

The 'Great Refusal'? A Marcusean response to the Bright Blue vision of education in the 'Big Society'

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The modernisation of education and other public services remains a major political objective of the current Coalition government in the UK. This paper focuses on *Tory Modernisation 2.0*, a blueprint for the second stage of public sector reform produced by the Conservative pressure group, Bright Blue. From the critical theory perspective expounded by Herbert Marcuse, the Conservative vision of the 'Big Society' is a one-dimensional conceptualisation of social relations. In the guise of pragmatic, sensible prescriptions for how the institutions of society should be reformed, *Tory Modernisation 2.0* advocates an acceleration of marketisation, which is both potentially destructive and irreversible. Against the backdrop of a bleak, one-dimensional society promoted by the Conservative Party, education has become a site of struggle between what Marcuse terms the dialectic of domination and the 'Great Refusal'.

Keywords: modernisation; education; neoliberalism; 'Big Society'; critical theory; qualitative change

Introduction

Two and a half years into the Coalition government's term in office,¹ a collection of essays entitled *Tory Modernisation 2.0: the Future of the Conservative Party*, was published by 'Bright Blue' (Shorthouse and Stagg 2013). Formed in 2010, 'Bright Blue' is a Conservative Party pressure group embracing activists, MPs and councillors, aimed at providing policy prescriptions for the Conservative-led government. *Tory Modernisation 2.0* is their blueprint for the 'second stage' of the modernisation of public services. This paper focuses on three essays, authored by David Willetts, Jonty Olliff-Cooper and Ryan Shorthouse, which refer to plans for deeper reforms of education. The overarching goal of Tory reforms presented by Bright Blue is ensuring that 'British society and the economy flourish in the years ahead' (Shorthouse and Stagg 2013, p. 5). The reforms are underpinned by David Cameron's (2010) vision of the 'Big Society', developed for the Tory election

¹ The Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition replaced the New Labour government following the 2010 general election in the UK. The Coalition government is led by the Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron.

campaign and premised on: 'breaking state monopolies, allowing charities, social enterprises and companies to provide public services, devolving power down to neighbourhoods, making government more accountable.' The 'Big Society' symbolised a reformed, compassionate Conservative party, which appeared to abandon Margaret Thatcher's (1987) famous assertion that there is 'no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families'. However, reducing the role of the state to enable private provision of public services aligns the 'Big Society' with neoliberalism. Neoliberal thinking is premised on an assumption that 'human well-being can best be advanced by the maximization of entrepreneurial freedoms within an institutional framework characterized by private property rights, individual liberty, unencumbered markets, and free trade' (Harvey 2007, p. 22). Cameron's approach to policy-making could, therefore, be viewed as consistent with New Labour's 'Third Way' and based on 'political triangulation'. As McAnulla (2010, p. 292) explains, 'political triangulation' consists of contrasting two opposing perspectives which are then 'transcended by formulating a third position which takes elements of, and yet transcends, the original positions'. According to Lingard and Sellar (2012), both the New Labour and the Coalition governments used 'political triangulation' to reformulate Thatcher's neoliberal agenda. Blair's 'Third Way' set out to create quasi-markets in the public sector through the exercise of state power. The Conservative-led Coalition has sought to extend private sector involvement in the public sector and simultaneously accentuate localism and decentralisation. Underpinning these distinctive nuances in policy orientation within 'Thatcherism', 'Blairism' and 'Cameronism' is the common objective of marketisation and rolling back the welfare state (Avis 2011, McAnulla 2010).

Continuities in education policy are most ostensibly manifested in the acceleration of the New Labour's academies programme by the Conservative Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove. Announced in 2000, the programme aimed at improving education through more diverse provision, parental choice and voice, as well as a 'positive' influence of private sponsors (Gunter 2012). The programme has, however, provoked controversy centred on issues of: privatisation, equality of opportunity, accountability linked to academies being under the direct control of the Secretary of State for Education, as well as research concerned about the quality of education they provide (Gunter

2012). In spite of the controversy, Michael Gove accelerated the programme, often enforcing conversion to academy status against the wishes of parents (Ball 2013). He also introduced state-funded 'free schools', based on an equally controversial Swedish model. Free schools are also independent of local authority control and 'could' in the future be run for profit (Eaton 2012). Between May 2010 and January 2014, 174 free schools opened and the number of academies rose from 200 to 3,613 and (DfE 2013). That more conversions are being planned is based on the government's belief that 'all schools should become academies or Free Schools which benefit from greater freedoms to innovate, raise standards and to increase the variety of schools in areas where there is demand' (DfE 2013). The initial goal of developing more diverse educational provision has thus evolved into a belief in a totally privatised school system.

