

# Neo-Liberalism, Irish Society and Adult Education

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## Abstract

*This article offers an overview of recent international scholarship on neo-liberalism in particular the work of the geographer and historian David Harvey and the recent books of the educationalist Henry Giroux. It begins with a brief historical account of neo-liberalism and outlines the main characteristics of the free market era. Irish society and education is analysed in light of this work arguing that this offers a useful model for understanding the rise in inequality, the changing nature of democracy and the shift in social values that we have witnessed in Ireland over the past decade. The article finishes with a brief exploration of the impact of free market ideas on contemporary adult education and the relevance this has for the ongoing debate over different versions of lifelong learning.*

## Introduction

Economics is the method but the object is to change the soul (Margaret Thatcher, quoted in Harvey, 2006, p.17).

What is neo-liberalism? A programme for destroying collective structures which may impede the pure market logic (Pierre Bourdieu, 1998b, p.1).

Thirty five years ago the idea that the needs of the market should determine social policy and statecraft was a proposition which was seriously entertained by only a few thinkers at the margins of Chicago and London academia. Today the same idea is so powerful it is simply 'common sense' - making the diffusion and consolidation of the neo-liberal project one of the most remarkable stories of recent history (Anderson, 2000). This free market revolution has reshaped the global economic and political system and arguably even changed the models by

which we judge social progress (Bourdieu, 1998a; Harvey, 2005; Anderson, 2000). There is an extensive body of international research on neo-liberalism and unsurprisingly a number of prominent educational thinkers have begun to analyse the challenges that this new historical conjuncture poses for educators (Apple, 2006; Burbules & Torres, 2000; Giroux, 2004; McLaren, 2005). However, in Ireland although there is a large swathe of popular and academic literature exploring various aspects of change during the 'Celtic Tiger' (Nolan, Connell & Whelan, 2000; O'Toole, 2003; MacSharry & White, 2000; O'Riain, 2000; 2004; Smith, 2005; Sweeney, 1998) relatively few commentators have chosen to frame the transformation of Ireland as part of a more general story of the triumph of neo-liberalism. Kirby (2002a; 2002b; 2004; 2005) has offered the most nuanced account of an 'Irish neo-liberalism' but even when this is supplemented by relevant work by other writers (Allen, 2000; 2007; Coulter & Coleman, 2003; O'Cleary, 2007; O'Hearn, 1998) this topic requires considerable further study and elaboration. Most pertinently for educators there has been very little research on the impact, or the potential effect, of neo-liberalism on Irish education in general (Allen, 2007; Lynch, 2006) or more specifically on adult education (Connolly, 2007; Fleming, 1998; 2004). As a small contribution to this field of inquiry this article will briefly offer a brief history of neo-liberalism and outline its main characteristics drawing on a range of scholarship including the work of the geographer and historian David Harvey and the educational thinker Henry Giroux. This scholarship will then be synthesised with the available research on Irish neo-liberalism cited above alongside a number of recent empirical studies in order to explore the specific cultural and political logic of Irish neo-liberalism and what this has meant, and might mean, for adult education.

#### Neo-liberalism: a brief overview of the new hegemony

Between the seventies and early eighties the world economic system was beset with a variety of economic and political crises. Besides having to contend with a wave of militant social struggles politicians and policy makers were confronted by falling profit levels, interest rates problems and stagflation (Brenner, 1998; Harvey, 2000). Under these various pressures the dominant post-war paradigm of economic management – Keynesian and welfare state economics – eventually disintegrated (Brenner, 1998). In response to these crises the governments in Chile, the US and the UK conducted a series of free market experiments in social and economic engineering (Harvey, 2005). This laid the basis for what became known as the Washington consensus in which neo-liberal ideas began to be promoted by the main international economic regulatory institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF. As a

consequence of this neo-liberalism became the dominant political ideology of capitalist globalisation. This paradigm shift has been behind the systematic deregulation of trade and finance, the adoption of new forms of fiscal and monetary policy and the implementation of a massive programme of marketisation and privatisation across the world (Brenner, 1998; Harvey, 2005).

