

# David Ridley's 'method of democracy'

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David Ridley, *The Method of Democracy*. John Dewey's *Theory of Collective Intelligence*. Peter Lang Publishers. 220pp. £40.00 but also downloadable online and as PDF.

David Ridley asks in conclusion to his book: 'Why begin a book on Dewey's critical social theory with the Frankfurt School?' As a US philosopher of education associated with Chicago University where he established an experimental school, Dewey seems far from the Frankfurt School of Marxist cultural theorists who initially followed the Hungarian Leninist Gyorgi Lukacs but later succumbed to 'the deep cultural pessimism' David Ridley sees influencing subsequent academic critical theory.

Yet both Dewey and the Frankfurters sought a means to build collective understanding of society. To achieve this Communist Parties followed Lenin in bringing together class-conscious manual workers with progressive intellectuals to forge a party line. Dewey argued it was also possible to mobilise local communities and publics to discover and pursue their own interests through education. Ridley sees this method as achievable through a 'public sociology' developed in the universities as an 'intelligent populism' by which the various publics of post-industrial society can confront their shared situation.

Academic expertise can make sense of the welter of internet information whilst also indicating a way forward for intellectuals enmeshed in the marketisation of the academy. How successive waves of neoliberalism created this 'problematic situation' - in Dewey's terms one demanding a collective response - is narrated in Ridley's third chapter. This cuts through the mantric repetition of the term neoliberalism as a catch-all shibboleth to relate its successive phases of implementation in the global economy to its theoretical origins. A no less exemplary fourth chapter then details neoliberalism's application to 'The Marketisation of Higher Education'. This draws on former Tory HE minister David Willetts's justifications of his policies for linking English higher education to a stagnating neoliberal economy.

The result has been the hierarchy of further and higher education that Kate Purcell's research reports in this issue of *PSE* has now established itself. Building upon the social sorting machine that schools have become, students are allocated to levels of learning ranging from 'apprenticeships' continuous with T-levels on 'technical' courses in schools and colleges through the hierarchy of more or less specialist and often inadequate and increasingly platformed provision. This leads young people on towards the receding goal of secure employment amid illusions of 'levelling up'. Desperation to achieve 'upward social mobility' needs only Gove's vouchers for those who can afford to top them up in private and semi-private schools to complement the paperless vouchers that fees/loans represent post-school, especially when differentiated by course and institution as Ridley reveals is planned.

In response, Ridley advocates 'universities as social cooperatives' based on the idea of 'co-inquiry' through a Deweyian 'democratic collegiality' providing the basis for academic self-governance to resolve the contradictions of ownership and control resulting from marketisation. Such a cooperative response was adopted by staff and unions at Coventry University in which Ridley was involved against the reduction of its public sphere to a collection of diploma mills. However, it is not a criticism but a question to ask how universities differ from political parties, particularly as Ridley cites Corbynism as an example of intelligent populism

Unfortunately Corbyn was not popular enough to avoid electoral debacle in the Johnson coup and opposition still has to overcome social democratic prejudice against wider alliances, especially those that are building from below. Universities will surely contribute to this resistance to their further dismemberment in the moribund market but they cannot substitute for it.