Underpinning these developments is a vision of what Herbert Marcuse (2002) terms a 'one-dimensional society'. It is a 'society without opposites' where critical debate is marginalised by universal control systems of thought and behaviour and eventually eliminated. For example, as the spread of marketisation leads to the totality of human relations being viewed as transactions of exchange, alternative conceptualisations are presented as outdated, belonging to 'the dark ages' (Shorthouse 2013, p. 67). UK neoliberal policies resonate with the reform agendas of other countries such as the USA, New Zealand and Australia (Smyth 2011). Writing about education reform in the international context, Lingard and Sellar (2012, p. 49) argue that, contrary to governments of these countries promising 'a new era in politics', their key ideas 'sound like a strategy for rolling back the state, privatising public services, and devolving responsibility for redressing social problems to social enterprises and communities themselves.' They point to an urgent need to 'think our way beyond the neo-liberal imaginary toward more cohesive and comprehensive visions of what social democracy and social justice might mean in the future' (Lingard and Sellar, p. 62).

This paper is written in response to Lingard and Sellar's call for transcending the neoliberal imaginary. By deploying Marcuse's analysis of one-dimensional society, I will argue that, despite its continuing 'colonisation' by private enterprise (Ball 2012), education can still be seen, and 'imagined', as a site of hope. However, this would require a robust challenge to the Tory appeal to be 'bolder on markets in education' (Shorthouse and Stagg 2013, p. 61). This is

because further marketisation of education conceals the bleak prospects of increasing social segregation and damage to the education system which may be irreversible (Lupton 2011). Resisting the Tory version of modernisation would also be premised on seeking qualitative rather than quantitative change. Quantitative change is defined by Marcuse (2002, p. xlii) as 'more and bigger of the same sort of life'. In contrast, qualitative change is predicated on freedom to critically examine and challenge dominant systems of thought and action, thus opening possibilities for a 'different' rather than 'more of the same sort of life'. The Tory mantra of 'doing more for less' (Shorthouse 2013, p. 49) reveals a preoccupation with quantitative change. The assertion that, to date, Tory 'education reforms have been among their most successful policy programmes' (Shorthouse and Stagg 2013, p. 124) masks the neoliberal agenda and damaging effects of these policies, to which we now turn.

Tory Modernisation 2.0: 'more for less' in 'the small state and a big society'

Central to *Tory Modernisation 2.0* are 'flourishing, mature school markets in every part of our education system, from childcare to higher education' (Shorthouse 2013, p. 61). Tory faith in the markets in education is premised on an assumption that consumer choice provides a key lever for raising standards. According to David Willetts (2013, p. 35), market economy best meets the needs of the modern age because of its basis in 'trust', 'cooperation' and 'honesty'. This is an idealised representation of market economy which, at its most fundamental, is based on transactional relations and competition rather than trust and cooperation (Harvey 2007). Market principles, Willetts explains, provide the pillars of the 'Big Society' and are encapsulated in the metaphor of 'wings' and 'roots'. 'Wings' denote the neoliberal conception of individual freedom as a supreme value, because '[n]othing beats the sheer excitement of an individual's freedom, mobility and enterprise' (Willetts 2013, p. 26). 'Roots' are about responsibility, a sense of belonging to a community, faith in tradition and commitment to 'things greater than oneself' (Willetts 2013, p. 27). This vision of the 'Big Society' can thus be interpreted as an attempt to infuse the values of community into the Thatcherite paradigm.