Harvey (2000; 2005; 2006) argues that this historical shift needs to be understood both as the result of the intensification of longstanding tendencies within capitalism and as something that is qualitatively new. Its novelty lies in the way neo-liberalism has emerged as both an expression of, and a response to, a series of technological and political changes that have occurred during the past thirty five years. Technological innovations, especially in terms of information and transport technologies, have facilitated “the geographical dispersal and fragmentation of production systems, divisions of labor, and specialization of tasks” and led to a “profound geographical reorganization of capitalism” (Harvey, 2000, p.63 & p. 57). A fusion of ideology and technology shaped a new era marked above all by its flexibility and the compression of space and time allowing the expansion of the market into hitherto non-commodified areas of social life (Harvey, 1989; 2000; 2005; 2006). This expansion of the market has far surpassed the expectations of even the most prescient and most pessimistic critics of commodification. We have arrived at a point in which the relentless commodification of space, time and knowledge has even resulted in the ability of the market to patent and profit from the very stuff of life through innovations in the field of genetic engineering and intellectual property legislation.

Clearly the reach and ambition of the neo-liberal project is such is that it is subject to varying temporal and spatial histories of national and regional development (Harvey, 2005; 2006) and has also encountered considerable resistance (Notes from Nowhere, 2003). A satisfactory account of the intersection of global and local trends worldwide within the dynamics of hegemony and resistance is obviously well beyond the scope of the present paper. Nonetheless, without too much simplification it is possible to discern amongst all the varying applications of free market ideas six main characteristics of the neo-liberal project as it has evolved over the past three decades.

- (1) The market has become the dominant paradigm of the age and is now seen as a useful and natural template for practically any sphere of human activity including areas of society which have been traditionally treated

as distinct from the market. Marketisation policies have, amongst other things, resulted in a series of binding multilateral agreements and complex trading rules that commit states to the commodification of social goods of all sorts including healthcare, natural resources and education. The World Trade Organisation's (WTO) Global Agreement on the Trade in Services (GATS) is of particular importance to this process and sets down the rules for a global trade in services including, since 2000, educational services. While the WTO (2005) argues that the market will ensure greater efficiency and broader access critics contend that GATS transforms social goods into service commodities (Barlow, 1999). The process of marketisation on a macroeconomic level has been complemented and strengthened by the growth of corporate power and the increased influence of sponsorship and advertising in society. These trends, it is argued, have had profoundly negative implications for the elements of civil society which seek to create spaces and discourses that are independent of the market.

- (2) The neo-liberal project has also reconfigured the relationship between the state and the market. In many countries this has led to the state abandoning or downgrading its social and redistributive functions while advancing the commodification of social life and the colonisation of civil society (Harvey, 2005; Giroux, 2004). In practical terms this 'hollowing out' of the state has led to a steady erosion of social democratic guarantees in the global north (Bourdieu, 1998a; 1998b; Harvey, 2005) and even more violent changes in the global south where the massive restructuring of national economies through policy initiatives such as Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPS) has profoundly changed the way these societies function.
- (3) Giroux (2004) and Harvey (2005; 2006) argue that this change in the relationship between market and state is part of a more general attempt to roll back the freedoms and rights won in previous eras and marks a restoration of power to the very wealthy. As a direct consequence of this one of the most marked characteristics of the neo-liberal era is that it has transformed the way resources and wealth are distributed worldwide and has deepened and intensified social inequality (Harvey, 2005).

- (4) There is considerable debate over the causes, extent and exact nature of the shifts in global capitalism that have contributed to this state of affairs and different writers have focused on a variety of issues such as the increased influence of transnational corporations; the diminished power of the nation state and the role of the US as the only world superpower (Arrighi, 2005; Bourdieu, 1998b; Harvey, 2005; Hardt & Negri, 2004; Wallerstein, 2003). However, all these critics concur that transformations within global capitalism have affected the quality and capacity of global democracy in the sense that most of the important centres of power, wealth and influence within global society remain largely unaccountable to any form of meaningful popular control.
  
- (5) The politics of neo-liberalism needs to be understood as a powerful and complex form of cultural hegemony rather than simply as economic policy- that is a set of strategies, ideas and models that have been used to secure consent for the increasingly uneven distribution of power and wealth across the globe (Bourdieu, 1998a; 1998b; Giroux, 2004; Harvey, 2005; 2006). According to these writers neo-liberalism is not simply what happens in an International Monetary Fund (IMF) think tank, or a chancellor's speech, it is a world view that promotes a certain conception of human beings as self interested, calculating and individualistic. It is based on a fantasy, what Bourdieu termed "a pure mathematical fiction" (1998b, p.1) in which human behaviour and the varied needs, desires and dreams of people can be explained solely in terms of the calculus of economic self-interest.

