



JOSH COLE

Putting PISA in its Place

For Stuart Hall, 1932-2014

In this article I will put the PISA test — the newly-minted and much-vaunted international education league table (a collection of educational rankings) — in its place. That is, I will set PISA in historical context, so we can better understand what the test is, why it was created, and how it has exercised so much influence over politicians, business-leaders, and the media.

PISA stands for “Programme for International Student Assessment.” The test was first given in 2000, and has been administered triennially ever since. According to the PISA website (<http://www.oecd.org/pisa/home/>), the test aims to measure “the key subjects: reading, mathematics and science.” Further, it is supposed to be “unique” in that it is designed to assess “to what extent students at the end of compulsory education, can apply their knowledge to real-life situations and be equipped for full participation in society.” To date, the website asserts that “more than 70 economies have participated in the assessment.”

Note the careful use of language here — both in the test’s design and the way it is sold to the public through the website. PISA purports to measure “the key subjects,” which are limited to just three. It claims to measure “real life” skills — as opposed to those irrelevant subjects taught in traditional, outmoded school-systems (there is no room

here for history or citizenship education, for instance). Crucially, the countries tested are considered not as societies or even nations. Instead they rendered as “economies,” full stop.

Finally, note what is left out. The politics behind PISA are absent from the site. While it measures national school systems in exclusively economic/utilitarian terms, ranks them first to last, and seeks to shame their host “economies” into changing their educational policies in order to bring them into line with globalized capitalist standards, this *raison d'être* is not for us to know.

Who came up with this test? The answer is telling. PISA was created by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). This organization was founded — as the Organisation for European Economic Cooperation — by the Allied victors after World War II. Originally, it was to administer “Marshall Plan” funding (U.S. money for rebuilding war-torn Europe along liberal-democratic lines). By 1961, it achieved its present form as the OECD — as an organization dedicated to international capitalist research, development, and promotion, and policing. Think of it as the world’s largest, best-funded, most prestigious think-tank.

The Cold War is often thought of in military terms — the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. squaring off in order to dominate the world through brute force — but it was as just as much a cultural and economic undertaking as a military one. It saw two radically different social systems vying for international influence: one liberal-capitalist, the other communist. The OECD played a major role in furthering the ends of the former system by providing information and resources to “developed” and “developing” economies the world over. With the end of the Cold War came a world dominated by a single ideology: liberal-capitalism. Naturally, the OECD expanded its operations in this new context, absorbing the economies of the former Soviet Bloc in the process. That said, the OECD denies having any ideological role whatsoever. It portrays itself as simply “addressing the challenges facing the world economy,” plain and simple. (<http://www.oecd.org/>) PISA indicates otherwise. It is shot through with ideology.

Just what is this ideology? It asserts that education — which could potentially involve any number of aims and objectives — should be narrowed to that which is considered to be economically advantageous. That is, it should be utilitarian, responding to the needs of production, whatever those may be at a given time.

This idea runs back to the nineteenth century. It was a reaction to the upheavals of the Industrial Revolution. In the light of the seismic economic and social upheavals wrought by that event, the question was posed again and again (in the words of the English thinker Herbert Spencer): “what knowledge is of most worth?” Utilitarianism was increasingly the answer. The humanistic/liberal arts curriculum still had its place, of course, but it was increasingly edged-out by practical/vocational training of various sorts, while the school as a whole became subjected to administration based on principles of “efficiency,” and later “scientific management”).

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This utilitarian thrust received an immense boost through the Second World War. In this event, science and technology demonstrated their profound destructive and creative powers — powers which translated smoothly into the realm of postwar global capitalism (think of the importance of global communication, transportation, and automation in economic life after 1945). Though the 1960s saw a flash of enthusiasm for liberal learning and progressive education (including discovery learning, the “project method,” ungrading, and so on) it did not survive the 1970s intact — it lived on as *rhetoric*, but not policy. Today, supporting an educational model emphasizing STEM subjects (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) is considered simple common sense. To think otherwise is to be naïve.¹

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There are two premises underlying PISA that are deeply faulty. The first is that the economic future can be known. Does this need detailed explanation? No one can see the future, even a “visionary edupreneur” like Bill Gates. The second — knocked out of contention by the first — is that educational policy-makers can design curricula to meet those future needs.