However, post-2010, extended marketisation, together with cuts to public sector budgets, now appear to reverse the Conservatives' pre-election community

rhetoric. For example, within the new 'politics of austerity', Cameron (2012) has introduced the divisive discourse of the 'strivers', those who 'strive to make a better life for themselves and their families.' This discourse juxtaposes the 'strivers' with those who do not 'want to get on in life' and, as a consequence, appears to diminish community values. It also resonates with Margaret Thatcher's vision of society as a collection of individuals and families engaged in pursuit of material goods: 'their first pay cheque, their first car, their first home' (Cameron 2012). Indeed, it was partly their anxiety that 'progressive Conservative' agendas were being eclipsed by the 'strivers' versus 'skivers' divide that prompted Bright Blue to reinvigorate the 'Big Society' discourse, as emphasised by Francis Maude in the *Foreword to Tory Modernisation 2.0*.

These discursive shifts illustrate the phenomenon of Conservative education policy-making as a 'bricolage of often incoherent... 'borrowings', the input of a diverse set of 'think tanks'... the takeover of many of Labour's 'good ideas', and the underlying tensions' (Exley and Ball 2011, p. 113). The 'glue' holding this 'bricolage' together is provided by marketisation, despite an admission that 'markets can be unfair and inefficient' (Shorthouse 2013, p. 61):

if you believe in markets, you need to be prepared to make them work... The next stage for a modernising policy on education is to be bolder on markets in education, but rooted in compassion and with extra focus on, and support for, children from deprived backgrounds.

The possibility that market-based reforms 'fail' the most disadvantaged has been confirmed by empirical studies discussed below (e.g. Bagley 2006). Whilst denying that their modernisation agenda could be 'about all naked Tory privatisation', Olliff-Cooper simultaneously admits that:

Unless we can get much more from the hundreds of billions we spend on schools, hospitals, councils, care homes and prisons, we will never again be able to afford tax cuts. (Olliff-Cooper 2013, p. 48)

The Bright Blue discourse of 'better, cheaper, more human' education can be interpreted as driven by a tax cuts agenda. Ironically the discourse is also claimed to be an expression of Tory 'compassion'. For example, Shorthouse (2013) points to 'compassion' as underpinning his proposal for a system of government loans to help parents pay for childcare. These loans...

would be subsequently repaid on an income-contingent basis for a set number of years. So if a parent earns too little, they don't pay – if they earn too little over their lifetime, it is written off, which government pays for by applying an interest rate to all repayees. (Shorthouse 2013, p. 65)

On the surface, this reads like a pragmatic solution for making childcare more affordable and fiscally viable. However, this is also a blueprint for a 'public loans system' based on the same debt model found in higher education and extended by the Coalition government in 2010.² Despite opening the school market to private providers, Shorthouse boasts Conservative Party commitment to state education being 'free at the point of use' (Shorthouse 2013, p. 64). This assertion is a distortion of the established post-war settlement that, having contributed to the national finances, taxpayers could expect the young people's access to free education (Cowden and Singh 2007). What is now proposed is a deferred additional payment which is de facto not 'free at the point of use'.

In summary, Bright Blue offer a vision of a monolithic, market-based society governed by an elite of pragmatic optimists 'engaging in the authentically Tory business of... cutting taxes and liberating markets' (Shorthouse and Stagg 2013, p. 12). In alignment with traditional Tory beliefs in 'freedom, aspiration, equality of opportunity and security' (Shorthouse and Stagg 2013, p. 4), they privilege commercial activity, profit-making and efficiency over alternative value systems. Freedom, equality and security, however, acquire a different meaning in a society organised on qualitatively different principles to those of the marketplace. In Marcusian terms, contrary to the rhetoric of society and economy flourishing in the years ahead, Bright Blue create a bleak vision of one-dimensional society where the freedom of enterprise may give 'wings' to some, but, as 'the liberty of work or to starve, it spell[s] toil, insecurity, and fear for the vast majority of the population' (Marcuse 2002, p.4). In the 'Big Society', progress is being defined quantitatively, as '30%, 40%, even 80% more for less' (Olliff-Cooper 2013, p. 50), whilst freedom and other slogans promote submission to productivity regimes. Given the failures of the unregulated markets and their contribution to the global recession post-2008, urging to be 'bolder on markets in

² The Coalition tripled university tuition fees in England on coming to power in 2010. Despite this, Shorthouse and Stagg (2013, p. 69) claim that university education is still 'affordable'.

education' (Shorthouse 2013, p. 61) has, therefore, a flavour of 'rational irrationality' (Marcuse 2002, p. 11). Remedying negative consequences of market-based reform by 'accelerating' the reform (Shorthouse 2013, p. 59), introducing more of the same reform, more urgently, appears to promise a 'bleaker' future, sooner.