Giroux (2004; 2005) argues that this market model and the values of individualism and greed are being diffused through popular culture most notably by large media corporations. In examining a wide range of cultural products such as films (2002; 2003), various adverts (2001; 2004), cultural phenomena such as child beauty pageants (2001), news and infotainment(2004; 2005), video games (2005), extreme sports and reality TV shows (2003; 2004; 2005) Giroux returns again and again to the idea that our subjective understanding of the world is being relentlessly schooled through popular culture to operate through categories and ideas that are conducive to neo-liberal capitalism. Giroux concludes that the very fabric of social communication and the cultural spaces through which we make meaning, shape values and articulate identity, is now saturated with the values of free market ideology. Clearly this ascribes a regulatory power

to neo-liberalism that goes well beyond the commonly understood notions of this doctrine simply as a set of monetarist and free market policies. In this formulation the market paradigm has acquired the power to create what it claims to describe- an atomized, individualistic and acquisitive society.

- (6) Related to these geopolitical trends are substantive changes in how people conceive of personal identity and collective solidarity in relation to political agency (Bauman, 2000; Giroux, 2003; Sennett, 1998; 2006). As a consequence, according to these writers, democracy is at a crossroads, not only in terms of devising global institutions of governance and overcoming inequality, but also in terms of our ability to create enduring and meaningful personal and collective narratives in a world in which the tempo, values and reference points of social life have been drastically altered.

Part of this is undoubtedly due to the fact that one of the most compelling and most constantly revised lesson of neo-liberal hegemony, is that, as Mrs Thatcher's rather pithily put it, "there is no alternative" to the present social system (Harvey, 2005). The apparent lack of alternatives serves to stifle dissent and narrows the social imagination and undermines non market forms of public participation (Giroux, 2004; O'Halloran, 2004). This reductive version of citizenship is a key part of 'learning to be neo-liberal' – a process in which society learns to accept inequality; conceptions of the public good are replaced by a narrowly defined notion of private interest; and any social dialogue on the question of possible alternatives is completely rejected. Viewed through a neo-liberal ideological lens, which sees any outcome of the market as just, proper and natural, poverty and social problems become the mark of personal failure rather than systemic failures.

In summary, many aspects of neo-liberal policy are of obvious and immediate concern for educators. For instance, research on the effect of marketisation policies on third level education suggests that these initiatives have already changed the orientation of research, the structures of colleges and universities and are perhaps even changing the way we understand education (Ginsburg, Espinoza, Popa & Terano, 2003; Lynch, 2006; Robertson, 2003). However, arguably such policies are only one, albeit the most obvious element, of a broader paradigm shift which is of enormous relevance to education even if all the immediate effects of this sea change are not yet clear. If one accepts the expansion of the market and the intensification of instrumental rationality has impacted on the

relationship between market, state and civil society, and this has been accompanied by an exhaustion of hope and a progressive narrowing of the emancipatory potential of the social imagination, then the ramifications of the neo-liberal revolution are almost incalculable. Changes in social and economic policy, combined with the increasing power of corporations, and the aggressive promotion of market values marks a new cultural moment in how we make meaning in society and sense out of our lives. In Giroux's terms we are enmeshed in a series of public pedagogies "in which the production, dissemination and circulation of ideas emerges from the educational force of the larger culture" (2004, p. 106). This requires a whole new map of how education happens within society in which formal education is only a single node within a network of learning spaces and in which neo-liberal public pedagogies operating across culture impose a form of lifelong learning based on the needs of the market.

#### The state we are in: rhetoric and policy in a 'market state'

It was noted at the beginning of this article that analyses of recent Irish history have largely underestimated or ignored the role of neo-liberal ideology in Irish society (Coulter, 2003; Kirby, 2002). The broader, vaguer and more politically neutral term globalisation is used far more often. Ireland, we are told, has finally caught up with modernity through globalisation and the benefits are clear - the end of mass unemployment and forced emigration, the rise of income and wealth and a new cultural confidence. However, as Smith (2005) has noted, this globalisation is often conceived as a poorly defined, but distinctly inevitable, process in a manner that risks conflating a variety of historical and economic processes and avoids exploring the deeper reasons for social change. While it would be foolish to ignore the fact that the boom has yielded considerable material benefits to a substantial number of Irish people explaining change through the simplistic equation of globalisation with modernisation fails entirely to offer adequate terms of reference for exploring contemporary Irish society. This model of 'globalisation without adjectives' offers no notion of growth and social development except in the most reductively economic sense and consequently tells us nothing about the impact on equality, changing social values or the state of Irish democracy.

