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LEARNING TO BE A CITIZEN THROUGH POLICY ANALYSIS AND PROTEST

Karin Doolan



"We are students not customers", "This is not a production line", "Education is not for sale", "Education is a right not a privilege" and "Save schools not banks" are some of the slogans expressed in the wave of student protests that swept across the globe from California and Austria in 2009 to Chile and Canada in 2012. What unifies many of these protests is the struggle against the marketisation and commercialisation of education and, more broadly, "the neoliberalisation of society". The following specific objections have been listed in the International Student Movement's (ISM)[1] statement: fees which create unequal footing for participating in education; student debt; public education aligned to serve the (labour) market; budget cuts on public education; increasing the influence of business interests on budgets for public education; exploitation of labour within educational institutions and prioritisation of research towards commercially valuable patents. Most importantly, the ISM statement situates these objections in the broader economic context.

Students in Croatia, gathered around the Independent Student Initiative, have been part of this global resistance too. In 2009, students took over the University of Zagreb's Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences for 35 days, replacing their official curriculum with lectures, workshops and screenings of films critical of capitalism and its effects (e.g. Idiocracy, Sicko). This resistance also spread to other Croatian universities; as a direct result of the protest, undergraduate and Masters' study courses in Croatia are now tuition-free for all full-time students who attain 55 ECTS points per academic year (although the demand was no tuition fees at all levels of education for all students).

By drawing on the case of student protests in Croatia, I suggest that for a group of student protesters their citizenship was enacted and shaped in the process of analytically engaging with and publicly contesting neoliberal education policy trends. I base my observations on available protest materials and written interviews with selected students collected in 2013.

Policy analysis as an act of citizenship

According to Isin[2], subjects become citizens through acts such as voting, volunteering, blogging and protesting. He contrasts the "activist" citizen who engages in "writing scripts and creating the scene" to the "active citizen" who acts out "already written scripts such as voting, taxpaying and enlisting". According to this distinction, there are student protesters who can be categorised as "activist" citizens, who enact their citizenship by radically contesting the dominant, taken-for-granted political and economic order and its impact on diverse fields (education in particular). This contestation takes the form of critical analytical engagement with neoliberalism and its educational implications, as well as engagement in the form of protest activities such as sit-ins, marches and assembly participation.

In this article, I would like to focus specifically on how students involved in writing protest materials have analytically engaged with education policies as an act of citizenship. To begin with, Rizvi and Lingard[3] observe a distinction in traditional policy literature between analysis of policy and analysis for policy, describing the former as an exercise conducted by academic researchers, and the latter as commissioned by policy makers for the purposes of policy development. They list the academic researcher, doctoral student, policy bureaucrat, commissioned researcher, freelance analyst for hire, consultant researcher and policy entrepreneur as distinct figures engaged in such analyses. However, there is another actor that can be added to this list: the student protester. The voice of this student protester, as reconstructed from relevant protest materials, exposes educational policies as value-laden rather than value-neutral, uncovers the broader discourses built into education policy, identifies international actors shaping policies, and provides suggestions on how to make the educational system more socially just, all of which are characteristics of critical education policy analysis.

Such policy analysis should practice an awareness of one's own position and how it affects interpretation and, although student protest materials in Croatia do not include a section on reflexivity (unsurprisingly so vis-à-vis the genre of protest materials in general), the position of those writing the protest materials, as can be gathered from the protest materials, is fairly clear. This is an interested position (as positions tend to be from a critical perspective): it aims to prevent educational policies which embody neoliberal principles and reshape the higher education sector to the detriment of human rights, social justice and the public good. As stated in the student protest manifesto published on 20 April 2009 by the Independent Student Initiative, "the direct reason for action is the clear intention of governing structures to gradually commercialise education as a first step to the potential privatisation of public educational institutions, i.e. the property of all citizens". It is also a marginalised position. The Croatian student protest manifesto argues that "formal representational mechanisms and student representatives do not realistically have the power to tangibly influence questions which directly affect their status and future", attributing power to those in control of the state budget. Furthermore, although the students who participated in the protests came from different fields of study, the core of the protesters was made up of students from the humanities and social sciences. This is not surprising since those fields of study have been most at risk due to austerity measures and, arguably, bear the biggest responsibility for engaging with societal dynamics. As the student protest manifesto put it, "social-humanistic institutions fulfil their social function and responsibility only when they stand up critically against processes which we believe to be socially destructive". The position of the student protester is also often that of young people living in a time of global economic crisis, with high youth unemployment and severe austerity measures. And, finally, judging by the protest materials' oppositional discourse, it is predominantly a neo-Marxist position, which has extended the political Left discourse in Croatia.

From this perspective, the 2009 student protest manifesto describes the broader political, economic and social context as marked by an attack on trade unions and social institutions, endorsing competition, individualism and over-consumption. The economic crisis is described as a consequence of neoliberal capitalism which shelters private businesses motivated only by profit. A characteristic of critical policy analysis is the provision of an alternative framework for thinking about society, and the protest materials emphasise the importance of "collective solidarity", "social interests" and "a more just society" as guiding principles.

The broader discourses embedded in educational policies, as well as their discursive opposites, can be identified in the student protest materials as a series of dichotomies, such as private-public, privilege-right and exclusion-inclusion. Student protesters see themselves as defenders of public goods: "we will not allow public goods to be transformed into commodities". Commodification, commercialisation and privatisation are discourses they identify as framing trends in education policies, reflecting Rizvi and Lingard's point that there has been a global shift to neoliberal orientations in thinking about education which has resulted in policies of corporatisation, privatisation and commercialisation. Quotes from the student manifesto, such as "commercialisation is not a value neutral process, it changes the social purpose of education" and "through privatisation the university becomes an institution primarily oriented to profit-making", vividly illustrate the students' critique.

