



Book Review Article

Education for Societal Transformation: Alternatives for a Just Future, Adamson Frank, Rezan Benatar, Michael Gibbons, Mark Ginsburg, Steven J. Klees, Giuseppe Lipari, Carol Anne Spreen, Deepa Srikantaiah. (2024). (<https://resources.norrag.org/resource/view/900/478>)

The NORRAG Special Issue 10 title is *Education for Societal Transformation: Alternatives for a Just Future*. It brings together 39 short articles and an Introduction that presents an overview of the complete work. Eight academics edited it.¹ Most of them are known for their contributions to the discussion on comparative and international education from radical perspectives. According to their stated intentions, the set of texts represents a humanist manifesto for an education centered on the well-being of people and the survival of planet Earth.

The editors argue that the world is facing a *polycrisis* or, even acutely, a civilization crisis. This volume presents alternatives to today's dominant thinking and practices' economic, social, political, environmental, and educational perspectives. The main message: "Let us embrace our potentially terminal crises as an epic opportunity to realize our human desire and potential to love and care for each other and the Earth." (p. 20).

It is not a conventional educational research book. The authors are neither impartial nor take distance from their objects of study; they have a cause to defend and argue in its favor, some of them even with passion. For these reasons, they criticize the Western model of development and capital accumulation and refute the foundations of this civilization, its regime of truth, and its whole-hearted belief that the progress of science and technology and liberal institutions will solve all problems of the Earth and the humanity. Notwithstanding, some authors recognize the progress of science and technology in solving health and other social issues. Also, there are efforts of many national states to expand and improve their education systems, even if they do not do so with ecological and humanistic approaches.

Most authors recognize the efforts of multilateral institutions to reach global agreements in favor of education and the planet's ecology, like the Sustainable Development Goals and Education for Sustainable Development, as well as the contributions of religious organizations. However, they emphasize school systems' shortcomings rather than their achievements. Their critique focuses on the international commoditized public education model with limited budgets and benchmarks of outcomes, human capital formation, economic rate of return, and value for money.

The editors image aims and principles for education: "We must seize this unique historical moment to reconceive and radically change public education as an entry point for deeper transformations that will build human solidarity and cooperation, bringing an end to racism, patriarchy, and capitalism." (p. 11). But these attributes are hard bones to crack, not only in capitalist societies but also in those that were once

socialist. Perhaps Mark Ginsburg and Emilio Rodríguez Alonso, with their essay, "Developing Youth for a Socialist Society: The Role of the José Martí Pioneer Organization in Cuba," challenge my assertion. They admire the improvements in education in Cuba. Though, they evade discussing the authoritarian disposition of the political regime.

Notwithstanding, it is good that the first chapter embraces the voice of an activist, David C. Korten. In a synthetic and didactic manner, he presents a reflection in which he refutes the praises of advanced capitalism, the prevailing inequity, and the degradation of ecology. His position is "Eco-nomics: Life-Centric Alternative to the Money-Centric Ego-nomics that is Killing Us," which symbolically summarizes the message of the collection of papers.

The book contains theoretical contributions and a review of ideas in vogue in the international arena. It also imagines new institutions and fundamental changes in pedagogy and the actions of learners and educators. It covers case studies from five continents, outlining achievements, hopes, and expectations for the future. Likewise, it also documents cases of democratic education, aspirations for social justice, and ecological alternatives. It is a book that looks to the future and offers clues on achieving societal transformations. It contains essays on basic formal education, postsecondary schooling, and nonformal education.

Furthermore, although it is not reminiscent, most of the texts arose from anti-capitalist ideas that evolved from the writings of Marx and Engels and radical 20th-century authors who analyzed educational policy. Martin Carnoy with *Education as Cultural Imperialism*, Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis with *Schooling in Capitalist America*, and the contributions of the authors of the New Sociology of Education. None of them recognize the contributions of the human capital theory or the modernization approach as useful instruments for analyzing educational systems.

On the contrary, they criticize the rule of human capital theory. For example, Tom G. Griffiths, with his essay "Advancing Revolutionary Reforms of Education and Society Through the Reformist SDG and ESD Agendas," states: "The human capital formation approach is coupled with ideas of meritocratic social mobility, of social and economic success or failure, of individuals and of entire nations, here constructed as somehow disconnected from the operation of capitalism." (p. 39) However, education for the masses was born with capitalism; before that, it was only for the aristocracy and the powerful. The human capital theory was the intellectual tool that explained and, yes, justified the expansion of schooling around the globe.

In general, I am sympathetic to the contributions and approaches in this collection of articles. However, it seems to me that several of the authors exaggerate the value of decolonial approaches to achieve transformations in education, social justice and anti-capitalist ecological development. Their approaches to epistemology are interesting; they contribute to the discussion, but I doubt that they are compelling for practical politics. Still, I applaud their recognition of the importance of

¹ Adamson et al. (2024).

indigenous cultures.

Education for Societal Transformation has several virtues. First, every chapter contains logical reasoning and argumentative congruence. It is noticeable that they went through several revisions and more than one dialogue among colleagues who share points of view, even though they work on different topics. Secondly, it also seems obvious that there was professional editorial work. The essays are written very well; their language is understandable without abrupt turns of phrase and congruent with the theoretical approach they point to with brevity. A third virtue is the economy of words. The authors dispatch important ideas in a few pages, some elegantly written. Their approach is deep, committed, and insightful.

I do not refer to each chapter; it would make this review lengthy and will not add significance to my thoughts. However, if I were still an active professor, I would certainly put it as required reading in my graduate courses on educational politics. I will use it if I accept an invitation to be a visiting professor next academic year. Two of the essays in this anthology will be useful to me for the afterword of a book I am writing: “Placing Epistemic Justice at the Core of Educational Transformations for a Just Future” by Maria Balarin and Lizzi O. Milligan and “On the Tasks of the Critical Scholar/Activist” by Michael W. Apple.

In sum, this special issue of NORRAG, *Education for Societal*

Transformation: Alternatives for a Just Future, is open access and easier to read on the web page or download its PDF version. I think it will be welcomed by professors and practitioners of comparative and international education; it is also useful for undergraduate and graduate courses. Thus, its texts are relevant and will be for years to come.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Carlos Ornelas: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Reference

Adamson, Frank, Benatar, Rezan, Gibbons, Michael, Ginsburg, Mark, Klees, Steven J., Lipari, Giuseppe, Spreen, Carol Anne, Srikantaiah, Deepa, 2024. Education for Societal Transformation: Alternatives for a Just Future. NORRAG Special issue, no. 10. (<https://resources.norrag.org/resource/view/900/478>).

Carlos Ornelas 

Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, Xochimilco campus, México City,
Mexico

E-mail address: carlos.ornelas@icloud.com.