

Me, Inc: Individualizing Education

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Michael Surbaugh presents a compelling and articulate account of a troubling dimension of neoliberalism. In debunking naive presuppositions in special education, Surbaugh has demonstrated the important contributions that philosophy of education can offer to an analysis of current educational issues.

In response to a possible charge that he is over-intellectualizing a simple problem and a potentially worthwhile solution, Surbaugh demonstrates how a facile acceptance of seemingly straightforward presuppositions would allow ever greater and more subtle strategies by which the subject is disciplined into market relations. Indeed, this is the basic thrust of Michel Foucault's work: how disciplinary projects and strategies of governmentality are more readily internalized and taken up by the subject when rendered benign and construed as benevolent. We can miss the hidden danger when no overt or physical forms of violence are required to keep a population in check, such that self-determination masks social control, and self-maintenance becomes self-surveillance.

For the most part, I am sympathetic with Surbaugh's aims and concerns. In this essay, I explore the notion of independence and interdependence as they relate to neoliberalism and education, beginning by describing how neoliberalism is itself impossible without interdependence. I then raise a meta-theoretical issue by examining how philosophical work is conducted with respect to Foucault and John Dewey.

Interdependence is evident in the harsh realities of global warming, the spread of contagious diseases, terrorism, and global crime. Pollution in one region of the world spreads easily through the stratosphere and through water cycles into otherwise impenetrable regions of the world. A recent study in Canada showed that even the bodies of those politicians who downplay or dismiss the importance of environmental problems are in fact filled with trace levels of the very toxins they adamantly deny are health risks.¹ Even the bodies of those people who are not participants in modern economic and technological progress, from the Amazon to the Arctic, are infused with trace toxins produced half a world away. Locke may claim we possess our body, but these cases demonstrate that our body is not our own. Like America itself, it is colonized.

Both 9/11 and the recent credit crisis of fall 2008 further demonstrate the extent to which independence is a myth. In fact, those same advocates of personal financial independence themselves profited hugely by spreading risk as widely as possible, creating a system so complex because it was so interdependent, such that even its architects could not trace the flows of toxic debt. Financial engineering and the ensuing contagion of debt have proven as dangerous for the body politic as genetic engineering of crops for the human body. Continued efforts to allow the free flow of capital to overrun regulative bodies and national identities shows the extent to

which neoliberalism is based on interdependence. It was the threat of this very interdependence that was used to convince taxpayers about the importance of a government funded bailout plan, for if the banks and financial institutions were not rescued, we would all surely suffer.

But America itself was built on this myth of independence. A Body Politic bordered by two vast oceans and a seemingly endless frontier can easily breed a rugged individualism. But one purpose of philosophy is to challenge myth when it becomes dogma. In response to America's founding myth political theorist Benjamin Barber started a Declaration of Interdependence, the aim of which is to seek "solutions rooted in cooperation and pooled sovereignty rather than national hegemony and unilateralism."²

Neoliberalism could never have become so dominant without cultivating extensive interdependence — even as it undermines interdependence among the populace and promotes individualized and privatized solutions to those same political problems it creates. So neoliberalism benefits from interdependence even as it makes independence impossible; it devalues interdependence such as political solidarity by promoting individualized solutions to political problems.

Zygmunt Bauman calls this the "individualization of political problems," and notes that while "[P]olitics is many things, it would hardly be any of them were it not the art of translating individual problems into public issues, and common interests into individual rights and duties."³ Individualizing and privatizing political problems obscure the extent to which private problems may only have political solutions.

Not only politics but also education itself is caught up in this individualization. Gert Biesta notes, "In the learning economy, learning ceases to be a collective good and increasingly becomes an individual good."⁴ Not only are people learning by themselves, that is, as an individual activity, but also the content and purpose of these forms of learning has become more focused on the individual. Education becomes "learning" in the most narrow sense: an individual issue and an individual responsibility for individual benefit. Individualization is increasingly evident in the representation of learning as a private undertaking for private gain and construed as an investment in one's own human capital measured in terms of Return on Investment.