One-dimensional society

Writing at the beginning of the 1960s, Marcuse presents an analysis of the dialectic at play in the capitalist state of the advanced industrial age. He posits a trade off in the affluent capitalist state between rising living standards and the suppression of social freedoms. Marcuse locates this dynamic in the illusion of freedom created by consumer choice in the purchase of material goods. The capitalist economic system is based on consumption, with economic growth predicated on consumer spending. However, the technological efficiency which underpins the overproduction of material goods leads to a hegemony of technological and instrumental rationalities utilised for the 'scientific conquest of nature' and 'the scientific conquest of man' (Marcuse 2002, p. xliii). For example, in mechanical engineering, technological rationality aims at producing a controlled effect, in order to make industrial machinery to behave deterministically. In the world of humans, it also strives to engineer social change, through a complete integration of individual needs and aspirations with those of the industrial society's imperatives of production and efficiency. It is these imperatives that provide conditions for the emergence of new forms of social control, through the manufacturing and satisfaction of needs. Modern communication technologies are utilised instrumentally to manufacture consumption needs, simultaneously repressing alternative needs and aspirations. For example, the need of parents as educational consumers to exercise choice in the school market has been 'manufactured' by consecutive governments in England through calls for greater transparency about school performance. Measures to address the need for transparency range from the publication of school league tables in the national press to instant public access to detailed performance statistics on the Department for Education and individual school websites (DfE 2010).

However, whilst parents have been offered access to sophisticated performance data, their opportunities for democratic participation in decisions about education have diminished. Recent examples of enforced academicisation, against the wishes of parents, contradict the rhetoric of parental choice (Ball 2013). As pointed out by Hatcher (2012), the White Paper 2010 proposed autonomy driven by Headteachers, rather than governing bodies, with just two parent governors as the minimum requirement for the new academies. Despite the official aim of the free schools programme to address educational inequalities in areas of social deprivation, to date, few free school applications have been accepted on the basis of serving disadvantaged communities (Higham 2014). Promoting consumer choice seems to have suppressed democratic values and parents' rights (Whitty and Power 2002). This is because in a one-dimensional society, the promotion of one type of needs leads to a simultaneous suppression of alternative needs.

Marcuse (2002, p. 11) explains that an illusion of choice in an 'unfree world' is achieved through efficiency and productivity, the 'capacity to increase and spread comforts, to turn waste into need, and destruction into construction'. Free consumer choice among a variety of goods and services, however, may be problematic, because it...

does not signify freedom if these goods and services sustain social controls over a life of toil and fear... And the spontaneous reproduction of superimposed needs by the individual does not establish autonomy; it only testifies to the efficacy of the controls. (p. 10)

The efficacy of social control in the advanced industrial society is a product of instrumental rationality. Instrumental rationality relies on a synoptic focus on the quantifiable properties of the physical world. Transferred into the social world, this scientific view relates people to each other 'in accordance with quantifiable qualities-namely, as units of abstract labour power, calculable in units of time' (pp. 160-1). Aided by technology, the unrestrained logic of domination may eventually give rise to a totally administered society, in which both nature and people serve as means to instrumental ends. When people are subjugated to dominant capitalist systems of thought and action, they 'live and die rationally and productively', in the belief that 'destruction is the price of progress... and... that

business must go on, and that the alternatives are Utopian' (p. 149). Despite claims to neutrality, both technology and instrumental rationality serve the political ends of powerful elites. Their power relies on pushing the opposition to the margins and directing all individual and social thought and activity towards increasing productivity and efficiency. Marcuse's (2002, p. 66) response to these conditions of domination and oppression is the 'Great Refusal', a 'protest against that which is'. By negating control systems which unify opposites and promote positive thinking, the 'Great Refusal' provides a departure from a *'happy consciousness'*, which is utilised in an 'unfree society' to facilitate acceptance of its misdeeds (p. 79) and the belief that, 'in spite of everything', the established system 'delivers the goods' (p. 82). The 'Great Refusal' is also a basis for a critique of the tendency to diminish responsibility, whereby people are encouraged to surrender their personal thoughts and actions to the productive apparatus. In the process, the apparatus assumes the role of a moral agent and responsibility, conscience and guilt are 'absolved by reification, by the general necessity of things' (Marcuse 2002, p. 82).