It may be impossible, but that doesn't mean that it hasn't been tried. The educational historian Paul Axelrod points to the example of

computer science to illustrate the point. In the late-1970s, computer scientists saw the future of their field as dependent upon the spread of the computer languages COBOL and FORTRAN. Thus, they pressed students and colleagues to master them. Do you know anyone in 2014 who codes with COBOL or FORTRAN? Me neither. These are dead languages — a part of no one's future.

As Axelrod argues, though utilitarian thinking has come to dominate education policy in the past few decades, many business leaders, as far back as the 1960s, have protested this shift. What they wanted was something much more traditional. They want well-rounded, generally educated people who could adapt themselves to an increasingly dynamic, unpredictable global economy. That is, they want humanistic liberal education to continue. They insist they could do the specialized training themselves, thanks very much.²

But don't tell the OECD about this wrinkle in time. And definitely don't tell John Manley, the former Liberal Deputy Prime Minister of Canada, and now the President and Chief Executive Officer of the Canadian Council of Chief Executives (CCCE). Upon hearing this year's PISA results, he descended into hysterics. According to Manley, the PISA scores were "on the scale of a national emergency" (<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/education/canadas-fall-in-math-education-ranking-sets-off-red-flags/article15730663/>). He argued that if they did not improve — and if the human capital "skills gap" were allowed to widen further — prosperity would evaporate and society would crumble. Canada would then be handily trounced by various Asian economies who placed higher in the PISA league tables.³ He was quickly joined by other voices. Some math educators, fed up with the traces of the student-centered "progressivism" still remaining in the curriculum, started drafting petitions calling for a return to education "standards" i.e. more rote learning and more testing). At least one educational historian jumped on board as well, using the opportunity to bash the "Finnish Model" of education which for him represented progressivism at its worst. The Ontario government quickly followed suit, pledging \$4 million to overhaul math pedagogy in light of this supposed "national emergency."

And what of the reality of the 2013 PISA tests and Canada's results in them? If one accepts that they are methodologically sound — and many argue that they are not⁴ — Canada is doing fine. We fell

in the rankings, but not by much. We are still in the top 10 in math and science. We rank fourth in reading. Does this sound like a “crisis”? I don’t think so.

If the panic is not based upon reality, what is it based on? The answer is politics. The Jamaican scholar and teacher Stuart Hall (who sadly died very recently) spent years analyzing such issues. In his effort to understand postwar Britain, he drew on Marx, Michel Foucault, and most importantly the work of Antonio Gramsci. Like Gramsci, Hall was a “conflict theorist”; that is, he saw historical change not as something “natural,” but rather as the result of cultural politics waged over time by intrepid political activists.

For Hall, in order to understand the final quarter of the 20th century (and the first quarter of the 21st) one had to come to grips with the erosion of what historians call the “capital-labour consensus.” During WWII, traditional conflicts between these two factions were put to the side, as the war-effort mobilized the nation, and the massive economic “stimulus” — as the war was proved to be — lifted all economic boats. After 1945, politicians, intellectuals, and vast swaths of the population wished to continue this state of affairs, in the form of social democratic governance (Britain’s famous National Health Service was developed in this period, for instance). Other countries around the world followed a similar path, as *laissez-faire* capitalism retreated before state regulation.

For a while it worked. Around the world, the period from 1945-75 constituted the largest and longest period of economic growth and equality in world history.

That said, stability never lasts under capitalism — even under social democratic capitalism. Crisis is always on the horizon, and it hit hard in the early-1970s with the arrival of “stagflation” (a deadly combination of low growth and high inflation). Importantly, those who never agreed with the postwar consensus had never gone away. They were waiting in the wings, and with Thatcher at the helm of a newly energized Conservative party in 1975, they pounced. As Hall argues, this “New Right” created a powerful merger of disparate political interests — for instance, an alignment of free-market liberals and traditional Tories — and collectively, they blew the postwar compromise out of the water. It has never returned. In fact, the influence of the New Right spread to the U.S., Canada, and other countries as well. It still thrives on a combination of a possessive individualism, an authoritarian state

apparatus, and massive doses of social panic — just to keep everyone frightened enough not to change course.

