

Book Review

Distress in the City: Racism, fundamentalism and a democratic education

Linden West, (2016)

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Reviewed by Tony Brown

This century we are witness to a series of political tremors and occasional earthquakes, though the fissures have been widening for some time. First the Global Financial Crisis led to the deep austerity imposed on Greece, Spain and Italy and the appointment of EU administrators over the heads of elected governments in those countries. Modern electoral expectations were then turned on their head with the UK Brexit vote, and quickly followed by the wave of support for Bernie Sanders, and ultimately in the shock of Donald Trump's Presidential victory. More recently the tremors have continued with the out-of-nowhere French Presidential victory of Emmanuel Macron, the surge of support for Jeremy Corbyn's UK Labour Party, and now the election of nearly 100 members of Germany's far-right, anti-immigrant party (AfD) to the Reichstag. Most analysts were taken by surprise and struggled hard to explain this phenomenon.

Like others I was more than just surprised, I was disoriented by Trump's election. On the other hand though, the evidence of the large and growing disparities in wealth, the spread of precariousness to many aspects of daily life affecting more and more people, their disaffection with politics and sense of alienation has been around for some time. Whether it be serious academic research (such as Wilkinson & Pickett 2009, Dorling 2010, 2014 or Piketty 2014) or the more popularly pitched exposes of Thomas Frank (2016) the devastating impact of growing inequality has been there to see and therefore we shouldn't be so surprised upon reflection.

Generally however these works have been grand in scale providing historic perspective and national sweeps. This is where Linden West's book differs. *Distress in the City* takes its starting point in one midlands English city, Stoke-on-Trent, and through a close examination gives insight to the daily and immediate impact on this multi-cultural city.

Stoke was well known as the home of English pottery with its world famous Spode and Wedgewood factories. There was also coal-mining, iron and steel production and related industries but they have been largely shut down and the city now relies on service industries and as a distribution centre. Where once 100,000 were employed in the Potteries by 2009 the number was down to 9,000 and on some estates unemployment reached 50 percent. Twenty percent of the population have limiting long-term illness and mental disease is rife. Instead of being a mildly prosperous city Stoke, Britain's 12th largest city, suffered the despair and fracturing evident in many post-industrial cities. In this environment racism and fundamentalism have had 'stronger purchase', and the Labour Party, which had traditionally held such sway in local politics lost touch and then support, such that the neo-Nazi British National Party (BNP) won seats on the city council in 2009. Stoke is West's home town.

Coupled with this social and economic fragmentation was a decline in adult education provision. The independent self-help tradition that had been such a strength of British workers education and organisation withered as the WEA and the Wedgewood Memorial College were forced to close, and the City and County Councils cut funding as they opened public provision to private providers, as education for a narrowly conceived labour market was prioritised above other areas such as citizenship education.

The book has four sections. The first three chapters present a case study of Stoke-on-Trent, enabling the reader to understand its scope and see it as an example of other English post-industrial cities. I particularly enjoyed Chapter 4 where West sets out a rationale for using Auto/biographical narrative research, and its functionality. It's a convincing argument for 'understanding lives from the inside' and one that will be beneficial to research students in observing how a research methodology rationale is articulated. In this case he is arguing that auto/biographical narrative research has the power to illuminate in a way that data-rich and data-driven epidemiological studies don't quite capture. The data collected for this work is taken from interviews with fifty residents conducted over a three-year period.

Chapters 5-8 present four examples of life in Stoke and the interconnection of education and learning. In these chapters we hear the voices of white working class residents and their experiences of 'the State withdrawing from the(ir) estate'; members of the predominantly Muslim South Asian local population and their experience of fundamentalism within the community; and participants in local adult and workers' education centres as a means of understanding the importance it has played in personal transformation through 'evoking fundamental questions of who a person felt themselves to be, and who they might become'. In this regard West identifies it as an 'experiment in democratic education', which leads into Chapter 9 where he draws on the experiences of two autodidacts and introduces Raymond Williams' concept of 'resources of hope'. For examples of the life-expanding potential of adult education the stories of Nancy Dobrin (pp104-5) and Red Mick the retired miner (pp110-121) are inspiring and give life to the key notion of learning a 'democratic sensibility'.

The final three chapters address Raymond Williams' concept of 'resources of hope' with examples of how they might be understood and implemented today.

Three concerns weave through the book. The rise of a range of fundamentalisms – a term whose origins lie with nineteenth century Protestantism and the inerrancy of the Bible – but now manifesting in racism and a linked Islamophobia and Islamism. With the state of democracy – participation in, engagement with, alienation from, cynicism towards – especially among the poor and marginalised and

those living with the stresses of unemployment, social fragmentation, mental disease or a combination of them. And what might be needed for an education that is a 'perpetual learning of democracy', one that encompasses the idea of an active citizenry.

At its heart the book is radical. Radical in the sense of proposing a different way of approaching education and research, not just in its critique of 'marketopia' but more importantly in its reiteration of the need for reflection, that is, taking time to analyse, think and construct (historic) imagination. It is a call to listen and talk with others, for researchers to immerse themselves in recordings and transcripts to allow themes to emerge, and to generate stories. And radical in its effort to bring together psychoanalytic and sociocultural explanations into an inter-disciplinary imagination; and to foreground absences in analyses such as emotion and the neglect of working class experience.

West often 'strays' into the self-reflective – of his actions and views from his earlier years – when he first physically and then emotionally distanced himself from his own working class background, and his father, to attend university in the 1960s, leading to his dismissive, and snobbish, attitude to workers education and of his tendency to seek 'narrative truth' and a type of fundamentalism. In this his writing reveals a pain in its truthfulness.

What distinguishes this book for me, and infuses it, is the focus on an approach to an adult - democratic - education that has receded but is needed now more than ever. In discussing the education that was available in Stoke through the WEA, local adult education and other self-help centres, the Labour Party and through the work of R H Tawney and Raymond Williams he outlines a constructivist view of knowledge. 'Their classes were classes, not lectures, and ideas were explored and developed in discussion. The processes were democratic ...' (107). Williams described his teaching being for 'an educated democracy, not a newly mobile and varied elite' and hence his methods were dialogical. West argues that Tawney and Williams 'shared a pedagogic faith in ordinary people and the importance of open enquiry, cultivating curiosity and challenging received wisdom' (132).

Of course this can all sound like adult educator cliché. Except that it isn't, and it isn't easy. There is much doffing the cap to critical inquiry, to Freire, to dialogic education, but too often the temptation to 'tell' rather

to listen, and to lead to the correct answer, wins out. This is particularly the case in situations where important issues are at stake, among NGOs, campaigning and activist groups, parties and unions. The courage to resist telling and have confidence in adults to explore, inquire and learn is a constant challenge. Perhaps the demise of the structured education of adult educators has contributed to this.

The challenge is big. West observes the city of his youth and witnesses a fragmented society created by successive neo-liberal governments and the 'withdrawal of the State'. This has many faces - job loss; a mental health epidemic; failure of representative democracy and a sense of abandonment by the national government; various fundamentalisms of the BNP and political Islamism that offer scapegoating narratives of unknown 'others', which consolidates separateness; and a fractured economy of un and under employment and rising poverty.

In the final section *Distress in the City* explores initiatives underway in Stoke that give rise to hope and the potential to re-invigorate civil society.

This is, to me, the most satisfying and affirming adult education book I've read for some time.

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