Critical analyses of the 'post-affluent' capitalist society post-credit crunch of 2008 (e.g. Alvesson 2013, Berlant 2011) resonate with Marcuse's perspective, but also refine it in the light of recent history. Alvesson (2013) unmasks consumerism as not only the dominant, but also glorified, *modus operandi* in the 'post-affluent' state. In the economy that shifted its focus from (over)production to the creation of demand for goods, the consumer becomes a 'heroic' figure, who contributes to economic growth and keeps unemployment down through consumption. The means-ends logic has thus shifted from "work to consume" to 'consume so that people can work' (Alvesson 2013, p. 37). The desire for consumer products has been replaced with a desire for fashionable brands. Branding taps into an individual's inclination to develop a positive, albeit superficial, status-enhancing image. It utilises 'technologies of persuasion' in order to achieve the expected conditioned response: consumer faith in, and loyalty to, the brand name. That such success is often based on inflated impressions creating an 'illusion' of novelty or progress seems to be overlooked, because modern marketing is more about creating needs than satisfying them (p. 65). This may explain the development of Tory modernisation discourses discussed above, such as the rhetorical turn from Thatcherism to 'Cameronism'. Similar

'technologies of persuasion' have been employed to develop distinctive academy 'brands'. For example, the Harris Federation is presented on its website as a 'family of academies' aiming at 'setting standards of excellence and fulfilling high expectations' (Harris Federation n.d.), whilst the Aldridge Foundation 'brand' is based on 'harnessing entrepreneurship for social change' (Aldridge Foundation 2014). The status-enhancing intent of branding is revealed here in the contradictions inherent in the values of 'family' being linked to 'setting standards of excellence' and 'social change' being associated with 'entrepreneurship'.

Alvesson's analytical approach resonates with that of Marcuse's. As explained by Kellner, Marcuse's analysis relies on 'the ability to abstract one's perception and thought from existing forms in order to form more general concepts' (Kellner in Marcuse 2012, p. xiv). Although this approach yields insightful analyses of social relations, the process of abstracting the general from the particular inevitably involves a reduction of the complexity and singularity of everyday experience, a limitation overcome through Berlant's (2011) methodology. Berlant (2011) studies singularity and its material manifestations in literary, artistic and other genres. Her poststructuralist critique illuminates the fluid and paradoxical forces at play in the 'post-affluent' social settings, which provide the backdrop for the dramas of 'cruel optimism'. Whilst Alvesson's (2013) central theme is the society's attachment to grandiosity, for Berlant (2011) it is an attachment to what is actually an obstacle to flourishing. This attachment is termed 'cruel optimism' and is manifested in fantasies of 'the good life' which, in the present conditions of a 'precarious public sphere' are dissolving into an illusion (Berlant 2011, p. 3). These fantasies include job security, upward mobility, equality and other assurances of the liberal-capitalist society. In trying to find out why people remain attached to these conventional 'good life fantasies' in the face of instability, contingency and crisis, Berlant studies 'real characters' entangled in the everyday and the ordinary. Her riposte to the Tory 'wings and roots' metaphor might be framed as the following critique of neoliberal 'freedom':

in liberal societies, freedom includes freedom from the obligation to pay attention to much, whether personal or political - no-one is obliged to be conscious or socially active in their modes and scenes of belonging.
(p. 227)

This is a reminder of our obligation to be socially conscious and active in searching for 'new idioms of the political and of belonging' (p. 262). The search for new idioms in everyday stories of ordinary men and women takes Berlant to contexts where 'solidarity comes from the scavenging for survival that absorbs increasingly more people's lives' (p. 262). These contexts, with the contradictions and tensions that infuse the everyday, provide the public sphere of resistance. They are also spaces where power is manifested. Whereas resistance may not always bring about the desired outcomes, as exemplified by lost battles against forced academicisation,³ the participation of parents, teachers, local supporters, MPs and teachers' unions in local educational debates may strengthen social bonds and solidarity. Whilst Marcuse emphasises a 'Great Refusal', Berlant writes about 'solidarity', which is affective as well as rational and rooted in the 'desire for alternative filters that produce the sense - if not the scene - of a more livable and intimate sociality' (2011, p. 227). This analysis highlights Marcuse's (2002) omissions, particularly in relation to the singularity of diverse actors involved in social processes. For example, where Marcuse (2002, p. xliii) refers to 'the powers that be', Berlant traces embodied people in 'real-life' settings.