This failure to theorise the local impact of global trends within a broad notion of human development may well be linked to the fact that the Irish state is not readily identified, nor seeks to be identified, as promoting the neo-liberal agenda (Murphy, 2006). Despite the fact that the state has enthusiastically promoted the

language and model of the market in the public sphere (O'Donovan & Casey, 1995) and has attempted to commodify services such as water and waste disposal (Allen, 2007) Irish politics continues to be dominated by a pragmatic populism in which the rhetoric of welfare and social justice is combined with free market thinking. This is manifested in the commitment to interventions such as the National Anti-Poverty Strategy (NAPS) in which the putative aim is to mobilise "all sections of Irish society in building a fair society" (NAPS, 1998, p. i) within a much vaunted social partnership model (Sweeney, 1998). This consensual rhetoric is echoed at an EU level and the Irish political elite are at pains to portray the European project as also being informed by the values of social solidarity (Ahern, 2004; Mansergh, 2003). For instance the policies of 'social inclusion' and 'active citizenship', which seem directly at odds with a reddened tooth and claw conception of a neo-liberal society, have this exact provenance.

Despite the rhetoric the case for employing neo-liberalism as a paradigm for understanding change in contemporary Ireland, both in the narrow sense as economic policy and in the broad sense as a form of political hegemony, appears to be quite strong. First of all, Ireland has been transformed by over a decade of deregulation, privatisation and marketisation (OECD, 2001; Murphy, 2006; Sweeney, 2004) Moreover, these policy initiatives have been buttressed by the emergence of a public discourse that is strongly supportive of neo-liberal ideas (Allen, 2007). That is to say "discourse in the strong sense of that versatile term; a historically formed set of topics and procedures that both drives and regulates the utterance of the individuals who inhabit it, and assigns them definite positions in the field of meaning it delimits" (Mulhern, 2000, p. xiv). Some of the main features of this neo-liberal discourse include an insistent emphasis in public life and policy on 'prudent' social spending and a constant affirmation of the necessity to maintain competitiveness and flexibility within the global market (Allen, 2007; O'Riain, 2004). As a consequence of this, more often than not, the 'business' of public life is portrayed in the media and by politicians as providing the economic and regulatory conditions that favour capital and maximize profitability. This is rarely questioned and the extent to which it is now taken as a self evident starting point for social and economic policy has led to one of the most highly regarded commentators on the Irish political economy to speak of a destructive "competitiveness obsession" and "a blind faith in the market" within the body politic (O'Riain, 2004, pp. 20 & 24).

One of the most striking results of this neo-liberal legislative and discursive turn has been the promotion of economic policies, particularly in terms of the



taxation, that offer extremely favourable conditions to transnational corporations that establish manufacturing bases in the Irish republic (Allen, 2000; 2007). According to O'Hearn (1998) a large proportion of the intense level of foreign direct investment by transnational corporations in the 1990s was as a direct consequence of these policies. Leaving aside for a moment the rather pertinent question of who exactly benefited from this economic growth, what such policies and rhetoric demonstrate is that Ireland is open for business on the terms set by neo-liberalism. Some indication of the extent to which Ireland has accepted free market nostrums and has restructured its economic regulatory and legislative frameworks accordingly, can be found in the free market Index of Economic Freedom, compiled jointly by the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Heritage Foundation* (2006) which found Ireland's was the world's third 'freest economy' (see also Kearney, 2006).

So how have the initiatives that have emerged from the policy shift affected the way wealth, power and social goods are distributed in contemporary Ireland? It appears that after more than a decade of phenomenal economic growth Ireland is still riven with inequality (CORI, 2007). In fact many studies indicate that social inequalities have worsened during the boom times (Allen, 2000; Kirby, 2002; 2005). This is corroborated by data published by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). According to the UNDP despite a massive increase in per capita GDP and a consistent movement upwards through the development rankings Ireland remains one of the most unequal of the developed countries and has the second lowest ranking in the Human Poverty Index which measures comparative poverty (UNDP, 2006). To put this state of affairs in perspective – this means that despite average annual GDP growth rates between 7-12 % over the past twelve years (Kirby, 2005) massive increases in real income and consumer spending (NESC, 2003; Smith, 2005) Ireland remains a deeply unequal society. What is more this income inequality data almost certainly underestimates the full extent of social polarisation due to the underreporting of income by the very wealthy and the difficulty of assessing the concentration of wealth in other forms such as assets, capital and shares (O'Reardon, 2001) .