This is evident in the new discourse of "Me, Inc.," which construes the subject as the locus of instrumental skills in a hyper-competitive arena of utility maximizers, in which the right educational investments will empower one as the master of one's own self-branding. A recent conference in Vancouver called "Me, Inc" claimed to be "a career exploration and personal development conference designed for first and second year students."⁵ A new book titled *Me, Inc.: How to Master the Business of Being You* claims that "whether you like it or not, you *are* the CEO of Me, Inc."⁶ Forbes Magazine celebrates "The Brand Called You," and notes that you can increase your own brand value through injecting knowledge through education. "Big companies understand the importance of brands. Today, in the Age of the

Individual, you have to be your own brand. Here's what it takes to be the CEO of Me, Inc."⁷

Subjectivity — and education itself — becomes construed only in terms of economic relations and objectives of maximizing production and consumption. The notion that education is a public good, a good that is both noninstrumental and more than economic, is lost.

In conclusion, I would like to now turn to a meta-theoretical issue regarding the role of Foucault and Dewey in Surbaugh's analysis.

A key philosophical question regarding the "methodology of philosophy," or how "academic or scholarly philosophy" is conducted, concerns how we draw from thinkers when conducting our own analysis. Is Foucault's account more robust, engaging, or illuminating than Dewey's? If so, why does Foucault not also offer what Surbaugh himself calls a "needed corrective?" On the other hand, why not initiate a Deweyan critique of the special educational literature, and then a Deweyan response? Or even a Foucaultian response! This raises a fundamental question regarding the contributions of postmodern thought to educational debates, and how such contributions relate to Dewey or other modernist philosophers of education. This intellectual strategy follows the pattern of drawing from a postmodern thinker in order to present a critical analysis of a particular problem, then turning to a modernist thinker for corrective responses. But why would a postmodern thinker help us understand an educational problem better than a philosopher of education? That is not to say that exploring the relations between Foucault and Dewey cannot be done or should not be done or has not been done.⁸ I am not at all suggesting that we as philosophers of education abandon postmodernism or stop reading non-philosophers of education, but simply that Surbaugh provide more explanation regarding his intellectual strategies.

While Foucault is a critic of neoliberalism he is no ally of this larger project of interdependence. Surbaugh notes that "Foucault's analysis of power affords a tool for consciousness raising that can provoke and inspire educators to rethink what they do, and conceptualize practices in the larger context of their consequences." However, he then turns to Dewey — which raises just as many questions because Dewey would likely be as critical of Foucault as of neoliberalism. While there may be some areas of commonality between postmodernism and Dewey that a subtle reading may reveal, as a pragmatist and progressivist Dewey would not likely embrace the postmodern "incredulity towards metanarratives,"⁹ and would likely think that the claim that the primary accomplishment of the Enlightenment was to birth repressive strategies overlooks its still unfulfilled emancipatory potential.

However, these questions about the role of thinkers does not undermine Surbaugh's analysis, but rather open doors for further analysis into special education discourse and what we do as philosophers of education.

1. CBC News, "Federal Politicians Contaminated with Chemicals, Group Says," *CBC News*, January 3, 2007, <http://www.cbc.ca/canada/story/2007/01/03/politicians-chemicals.html>.

2. Benjamin R. Barber, <http://www.benjaminbarber.com/civworld.html>.
3. Zygmunt Bauman, *Society Under Siege* (London: Polity Press, 2002), 170.
4. Gert Biesta, "What's the Point of Lifelong Learning if Lifelong Learning has no Point? On the Democratic Deficit of Politics for Lifelong Learning," *European Educational Research Journal* 5, nos. 2 and 3 (2006): 73.
5. http://www.meinc.ca/conference_overview.html.
6. Scott W. Ventrella, *Me, Inc.: How to Master the Business of Being You* (Hoboken, N.J.: John Wiley and Sons, 2007), 2.
7. Tom Peters, "The Brand Called You," *Fast Company* 10 (August 1997), <http://www.fastcompany.com/magazine/10/brandyou.html>.
8. See James Marshall, "On What We May Hope: Rorty on Dewey and Foucault," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 13, nos. 3–4 (1994): 307–23.
9. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979), xxiv.