Despite these omissions, the contribution of Marcusian thinking to the analysis of the present is two-fold. As a historical reading, *One-Dimensional Man* is a reminder that if we fail to learn from history, then we are bound to repeat rather than transcend it. *One-Dimensional Man* can also be read as prescient in predicting the spread of neoliberalism and its concomitant diminution of the possibility of qualitative social change.

The school: a site of struggle, a site of hope

The school as a site of struggle reflects the power conflicts at play in other public spheres of the neoliberal society. Conceptualised as 'edu-business', schools are controlled by networks of power consisting of government, policy entrepreneurs, consultants and private companies (Ball 2012). As Gunter and Forrester (2009, p. 499) point out, these networks work through the inclusion/exclusion nexus,

³ For example, in 2012, Downhills Primary School was forced to become the Harris Primary Academy after losing its legal battle in the High Court (Anti Academies Alliance 2012). Such examples illustrate the irony of the 'Big Society' in its substitution of 'localism' for the enforcement of centralised planning.

excluding teachers and local authority personnel for displaying ‘unmodern professional attitudes’ and replacing them with ‘attractive outsiders’ who view the school as a business enterprise. Their aim is domination, as well as profit from the widespread retailing of school improvement packages, policy solutions, tests and other educational ‘commodities’ (Ball 2009).

From Marcuse's perspective, whilst progress in the advanced industrial society relies on the production and consumption of material goods, neoliberal expansion is based on the (over)production, marketing and selling of improvement agendas. Like technological rationality, the idea of modernisation is presented as 'scientific' and therefore neutral and, as emphasised in *Tory Modernisation 2.0*, rational, sensible and pragmatic. However, modernisation through marketisation is not neutral, because it 'cannot be isolated from the use to which it is put' (Marcuse 2002, p. xlii). In educational contexts, market logics encourage viewing pupils as units of funding and schools as abstract units of performance in school league tables. Market values of customer choice, competitiveness and global competition, repeated mantra-like by neoliberal politicians, silence alternatives, penetrating to the very soul of the individual conceived as 'the enterprising self' (Smyth 2011, p. 112). The purpose of education in a marketised society is a narrow one: to prepare young people for life as marketplace workers, market consumers and entrepreneurs.

In one-dimensional society, education becomes impoverished also through a lack of critical perspectives, which contributes to the triumph of 'positive thinking' (Marcuse 2002, p. 174). Positive thinking underpins the 'optimism' characteristic of Bright Blue, as well as their 'can do more' approaches to quantitative change. Eventually, as the instrumental logic of the marketplace replaces thinking and disregards conviction as a motive for action, the aim of education may become no longer ‘to instill convictions but to destroy the capacity to form any’ (Arendt 1953, p. 314). This constructs the neoliberal subject who is ‘malleable rather than committed, flexible rather than principled – essentially depthless’ (Ball 2012, p. 31). In accordance with its paradox of ‘creative destruction’ (Harvey 2007), creating conditions for the advance of neoliberalism may be simultaneously destructive of the very core of educational endeavour: commitment, principles and depth.

Although the educational status quo in England suggests an ongoing struggle over schools, with no signs of a dramatic shift in the policy agendas and configurations of power, recent empirically-based studies highlight some, albeit constrained, possibilities for socially rather than economically oriented change (Lupton and Hempel-Jorgensen 2012). For example, the case of Weston Academy, sponsored by Weston Housing Trust, suggests that the Academies Programme could contribute to the regeneration of deprived areas, though one case is not enough to legitimise the programme as a whole (Rowley and Dyson 2012). The mobilisation of parents, schools, academics, MPs, teachers' unions and local communities through political campaigns organised by Anti Academies Alliance (www.antiacademies.org.uk), Campaign for State Education (www.campaignforstateeducation.org.uk) and other organisations, reveal that political action and forms of resistance are taking place. That such resistance may be faltering could be explained by the scale of the neoliberal 're-structuring' of social, political and economic relations. These changes have transformed the capitalist state from a one-dimensional advanced industrial nation state into a node in the global network of market transactions (Fairclough 2003). As a collection of individuals holding personal responsibility, the totally marketised 'Big Society' inhibits the development of social bonds and communities of people united through collective responsibility and solidarity.