Of course the emphasis on personal and private wealth creation and the consequent social polarisation has implications beyond the poorest doing badly and affects welfare provision across society. The UN report cited above also documents a lower level of social spending on health and education than most similarly developed countries and although there have been substantial increases

in expenditure in welfare it has not been extensive enough to address structural inequalities (Turner & Haynes, 2006). This argument is lent even further credibility by a recent European Union statistical survey that measured the level of social protection offered by the various European states (Eurostat, 2007). It was found that Ireland scored poorly in comparison to most of the longstanding members of the European Union. Furthermore, O'Hearn (1998) and Allen (2000) argue that a careful examination of how the vast wealth created during the 'Celtic Tiger' was divided up shows a diminution in the social wage, as measured through wages, pensions and social welfare and a concomitant increase in the levels of private profit.

Of course this is not solely about macroeconomic policy. There has also been a perceived shift in social values (CORI, 2007) but it remains difficult to assess exactly what this means and how fundamentally notions of competitive individualism have changed Irish life. Certainly there is a constant stress, in the media and advertising, on the personal use of wealth and consumption leavened with new age banalities about self-help all of which depict the individual as the only possible site of development and happiness. To what extent this has corroded the notion of public welfare is open to question but it would not be too far fetched to assume that such cultural forms within a broader public pedagogy of neo-liberalism is having an effect on the way we imagine our society and is encouraging individualistic and acquisitive tendencies within our society

Finally, there is the question of how much actual control we have over important economic and social processes. For instance, Gill (1998), Allen (2007), and Storey (2004) have all highlighted the democratic deficit that has developed in EU policy as important social decisions are reduced to questions of technocratic governance within a pre-determined neo-liberal policy framework. Storey (2004) asserts that a considerable portion of EU policy is now underpinned by neo-liberal theory- an opinion that is made credible by the fact that the EU has signed up to and has actively sought to enforce a series of treaties committed to the liberalisation of trade and services both outside and within the EU area. Indeed, attempts over the past decade to commodify water and waste services in Ireland came about as a direct consequence of these treaties. A further aspect of this, and one which remains under-researched, but is touched on by both Gill (1998) and Allen (2007), is how decision making processes in the EU are formally or informally influenced by groups through business consultancy and corporate lobbying by groups such as the European Round Table

of Industrialists who have helped shape the Lisbon strategy and other business orientated policies within the European Union (ERT, No date).

A similar nexus of political power and lobbying by private groups within a neo-liberal paradigm that prioritises the needs of the market has been observable in national politics as well. In fact, it scarcely has to be pointed out, after over a decade of tribunals, that there is an abundance of such activity in Irish life. One notable example is the Corrib gas controversy in which a conglomerate of multinational companies were sold national resources at very advantageous terms and are set to benefit from tax restructuring and royalty conditions that are, by international standards, practically without precedence (Connolly & Lynch, 2005). Just as egregiously, the state has continued to support the refuelling of US military and CIA planes in Ireland in contravention of both public opinion and the constitutionally guaranteed principle of neutrality, justifying this anti-democratic policy by claiming it will ensure continued US investment in Ireland (Allen, 2007).

Analysing these trends has led Kirby (2002; 2005) to conclude that Ireland is now a 'market state'. While Kirby acknowledges the complex and specific historical trajectory of Irish society he nevertheless argues that the state is now firmly wedded to a neo-liberal model of development. For Kirby (and Giroux, Bourdieu and Harvey) the central issue is whether the broad thrust of policy and statecraft intensifies instrumental rationality, copper fastens unequal social relations and guarantees that the locus of power remains outside popular democratic control. This theory helps to clarify the clear disjunction between policy rhetoric and the actual workings of power in Ireland. In a market state the priorities and needs of business and competition are so deeply embedded within state discourse and structure that, however egalitarian the rhetoric or even the motivation is behind a given initiative, the overall orientation towards the market puts powerful limits on what is possible to achieve (Kirby, 2002) and within which the concept of equality tends to get reduced to a notion of equality of access in a future 'perfected' market.

