

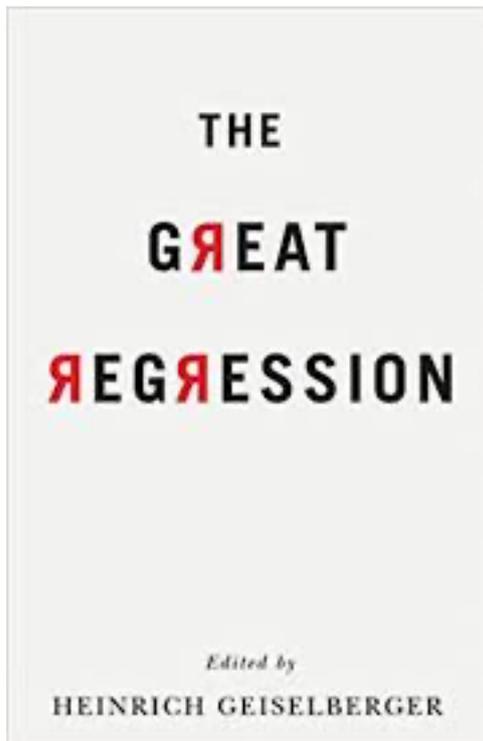
CEPaLS 20: Best Book of 2017

Helen M Gunter

University of Manchester, UK.

The text was originally posted on my Tumblr blog on 8th January 2018. The blog is now deleted and so I am presenting the text as a CEPaLS paper.

In thinking about 2017 (and there is much to think about!) I have now made my mind up that the best book I have read is: Heinrich Geiselberger's edited collection, *The Great Regression*.



As an integral part of my study leave I have been trying to make sense of why politics is in danger. What concerns me is how and why successive governments seem to be framing education policy through militant and violent neoliberal and neoconservative informed-reforms. So: why do grammar schools keep returning to the agenda, when all the evidence shows that they do not do what is claimed? And, why is it that new types of schools – City Technology Colleges, Grant Maintained Status, Academies, Free Schools, Studio Schools, etc all fail but the idea and reality of school autonomy and the ‘independent state school’ is sustained?

Where I live over 30k people voted Conservative in the June 2017 general election, even though this means that the schools necessary to educate their children and grandchildren are being taken away and handed over to entrepreneurs and philanthropists for profit. WHY are people letting this happen? (I could also raise this issue about Health...)

There are 12 chapters in Geiselberger's collection, and each is a gem. I cannot engage with all, but what I will say is that important insights are provided that have helped me to understand and to help to develop – in Arendtian terms – a standpoint.

What Geiselberger states in the Preface is that there are grand challenges for all of us – international terrorism, climate change, financial and currency crises, and lastly great movements of migrants” - but the issue is that “politically no one was prepared for them” (page xiii).

The responsibilities of democratic citizens necessary for the politicisation of these risks clearly needed development but the response of governments has been to depoliticize. It seems that political debate has been replaced by soundbites, numbers and lies; voting in elections has been replaced by voting people out of reality and make over TV shows; and participation in society has been reworked as consumerism. The focus is on exiting rather than confronting and working on shared issues and common problems. It seems as Appadurai argues in Chapter 1 that we are all suffering from “democracy fatigue” where we want to exit democracy by handing over government to what Hasan (2017) has identified the emergence of “kakistrocracy” or “government by the worst people” (p25). If only a small part of *Fire and Fury* (by Michael Wolff) is correct then it is clear that everyone around Trump, including himself did not expect to win, and some did not want him to win.

Two chapters in particular help to understand the issues raised above about education:

Nancy Fraser identifies in Chapter 4 that we need to understand the suturing of alliances under Clinton in the US and Blair in the UK (and their ilk...), where Wall Street or the City of London was connected to progressive agendas of social justice. Consequently those who had gained from industrialisation and then lost out from the changes to capitalism – the rustbelt in the US, and northern and midland towns in England – are behind Trump and Brexit.

Paul Mason in Chapter 8 is really helpful in regard to this, and as he came from Leigh and I am from just down the road, then we both really understand what the changes to capitalism have meant for our families and communities. Our communities voted for Brexit. We both left decades ago but still go back, and while we voted Remain we do understand the Brexit vote. Mason provides a really important analysis about what is unfolding and why, and in particular he identifies that it is the failure of the left to engage with narratives about work and dignity that is a crucial issue. Aspects of neoliberalism are attractive, and so parental choice for schools places is one that people would not reject, and everyone – even if you are unemployed – wants the best education for their children. So new types of school give people hope, even though their child is likely not to benefit from austerity combined with philanthropy. The left appeased and extended neoliberalism (school choice, academies, competition and markets) rather than challenge and develop new forms of educational innovation. Consequently, robust resistance to neoliberalism developed and has been successful in many ways (e.g. Anti Academies Alliance) but an alternative narrative to the self as the beginning and end of public service design and delivery did not really develop. It is an Anti-Academy Alliance, rather than a Pro Public Education Alliance.

So now that neoliberalism is in decline, the alternative has to be urgently created. Mason provides a thoughtful analysis about what is happening and he draws on Erich Fromm’s account of Nazi Germany, and how resistance became exhausted and resigned to what was unfolding. It seems that the German people had developed a ‘fear of freedom’. In order to break out of this the neoliberal dispossessed who within elite groups as well as welfare claimants need to ally in order to both challenge the attacks on people who are different and to develop a narrative of hope.

Following Arendt it seems that our categories and ways of being in the world need to be challenged, and Mason argues need discarding. Along with a social, economic and political agenda, we need a focus on education that is public and common, and that enables all children to be recognised as educable. After all it worked for Mason and myself, and others who continue to struggle for a politics that they can speak to.

A good starting point is to reject that politics is only about elections, government and ruling, and instead recognise that politics is about how in our ordinary day-to-day exchanges with each other we develop standpoints by setting out to understand.

If you wish to reference this paper:

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