Meanwhile, as suggested by research evidence, schools continue to be adversely affected by marketisation. Research by Lupton and Hempel-Jorgensen (2012, p. 609) reveals that modernisation agendas encourage 'performative pedagogies' and socially divisive categorisation of pupils based on 'ability' and social class, in place of more holistic pedagogical approaches. Accountability for modernisation encourages school leadership discourses which undermine teacher professionalism (Hall 2013). Where the discourse of parental choice is internalised, it intensifies competition and rivalry (Bagley 2006). A failure to include dissenting parental voices reveals a democratic deficit in school and local authority governance (Hatcher 2012). The outcomes of modernisation are complex, because neither schools nor education policy are 'of a piece' (Ball *et al.* 2012). Education reform agendas trigger compliance, resistance and other diverse local responses which cannot be fully controlled by the policy-makers or predicted in advance (Ball *et al.* 2012, Bates 2013).

Central to Marcusean thinking is also hope, a belief that a qualitatively different world is possible. This is because 'critique alone rarely inspires people to act' and we need 'something to fight for as well as against' (Van Heertum 2006, p. 45). Paradoxically, building a one-dimensional society depends on unrestricted knowledge and, at the same time, on...

an increasing need to "contain" knowledge and reason within the conceptual and value universe of the established society and its improvement and growth in order to protect this society against radical change. (Marcuse 1968, p. 34)

Because of this paradox, inherent in education is the power to transcend the present instead of reproducing it in the future and it is the disruption of the status quo implicit in the concept of the 'Great Refusal' that provides the conclusion to this paper.

Conclusion: the 'Great Refusal'?

For Marcuse, qualitative change is based on resisting tendencies towards one-dimensional thinking. Such resistance, termed as the 'Great Refusal', involves rejecting the logic of domination for dialectical logic. Dialectical logic accepts contradiction as 'belonging to the very "nature of thought"' (Marcuse 2002, p. 146) and, consequently, encourages 'two-dimensional' thinking. Two-dimensional thought focuses on questions about 'what is and what could be' (p. xii) and continually moves between critique and imagining an alternative future. For example, a critique of 'life as a means', which is simply a 'byproduct of economic and political changes', could allow for 'life as an end' (p. 19) to be considered. Similarly, questioning the subjugation of schools to increasing demands of productivity could assist educators in asserting their professionalism. Resisting the gratification of the manufactured desire for choice in the school market could help parents to reclaim their democratic rights. Above all, in moving between 'what is and what could be', a Marcusean reading of *Tory Modernisation 2.0* illuminates the simultaneously compelling and misleading nature of the metaphorical 'wings' and 'roots' of the 'Big Society'. As explained above, the metaphor juxtaposes the 'wings' of individual freedom and enterprise with 'roots' as a reminder of 'personal initiative and responsibility' (Willettts 2013, p. 26).

However, the metaphor appears to be a manifestation of 'political triangulation' (McAnulla 2010), by projecting an image of 'society' as a collection of individuals pursuing freedom and self-interest, albeit within the constraints of 'personal' responsibility. A qualitatively different image of 'society' would be of a community of people united through collective, as well as 'personal', agency and responsibility. The latter conception of society would, in turn, have implications for how education is imagined.