Hall points to the importance of education in the creation and maintenance of the New Right. From the first, these activists set themselves against the use of education as a public good — especially as a

means of ameliorating social and economic ills. Thus, they worked to produce position papers, studies, reports, and newspaper editorials, all with an eye to changing attitudes about education.

Over time, it worked. Education (and crucially, media coverage of education) was gradually remade as a site not of consensus, but of crisis — characterized by plummeting standards, behavioral

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problems, and (of course) irrelevant curricula. The New Right kept banging the same drum: educational coddling as represented by progressive education. That approach had failed, and a new, harder pedagogy had to replace it. As Hall put it, the Thatcherist authoritarian/liberal state sought to “harness education to the economic system and efficiency needs of the productive system.”⁵ They succeeded.

Sound familiar? It should. We are still living in the world Maggie made — and not just because her heirs are everywhere (Cameron, Harper, Obama, and so on). It also should resonate because — as in the early-1970s — we too are living in an age of economic crisis. But this crisis, beginning in 2008, was brought about by the erosion of state regulation of the economy, not by its partial and shaky realization as a postwar “nanny state.” And, just as in Hall’s prescient analysis, this empirical crisis has been twisted into an ideological panic with a crucial educational component by interested politicians, an uncritical media, right-wing “experts,” and, of course, the OECD and PISA.

Listening to people like Manley, you would think a modified school system could solve all the world’s problems. Of course, no social program like can do anything like this. Anyone who suggests

otherwise knows little about education — or has a hidden agenda.

There is light at the end of the tunnel, however. As Hall teaches us, social phenomena portrayed as “natural” are not natural at all. Rather, they are made by flesh-and-blood people through cultural struggle. Further, what has been made can be unmade, and remade in a more satisfactory way.

More good news: just as the burgeoning New Right was waiting in the wings from 1945-75, a resurgent left is simmering just below the social surface right now. In the realm of economics, cruel austerity policies are being denounced with vigour by new and older activists alike. Environmental activists are beating back climate change denial with facts and moral force. In education, teachers and students alike the world over (the U.S., the U.K., Spain, Mexico) are taking corporate school reformers and New Right populists to task for turning our children into grist for the globalization mill.

Finally, STEM is hardly the final word on science education. John Dewey had a far different view of science and its role in our world, that is full of democratic promise. For Dewey, science was not the memorization of facts, the creation of abstract models, or a way-station to more efficient technocratic procedures. Rather, science was a style of mind, buttressed by activities which reproduce the essence of the kinds of critical thoughts and actions that have saved our species from existential crisis again and again. Science was ultimately not about how to do things, but *why* we do things, and whether we should do such things at all. That is, for Dewey, science was a *critical*, *moral*, and *historical* activity.

Science as social justice. Now that's something that should make the utilitarians panic. For a change.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914-1991* (London: Abacus, 1995) 225-400.
- 2 Paul Axelrod, *Values in Conflict: The University, the Marketplace, and the Trials of Public Education* (Montréal & Kingston, London and Ithaca: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002), 64-118.
- 3 See Manley spin PISA and the supposed 'skills gap' together here: http://www.the-star.com/business/2013/11/28/ceo_group_issues_call_to_action_on_skills_gap.html
- 4 (see, for example, <http://www.theguardian.com/news/2013/dec/03/pisa-methodology-education-oecd-student-performance>).
- 5 Stuart Hall, "The Great Moving Right Show," *Marxism Today*, January (1979), 18; *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left* (London and New York, Verso, 1988). On the liberal/New Right hegemonic campaign in Canada, see Ian McKay, *Rebels, Reds, Radicals: Rethinking Canada's Left History* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2005).
- 6 Dewey's classic work on this subject is *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1916).