narrow though nonetheless important sense of working class underachievement, has been left out. It is high time to redress this and for children and young people to learn about capitalism and social class, and their accompanying massive inequalities, in a wide-ranging and meaningful way. From an early age, children have the right to know what it is really going on in the world. Judy Dunn (cited in Epstein, 1993) has shown that children are aware of the feelings of others as early as their second year of life and can therefore 'decentre' and are thus amenable to understanding issues of equality.

There are some positive developments in schools related to globalization, to world poverty, and to ecology, but no space is provided for a discussion of *alternatives* to neo-liberal global capitalism, such as world democratic socialism. Discussing world democratic socialism in schools may be seen as *the last taboo*. It is time to move forward and bring such discussions into the classroom in schools, colleges and universities. Paulo Freire (1972) urged teachers to detach themselves and their pupils from the idea that they are agents of capital, where *banking education* (the teacher deposits information into an empty account) is the norm and to reinvent schools as democratic public spheres where meaningful *dialogue* can take place. Given the fact that global capitalism is out of control (e.g. Cole, 2008a), the very survival of our planet is dependent on such dialogue. Neo-liberal capitalism, in being primarily about expanding opportunities for large multinational companies, has undermined the power of nation states and, as we saw above, exacerbated the negative effects of globalisation on such services as healthcare, education, water and transport.

World capitalism's effects on both the 'developed' and 'developing world' should be discussed openly and freely in the classroom. Capitalism and the destruction of the environment are inextricably linked to the extent that it is becoming increasingly apparent that saving the environment is dependent on the destruction of capitalism. Classroom debate should therefore include a consideration of the connections between global capitalism and environmental destruction. McLaren and Houston (2005: 167) have argued that 'escalating environmental problems at all geographical scales from local to global have

become a pressing reality that critical educators can no longer afford to ignore'. They go on to cite 'the complicity between global profiteering, resource colonization, and the wholesale ecological devastation that has become a matter of everyday life for most species on the planet'. Following Kahn (2003), they state the need for 'a critical dialogue between social and eco-justice' (*Ibid*: 168). They call for a dialectics of ecological and environmental justice to reveal the malign interaction between capitalism, imperialism and ecology that has created widespread environmental degradation which has dramatically accelerated with the onset of neo-liberalism. Environmental issues and their interrelationship with global neo-liberal capitalism and the new (US) imperialism are discussed at length in Cole, 2008a (see also Feldman and Lotz, 2004).

The last taboo: where can these discussions take place?

I believe that discussions about capitalism and socialism should permeate the curriculum, both with respect to the most pressing issues, and longer term possibilities. However, I will conclude with some *specific* suggestions as to where in the current National Curriculum, these issues might be most obviously addressed.

The global gateway

The government's international strategy and the DfES Global Gateway (www.globalgateway.org) provide the opportunity to register schools and to link up with schools worldwide. Referring to its potentials, Olga Stanojlovic, director of communications for the British Council's education and training group, which developed and maintains the 'Global Gateway', suggests that British schools might link up with schools in Africa 'to learn more about sustainable development of different ideas of social justice and citizenship around the world' (cited in the *Education Guardian*, 14 November, 2006: 1). This is a most worthwhile suggestion. However, if we are to be fully honest with the young people in our schools, we must link them up in addition with schools in Venezuela, Cuba, Bolivia and elsewhere for a *comprehensive* analysis of ideas about social justice. We must initiate discussions about (world) socialist alternatives to imperialism and to neo-liberal global capitalism. The British Venezuela Solidarity Campaign website (<http://www.venezuelasolidarity.org.uk/>) is a useful resource, as is Hands Off Venezuela (<http://www.handsoffvenezuela.org/home/>).

The revised Citizenship curriculum at KS3/4

According to the QAA:

The revised programme of study [at KS 3] recognises the importance of engaging pupils in thinking through, and responding to, real dilemmas, issues and problems facing individuals and communities. It encourages pupils to develop new ways of thinking and reflecting on a wide range of issues, ideas and concepts, including democracy and justice.