Within the neoliberal imaginary, education is conceptualised as 'a private good with public benefits only insofar as it generates human capital and spurs national productivity' (Lingard and Sellar 2012, p. 59). According to Lingard and Sellar, this conceptualisation stunts the capacity to imagine a different future, because of its inability to move beyond the next incremental step, as illustrated by the *Tory Modernisation 2.0* discourse of '30%, 40%, even 80% more for less' (Olliff-Cooper 2013, p. 50). If education is to transcend the neoliberal imaginary, then its 'internal goods' need to be open to contestation and debate rather than taken-for-granted as part of the existing policy framework (Lingard and Sellar 2012, p. 59). The difficulty of thinking beyond the neoliberal imaginary is reflected in the tendency to develop policy approaches which merely mitigate the worst consequences of neoliberalism simultaneously upholding its legitimacy (Lingard and Sellar 2012), as well as a belief that the 'system delivers the goods' (Marcuse 2002, p. 87). It is also based on the influence inherent in the social imaginary itself, defined by Taylor (2004, p.23) as the 'common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy'. A social imaginary is an assemblage of often pre-reflective ethical and institutional assumptions, normative notions and images through which people make sense of their social existence. According to Taylor, an understanding of society as a field of collective agency is crucial to the modern social imaginary. This image, however, is in tension with the view of society as a 'terrain to be mapped, synoptically represented, analysed, ... acted on' (Taylor 2004, p. 164) and inhabited by an administered population (Marcuse 2002). That it is difficult to transcend the neoliberal imaginary could, therefore, be because, by default, it defines the limits of the acceptable and the thinkable, at the same time offering intellectual tools and concepts which allow little else. On Berlant's (2011) analysis, this difficulty could also arise from attachment to optimistic fantasies of

'the good life', within its affective dimension. Marcuse's tacit understanding of the concept of social imaginary can be illustrated by his point that society would be free to the 'extent to which it is organized, sustained, and reproduced by an essentially new historical Subject' (Marcuse 2002, p. 256).

In response to Lingard and Sellar's (2012) call for transcending the neoliberal imaginary, Marcusian theory highlights the generative potential of individual and collective resistance, or the 'Great Refusal'. As a 'protest against that which is', Marcuse's 'Great Refusal' implies a major shift. Although he explains the theoretical principles of such protest, Marcuse leaves it for the reader to decide how the 'Great Refusal' could be manifested in practice. Based on post-Marcusian analyses and research evidence discussed above, it could be posited that, in the 'post-affluent' society, resistance emerges in and is sustained through ongoing, local, often contradictory articulations of contestation, solidarity and collective agency. Resistance is post-rational, in the double sense of challenging the dominant technological-instrumental rationality and embracing the affective. Acknowledging affective aspects of self, in turn, involves a search for self/understanding how affect and attachment play out in the public sphere (Berlant 2011).

Qualitative change in education could, therefore, emerge from an ongoing intellectual and affective endeavour involving dialectical thinking, self-awareness and discursive action. Whether it is implementing modernisation agendas or resisting them, it would involve members of the school community in reflecting, individually and collectively, on their own thinking and actions, as well as those of others. Qualitative change in education would need to be based on a recognition that learning, teaching, parental choice, school governance and any other activity taking place in educational settings, is a political practice. As such, it requires a continuing examination of vested interests underlying seemingly 'neutral' claims to expertise in educational modernisation. Education is a call for all to learn, in the school and beyond: pupils, school staff, parents, policy-makers, political activists. Contesting and abandoning unworkable policies, despite the paradox that 'it is awkward and it is threatening to detach from what is already not working' (Berlant 2011, p. 263), is an important lesson to be learned from the 'optimistic' attachment to a totally marketised education promoted in *Tory Modernisation 2.0*.

The contribution of this paper to extant critiques of educational modernisation rests on an application of Marcuse's 'critical thinking tools'⁴ to an analysis of *Tory Modernisation 2.0* as a specific articulation of the neoliberal imaginary. Marcuse's theory of one-dimensional society offers insight into the processes through which power elites try to actively shape the system, at the same time justifying their decisions through the 'general necessity of things' and absolving themselves of responsibility for the consequences (Marcuse 2002, p. 82). This paper has focused on the concepts of qualitative change, 'Great Refusal' and 'two-dimensional thinking' as particularly useful in contesting the Tory version of modernisation. In broader terms, Marcuse's theory reveals society as self-constituted, having control over itself rather than being determined by some exterior forces and this provides a starting point for imagining a qualitatively different future. Marcuse (2002, p. 261) is, however, aware that his theory 'possesses no concepts which could bridge the gap between the present and its future'. Much could, therefore, be gained from a further development of Marcusian thought and its application to the field of education policy.

⁴ A framework of 'critical thinking tools' for the analysis of education policy and leadership has been developed by the Critical Studies in Educational Leadership, Management and Administration Series (e.g. Niesche 2012; Gillies 2013; Gunter 2014).

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