Student protesters demanded a tuition-free system on the basis of human rights and social justice arguments. The gradual introduction of tuition fees into Croatian higher education is described in the student manifesto as “silently cancelling the right to education for everyone” and as a “reckless and socially insensitive taking away” of the right to education. Drawing on the UN Declaration of Human Rights, the student manifesto states that: “the right to education is a right that belongs to everyone, independently from the financial status of the individual”. Student protesters also ask the critical education policy analysis question: “is this policy socially just”? The socio-economic axis of injustice comes into focus with protest material claims that tuition fees are unjust, that they “socially exclude” and “lead to further societal fragmentation and polarisation”. According to the protest materials, “an even bigger gap is being created between the rich and poor, privileged and marginalised”. “Equality is not for sale” is their message to tuition fee advocates who tend to ground their position in “efficiency” arguments (e.g. the notion that it is inefficient not to have tuition fees because then students are not encouraged to complete their studies in a timely manner).



The valuable analysis provided by student protesters in Croatia, which embeds education in the broader context of neoliberalism and discusses the social justice effects of policy, is characteristic of critical education policy analysis, an approach largely missing from the Croatian academic context broadly. A further elaboration of this critical education policy analysis lens would involve specifying in more detail the addressee of resistance, as well as the specificities of the Croatian context. In terms of the former, critical education policy literature has recognised the need to go beyond the nation-state and examine the role of international actors that shape education policies, such as the World Bank and the OECD. The student protest manifesto does identify one such supra-national organisation, the World Trade Organisation and its General Agreement on Trades in Services (GATS), which is described in the protest manifesto as giving “full freedom to expose our educational system to the market”. However, it is important to recognise other powerful international actors that shape educational policies, particularly in reference to the centre-semi-periphery-periphery dynamic. Certainly “centre” countries have more leverage in terms of how they design their educational policies in comparison to periphery or semi-periphery countries such as Croatia. In terms of addressing the specificities of the Croatian context, there is a danger of essentialising concepts such as marketisation, commercialisation and commodification by overlooking their local expressions. Along these lines, authors such as Ball (1997)[4] have noted that policy realisation differs according to local conditions and histories. A question that results from this is whether the “commercialization” referred to by Croatian and Chilean student protesters is in fact the same phenomenon, however useful the term may be for connecting global struggles.

Enacting citizenship as a transformative process

In this piece, I have focussed primarily on analytical and protest engagement with education policy as a route for “making citizens”. In conclusion, however, I want to briefly turn to what kinds of citizens are “being made” in this process. In other words, what are the consequences of engagement on the student protesters themselves? As Crossley[5] has noted, participation in social movements changes participants’ identities and practices outside of the social movements themselves.

In 2013, a colleague and I conducted written interviews with eight students from the “core group” of student protesters from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Science at the University of Rijeka with a focus on what they had learned from their protest experience (Ćulum and Doolan, forthcoming[6]). We found that the protest experience was transformative for all of the interviewed students. One student described it as “revolutionary because it was messing with my thoughts on so many levels” and another as “an experience that changed my life”. Students reported gaining knowledge about direct democracy and social movements, developing skills such as conflict resolution and acquiring values such as tolerance. This learning process also influenced their educational and career pathways. Further important consequences of their protest participation include an expansion of their social network, personal development in terms of a sense of empowerment and the development of a propensity to further activism. The whole experience seems to have been a par excellence example of citizenship education.

The protest legacy

The legacy of the student protests in Croatia is multi-faceted. On a societal level, they were the first protests to bring into question the country’s contemporary economic and political order from a radical Left perspective, invoking Marxist vocabulary in the process. In the educational field, they were the first to exercise a critical reading of educational policies by locating them in the broader neoliberal context and critiquing them from a human rights and social justice standpoint. They were successful in terms of influencing tuition fee policy, innovative in terms of their organisational creativity, which included gathering in assemblies and exercising direct democracy principles, and using social network websites for mobilising. They provided a spontaneous site for citizenship education and they had a biographical impact on certain student protesters who became committed to activism. What remains to be seen is whether the energy surrounding the student protests, and other contemporary social movements both locally and globally, will be transformed into a radical and possibly worldwide political project.

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[1] The International Student Movement describes itself as “an open platform for cooperation, coordination, communication and collaboration between different individuals and groups involved with the struggle against the increasing commercialisation of education as well as for free emancipatory education” (http://ism-global.net/ism_en). It was initiated in 2008 around activities for the International Day of Action against the Commercialisation of Education. The mentioned joint statement was endorsed by the Independent Student Initiative in Croatia, discussed in this article.

[2] Isin, E.F. (2009). Citizenship in flux: The figure of the activist citizen. *Subjectivity*, 29, 367-388

[3] Rizvi, F., Lingard, B. (2010). *Globalizing Education Policy*. Oxon: Routledge.

[4] Ball, S. (1997). Policy Sociology and Critical Social Research: a personal review of recent education policy and policy research. *British Educational Research Journal*, 23(3), 257-274.

[5] Crossley, N. (2003). From Reproduction to Transformation: Social Movement Fields and the Radical Habitus. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 20(6), 43-68.

[6] Ćulum B., Doolan, K. (forthcoming). 'A truly transformative experience': the biographical legacy of student protest participation, in: Klemenčić, M., Bergan, S., Primožić, R. (eds.). *Student engagement in Europe: society, higher education and student governance*. Council of Europe Higher Education Series No. 20. Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing.

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