(QAA, 2007a)

The QAA goes on to define 'democracy and justice' as involving 'understanding the underpinning values and processes upon which our society is based, including freedom, fairness and equality before the law' (my emphasis). However, it then states that, '[s]uch an understanding requires independent enquirers and effective participants who are able to make judgements about the extent to which decisions, action and opinions reflect these

important values' (QAA, 2007b). Here there is space for comparing with British capitalist 'democracy' with socialist democracy.

At KS4, Citizenship Education, according to the QAA, should help 'young people to develop their critical skills and to consider a *wide range* of political, social, ethical and moral problems and explore opinions other than their own' (my emphasis) (QAA, 2007c). This also more than lends itself to a consideration of the socialist alternative.

Every Child Matters

The five aims of the Government's *Every Child Matters* (DfES, 2004a, b, 2005) are for children to:

- be healthy;
- stay safe;
- enjoy and achieve;
- make a positive contribution;
- achieve economic well-being.

While these are certainly laudable aims, they might be seen as rhetorical in the light of the actual material and psychological situation of Britain's young people after the decade of the Blair Government. In a recent UNICEF report of twenty-one industrialised countries issued on St. Valentine's Day (UNICEF, 2007), the UK came joint-last with the USA for 'child well-being' (see Cole, 2008c for a discussion). That this is the case and why it is the case should be part of schools' implementation of *Every Child Matters*. Introducing dialogue on this in schools needs to make links to the capitalist economy and capitalist priorities.

In addition, while *Every Child Matters*' aims are clearly concerned with the welfare of children and young people in the UK, there is scope here for adding an international dimension. For example, under 'being healthy', children and young people could learn about global health issues, and examine what eating healthily means to children in the 'developing world' (Smith, cited in Jewell, 2006: 4). For 'being safe' they could learn that safety for children is enshrined in human rights, but that safety depends on where children and young people live, and the political and economic context in which they find themselves (Smith, cited in ibid.). For 'enjoy and achieve', children and young people can realise that achievement can transcend personal success and can contribute to making a difference in society. Finally for 'achieve economic well-being', they can learn about global capitalism, and 'how we are rich in the West because other areas of the world are poor' (cited in ibid.). With respect to this final point, while it is, of course, demonstrably true, ownership of wealth in the west is relative, as witnessed by the UNICEF (2007) report, and many people are very poor here too.

Internationalising *Every Child Matters* should crucially include an examination of what such a concept has meant for nearly half a century in Cuba, and what it means in the context of the Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela, in the context of developments in Bolivia and elsewhere.

Conclusion

In the first part of this paper I began by suggesting that Louis Althusser's (1971) concepts of RSAs/ISAs are a good way of explaining and understanding why the working class in the UK has been interpellated to acquiesce in global neo-liberal capitalism. With respect to US-led imperialism, I argued that, while this is opposed by a large number of people, a sense that we cannot stop it has been successfully imposed. At the same time, socialism has been triumphantly distorted and discredited by the ruling class. The Monarchy and the aristocracy, I suggested, helps engender a natural sense of hierarchy. I concluded the first part of the paper by a consideration of the Educational ISA as the dominant ISA.

In the second part of the paper, I turned to the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, which I commend to be a good model of social democracy in action, and socialism in embryo.

In the third part of the paper, I suggested that, if we are to address *all* equality issues, including social class, if we are to offer a truly democratic dialogic education, if we are to consider all possible ways of saving the planet, it is imperative to break through *the last taboo*. A meaningful evaluation of global neo-liberal capitalism is a necessity, as is a serious consideration of the world socialist alternative. I then indicated some spaces in the education system of the UK where discussions of the alternative to global neo-liberal capitalism – world democratic socialism – might take place.

I began this paper by quoting Tom Hickey. Hickey is right that young workers in Britain carry a political potential of historic importance. There is much work to do if that potential is to be realised. In this endeavour, I believe that the Left in education have an important role to play. This paper has concentrated on a small part of the work of Louis Althusser, who, as noted, has sometimes been criticised for his structural determinism. Let me finish with a quote from that other great European Marxist, Antonio Gramsci, who is celebrated for his belief in human agency. Gramsci famously called for continued determination, even in the direst of circumstances, in the belief that resilience will result in meaningful change even in the face of adversity. As Gramsci (1921) put it:

*Our pessimism has increased, but our motto is still alive and to the point:
'pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will.'*

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