An examination of equality, democracy and, somewhat less conclusively, social values suggests the Irish state and Irish society have been reconfigured as part of a global neo-liberal revolution and that free market ideas are now the determining and dominant ideas in society. For historical reasons Irish and European neo-liberalism has employed a corporatist, consensual rhetoric that links the market to notions of meritocracy and modernisation. It could be argued that

“the winning formula to seal the victory of the market is not to attack, but to preserve, the placebo of a compassionate public authority, extolling the compatibility of competition and solidarity” (Anderson, 2000, p.11). While the contradictions between the welfare and market elements of policy offers some space for defending social gains against unbridled neo-liberalism the Irish state is on a neo-liberal trajectory and the full implications of this paradigm shift will only become clear in the future as the boom finishes and society has to cope with the effects of a downturn.

#### Neo-liberal hegemony and Irish adult education: civil society, the market state and lifelong learning

Marketisation policies have affected a number of major Irish universities and colleges in terms of the structure and content of third level education (Allen, 2007; Flynn, 2006, Lynch, 2006). Moreover there is now an identifiable discourse within higher education that fuses neo-liberal ideology and educational policy. This links a set of ideas, many of which are ostensibly commonsensical, about flexibility, excellence, competition and the faltering and inefficient state but are deployed in a way that suggests that education best functions according to market imperatives (Walsh, 2007). While the commodification of compulsory schooling is less advanced the process has certainly begun and several critics have described how corporations are increasing their influence through, amongst other measures, sponsorship deals and schemes that tie consumer spending with a particular business with ‘gifts’ to schools (Allen, 2007). An initiative of even greater potential significance in terms of the neo-liberalisation of Irish schools is the launching of a Department of Education pilot project in 1998 running schools as Public Private Partnerships (Allen, 2007).

So what might these broad trends mean for adult education? Much of Irish adult education caters for people who have been failed in various ways by the formal education system (Lynch, 1991) and the impetus behind much of the work in this field- whether in community development projects, literacy schemes, or women’s education initiatives- has stemmed from the desire to find educational practices that are commensurable with social needs that have been ignored or deemed unimportant (Connolly, 1996; Connolly & Ryan, 1999). So if the ‘sector’ has largely emerged from the failure of mainstream education and the desire to develop and articulate knowledges that are often marginal in relation to dominant values then it is clear that Irish adult education occupies exactly the sort of spaces within civil society that one would imagine is difficult to commodify.

However, in the neo-liberal conjuncture in which civil society is being aggressively colonised this does not provide any guarantee of independence from the market. Perhaps all the more so as Irish adult education has been formed within relatively weak discursive and institutional traditions (O'Sullivan, 2005) that arguably offer a relatively permeable space in which emergent tendencies can be disproportionately influential.

Besides this, it is obvious that adult education is in a slow, but major, process of change in which the state has begun to recognise the work done within the field and to legislate and strategise for adult educational provision. As part of this process the government published a White Paper (DES, 2000) on adult education and has established a junior ministerial post to oversee policy in the area. The state and the EU are now the major institutional influences on adult education in Ireland. These changes have brought numerous benefits such as increased funding, new accreditation systems, a growth in relevant research and a higher profile for the work. All this has advanced the, still incomplete, process of professionalisation of adult education. However, if elite decision making in Ireland is being determined within a neo-liberal paradigm and policy is implemented and overseen by a market state then there is a strong likelihood that work within the sector may be co-opted.

Arguably this has already had an impact on the orientation of policy. Contemporary education policy in Europe has been strongly influenced by conceptions of 'lifelong learning' (CEC, 2001) and it is one of the central ideas informing the key piece of legislation dealing with adult education in Ireland, the aforementioned White Paper (2000). It is, in certain respects, a potentially radical idea that acknowledges the value of learning outside of formal institutions (Connolly, 2007) and has emerged and re-emerged in educational thinking in a variety of forms since the 1970s (Borg & Mayo, 2005). However, currently many policy recommendations linked with lifelong learning have emerged within a specific matrix of priorities shaped by the market state and a neo-liberal EU (Borg & Mayo, 2005; Magaelhaes & Storr, 2003; Tett, 2002) in which "education [is viewed] as a key strategy towards the achievement of economic policies" (Alexiadou, 2005, p. 102) and in which lifelong learning is conceptualised largely in terms of maintaining a flexible and competitive economy in the modern 'knowledge society'.

