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Book Review: Cervone, Jason A. (2023). *Towards Rural Education for the Common Good (Routledge Studies in Education, Neoliberalism, and Marxism)*. Taylor and Francis

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Rural Futurability in an era of Neoliberal Capitalism

Jason Cervone opens his book with a polemic (some might say rant) against the state of politics, religious fundamentalism and capitalism in the United States. He argues that the same issues affecting rural education, affect the whole of the United States. He offers a ‘rural lens’ through which to look at the issues. His bleak assessment is that:

Rural spaces are currently stuck between neoliberal dominance and the rise of neo-fascists and white supremacists. They serve as sites of extraction and sites of refuge for the wealthy. Without new, emancipatory ways of thinking and new visions for education, there is no future for rural spaces. (pp. 15-16).

He introduces the reader to terms such as ‘autonomism’, ‘futurability’, ‘space as an act of resistance’ and in the context of rural education, sees an opportunity for rural schools to not only reimagine a future, but to resist and find transformative power to overcome the influence of neoliberalism on education. The philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of the book, based on an understanding of these terms, requires that the reader be prepared to listen and learn as the author makes his case.

Chapter One presents an argument for ‘rural futurability’ based on education for power, potency and possibility, drawing from Berardi (2017). ‘Futurability’—as I understand it—speaks to possibilities. ‘Potency’ is the force which turns possibilities into actuality. Cervone sees rural education as a potential vehicle for change: “*Futurability, radical rurality, and production of space are concepts that can all come together in education*” (p. 45). He argues that the ‘power’ of neoliberalism has left rural spaces without an imagined future beyond their role in capitalistic extraction and production. What is needed is “*collective struggle and action*” (p. 51). To achieve this, schools must be public institutions, with participatory governance and include anti-capitalist elements in the curriculum. Cervone sees neoliberal capitalism as the enemy which needs to be “*eroded*” (p. 59) so that alternative possibilities can be realised. Cervone draws quite heavily on the work of Corbett (e.g. 2016, 2020, 2021) to draw out meanings of rurality, space and place—but he does not share Corbett’s more optimistic outlook for “*finding new ways of working at the interface*” (Corbett, 2020, p. 295).

My first reaction to the idea of eroding capital was ‘well good luck with that!’. While the education system is different in Australia (where I live and work), I can see the principles of futurability at play in different ways. Many remote communities are opting out of public education for the very reasons Cervone wants it to stay—parents and community leaders see public education being captured by neoliberal priorities (Guenther & Osborne, 2018). But they do

engage in collective struggle to make locally imagined possibilities become reality (Guenther & Falk, 2022; Guenther et al., 2022).

Chapter Two explores in more detail, the concept of spatial futurability. The points that grabbed me here were about the difference between ‘abstract’ and ‘differential’ spaces. Abstract space, is conceived by Lefebvre (1991) as *“the dominant form of space, that of the center of wealth and power, endeavors to mold the spaces it dominates”* (p. 49). In neoliberal terms, Cervone argues that abstract spaces in rural education are homogenized, to ensure that schools produce economically productive graduates. Differential spaces, according to Cervone, *“exist as possibilities”* that *“push back against capitalism”* to be *“liveable”* (p. 77). Differential spaces depend on and emerge from abstract spaces. As I thought about this, my mind went to structures such as national curriculum and national standards, which for many regional and remote schools have been a springboard for curriculum adaptations and pursuit of culturally responsive/nurturing teaching practices (see for example Lowe et al., 2023; Lowe & Weuffen, 2022; Weuffen et al., 2023).

The third chapter focuses on power—though it would be more accurate to say that the focus is on neoliberal forces that shape rural education. Cervone takes broad aim at neoliberal capitalism as a force that problematises ‘rural’ as inefficient, and in need of fixing—an argument he has previously described as ‘rural erasure’ (Cervone, 2019). In part, this arises from the abstraction of ‘rural’ into geographic classifications, and a tendency for the development of strategies that tend towards ‘consolidation’ (for example through closure of small schools), and which encourage ‘outmigration’ of individuals so they can pursue a more productive life. He takes aim at the *“abundance of research in rural education regarding student out-migration, [where] there is often a focus on the individual aspirations of students, their parents, and educators rather than the societal and economic factors that shape those aspirations”* (p. 124). Similar dynamics are at play in Australia, where boarding schools are seen as the ‘solution’ to the rural problem of perceived poor quality in remote schools, even though that ‘problem’ has been created by systems that underfund remote schools, so that parents are forced to make a *“choice-less choice”* (Guenther & Osborne, 2020).

Cervone admits that many rural communities have bought into the neoliberal discourse. Have they simply been persuaded by the politics of neoliberalism or is this a real choice, based on informed choice? This, is where ‘potency’ and ‘impotence’ comes into the picture—the topic for Chapter Four. Cervone argues that questions like the one I posed are not about choice, but rather about a perception of impotence, which results in a reactionary response from *“right wing conservatives”* who *“fill school boards”* in order to *“dismantle the public sphere”* (p. 154). Cervone gives a couple of examples where potency—*“the ability to create and change societal factors”* (p. 141)—is evident. Far from offering hope for rural spaces and schools, these examples serve to demonstrate the power of neoliberal capitalism, leaving the reader with a pessimistic hopelessness at the end of the chapter.

Indeed, at the outset of Chapter Six, which discusses ‘possibility’, Cervone confirms his pessimism: *“The concept of possibility and taking an optimistic view of the world is currently an extremely difficult proposition”* (p. 177). He does, however, attempt to map out a future based on place and differential spaces. Several sections using the word ‘commoning’ follow that presumably offer an alternative to the individualisation of neoliberal capitalism. I found it hard to follow the threads of the argument, though Cervone’s aspirations for a ‘collective focus’ is rephrased in the following statement: *“The general intellect as described here can be developed and fostered through a common school movement that is aimed at creating a stronger collective and focus on human need rather than economic production”* (p. 206). The problem with this rather abstract manifesto is that it is difficult to imagine. While calling for a disentanglement from capitalism to reveal new possibilities, he concedes that *“what those possibilities are remains unclear”* (p. 209). Instead he argues for what rural spaces will not be: *“sites of decline”*,

“peripheral or remote”, “sites of extraction”, an “obstacle to those who live there” (p. 209). This leaves me feeling underwhelmed and somewhat mystified about what the goal for rural education is (beyond dismantling capital).

The conclusion to the book is equally pessimistic in its outlook, restating many of the maxims that are presented throughout the book. According to Cervone, the outlook for rural education in the United States is bleak, and requires revolutionary dismantling of one system, with no clear path forward, because according to Cervone, neoliberal capitalism will always hold sway and trump the attempts of rural schools to create differential spaces, which look beyond the value of education as a means of extraction and production.

While I acknowledge that the context of Cervone’s work—rural United States—is different to those I work in, I feel that he would do well to have a look at rural and remote schools in other contexts where the imagination for change has resulted in possibilities being realised. That said, this is an interesting book, which despite its somewhat turgid use of terminology, offers insights that are valuable for educators in colonised, capitalist neoliberal countries.

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