It is perhaps telling that the European Council meeting in Lisbon in 2000 which confirmed the EU's commitment to the lifelong learning agenda emerged as part

of discussions on how to improve the economic competitiveness of European countries and included a commitment to the neo-liberal commodification of services. It is also worth noting that the exact same sentiments and priorities that animated the Lisbon strategy meeting-focusing on the unstoppable competitive force of globalisation and the importance of a 'flexible' workforce-are precisely the same concerns set out much earlier in the influential European Round Table of Industrialists report *Education for Europeans* (ERT, 1994). Certainly the ERT (No date) claims some of the credit for the current orientation of policy. This paradigm of a ceaseless and uncontrollable globalisation that requires an ever more flexible workforce is massively influential and also informs the views of Irish politicians and policy makers (Dempsey, 2004). A similar set of concerns are also discernible in the White Paper (DES, 2000) on adult education albeit in a more diluted form and are placed rather uncomfortably beside more radical and progressive notions of education.

If one accepts the thrust of this brief overview of lifelong learning policy formation then obviously educationalists need to be deeply sceptical of policy rhetoric and ensure that policies are interrogated at a very profound level in terms of the expectations, assumptions and paradigms that they employ. An example of this approach is offered by Tett (2002) who has examined the Scottish experience of lifelong learning policies that were rhetorically committed to 'social inclusion' and 'active citizenship' but has found that these initiatives are often underpinned by neo-liberal and individualistic ideas. Tett argues, as Giroux has done in broader terms, that within the neo-liberal paradigm cause and effect are separated out and systemic problems are interpreted as biographical choices. The message embodied within these policies was that if the individual applies himself or herself to education they can equip themselves with the tools to keep ahead of the whirlwind of change in a flexible global economy.

An interrogation of such policies is especially important if adult education is increasingly being left with the burden to balance, "increasingly liberalised market-driven economies with the requirements of a socially just society" (Alexiadou, 2005, p. 102). Meeting the demands for global competitiveness while playing a role in overcoming the structural problems of poverty and inequality as well as creating an active citizenry are now part of the remit of adult education (DES, 2000: see also speech of Minister DeValera in NALA, 2006). It is questionable whether these tasks are complementary and it is also worth bearing in mind when adult education is offered as a panacea for a wide range of

social ills that, according to several studies of schools and colleges, education has found to have a limited effect on class mobility and improving equality (Smyth & Hannan, 2000; Whelan & Layte, 2004). Nonetheless, one recent study (Hardiman, McCashin & Payne, 2006) has found that many Irish citizens feel that education would make a significant difference to their social success suggesting that education remains a powerful part of the myth of meritocracy in contemporary Ireland. Given how important the meritocratic ideal has been in forming consensus around market hegemony, the way social policy and adult education intersect to sustain and promote myths of modernisation and meritocracy deserves greater attention but in the absence of such research, for both theoretical and empirical reasons, market solutions to market problems sugared with a dose of liberal rhetoric, need to be subjected to sustained critical scrutiny. All the more so if such policies are instituted with a cultural field increasingly dominated by diverse forms of market orientated public pedagogies.

### Conclusion

This article has offered a historical synopsis of neo-liberalism in order to trace how a set of political and educational themes might be usefully related to each other. It argues that in the rush and tumult of an economic boom signs have been taken for wonders and that Ireland has not been transformed by the 'magic of globalisation' but rather through the politics of neo-liberalism. This shift presents an enormous challenge to educationalists and students that are interested in broader forms of education and that materials, curricula and policy positions which do not explicitly acknowledge the force of the neo-liberal paradigm are, whatever the intentions behind them, likely to work according to the needs and logic of the market. Given this the possibility that adult education can argue for, and help foster, a strong civil society separate from the market in a neo-liberal era depends largely on maintaining a broad and non-instrumental conception of education orientated to social equality and justice (Fleming, 2004). In terms of current debates over Irish adult education this above all requires advocating and formulating a version of 'lifelong learning' that is orientated towards emancipation and renewing adult education's commitment to critical citizenship (Fleming, 1996; Keogh, 2004; Harris, 2005). The specific politics of a project that links social movements and adult education in the promotion of engaged citizenship is something that needs considerable elaboration (Keogh, 2004). Ultimately, the objective of such an approach is to develop a pedagogy that explores and engages in forms of popular education inspired by a vision of human potential that goes beyond the reductive and economic abstractions

of neo-liberal thought and capable of strengthening participatory democracy in Irish society against the deadly fatalism of free market ideology.

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