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The consumer, the market and the universal aristocracy: the ideology of academisation in England

Abstract

In 2018, academies accounted for 72% of all English secondary schools, compared to 6% in 2009 (National Audit Office, 2018). English academy schooling conforms to marketizing trends in international education reform, but Conservative politicians have also attempted to promote particular moral values. This article analyses the tensions between neoliberalism and neoconservatism and applies this analysis to a concrete debate taking place within the Conservative Party in the 2000s and 2010s. It uses arguments made by an illustrative group of Conservative politicians to explore and analyse the tension between these two reform trends. The aim of this article is twofold. Firstly, it will present the key arguments which were marshalled by a selection of thinkers affiliated with the Conservative Party in favour of educational reform. It will do this by analysing Conservative articulations of the failure of state education; the role of the consumer and the relationship between democracy and the market. Secondly, it will explore the degree to which marketizing and traditionalist impulses in education reform should be considered complimentary or contradictory. I will conclude by arguing that the parent-consumer functions as a vanishing mediator between neoliberal and neoconservative ideological positions.

Keywords: neoliberalism, marketization, Free Schools, neoconservatism, academies

Introduction

In 2018, academies accounted for 72% of all English secondary schools, compared to 6% in 2009 (National Audit Office, 2018). Parts of the apparatus of academy schooling had already been implemented under New Labour as far back as the Learning and Skills Act 2000, but the pace of change had been slower and there was no sustained impulse to complete a transition from the system of Local Educational Authority (LEA) control over education to a

fully entrenched quasi-market system. Under the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition and its successor governments, the transformation has been accelerated and the transformation has been extensive and intensive with the roll-out of compulsory academisation and the proliferation of multi-academy trusts (Wilkins, 2017).

English academy schooling conforms to marketizing trends in international education reform. Similar policies have been enacted in the United States (Lefebvre and Thomas, 2017), the Alberta region of Canada (Bosetti and Butterfield, 2016), Chile (Carrasco and Gunter, 2019), and, perhaps most relevant to the English reform, Sweden (Wiborg, 2013, 2015). The English reform shares key characteristics with its international fellows. Firstly, academy schools have been removed from the oversight of Local Education Authorities (LEAs), the bodies traditionally responsible for state schooling in England (Papanatasiou, 2017). Secondly, the principle of local catchment areas has been significantly weakened with parents given a choice of schools from a potentially much greater geographical area. Thirdly and finally, funding is now attached to pupil numbers, forcing schools to (at least theoretically) compete against one another to maintain budgetary levels year-on-year (Ball, 2012). These reforms go a significant way to implementing a market in primary and secondary education, imitating the structures now commonly found internationally in Higher and Further Education.

International education reform is frequently seen in terms of a global trend towards 'neoliberalisation' and marketisation (Peters *et al.*, 2016; Philips, 2016; Wilkins *et al.*, 2017). Clearly, there has been a fairly extensive process of policy diffusion across countries and this certainly could be described as 'neoliberal' or forming part of a neoliberal consensus. On the other hand, education reformers are almost always concerned not only with the administrative structure of education but also its content. In the case of Conservative education reform in the UK, I claim, this has led to an ideological tension between an impulse to promote marketisation and a secondary, neoconservative impulse to create an education system which promotes particular 'conservative' values.

This article takes these theoretical analyses of the tensions between neoliberalism and neoconservatism and applies them to a concrete debate taking place within the Conservative Party in the 2000s and 2010s. I use arguments made by an illustrative group of Conservative politicians to explore and analyse the tension between these two reform trends. The aim of this article is twofold. Firstly, it will present the key arguments which were marshalled by a selection of thinkers affiliated with the Conservative Party in favour of educational reform. It will do this by analysing Conservative articulations of the failure of state education; the role of the consumer and the relationship between democracy and the market. Secondly, it will explore the degree to which marketizing and traditionalist impulses in education reform should be considered complimentary or contradictory.

Neoliberalism and neoconservatism: a paradox?

Brown (2006) advances the argument that neoliberalism and neoconservatism function as 'paradoxical rationalities'. Neoliberalism is a 'market-political rationality', while neoconservatism is a 'moral-political rationality' (Brown, 2006: 698). The former presents 'political spheres and social spheres' as 'organized by market rationality', the latter 'identifies the state including the law, with the task of setting the moral-religious compass for society' (Brown, 2006: 694, 697). In the context of education reform, Apple (2006) echoes Brown by arguing that whereas neoliberal education reform emphasises individual choice and produces anomic effects, neoconservative reform trends point in the direction of hierarchism and traditionalism. These impulses, he argues, are at best in tension and at worst flagrantly contradictory.

Prima facie this tension between marketisation and traditionalism is difficult to resolve. While neoconservatives typically make accommodations with the market they are nonetheless basically opposed to its amoral logics. Kristol (2011) argues, in characteristic neoconservative fashion, that the profit motive is not to be celebrated, since it is merely an expression of human imperfection. Acquisitiveness, in his view, is rather like sex, a simple natural fact neither to be condemned nor celebrated. In other words, Brown's distinction between a 'market-political' and a 'moral-political' rationality appears to be borne out. Neoconservatives suffer the market rather than celebrating it, principally because their

focus, in contrast to neoliberals, is to promote traditional forms of authority and hierarchy, rather than individualistic values. This paradox notwithstanding, Brown argues that in the United States, these two rationalities have coalesced to undermine democracy. In the first instance, the extension of markets into the social order undermines basic tenets of formal democracy and the rule of law. Neoconservatism simultaneously 'produces loyal subjects and subjects whose submission and loyalty are constitutive of the theological configuration of state power' (Brown, 2006: 708). On the one hand, the market undermines and supplants traditional means of democratic accountability, while neoconservatism functions as an ideological supplement which valorises state power, undermining democracy from a different direction.

Fisher (2009: 62) applies this idea to British politics and extends the argument by attempting to resolve the paradox, arguing that neoliberalism and neoconservatism share 'objects of abomination', principally the 'Nanny State' and social welfare measures. This is somewhat schematic, and as will be shown in the analysis below, the neoconservative impulse is less to eliminate welfare altogether as it is to imbue that welfare with particular moral values (Hoctor, 2021b). Principally, the goal of neoconservative welfare is promoting 'family values' (Kristol, 2004: 146), 'educating and directing democracy' (Wolfson, 2004: 222), and encouraging patriotism through public and private bodies. The remainder of this article will assess particular articulations of marketizing and traditionalist reform put forward by Conservative politicians as a means of assessing whether and how this coalescence of neoliberalism and neoconservatism takes place in UK politics. I will conclude by arguing that the movement between the positions is completed by the figure of the parent-consumer which functions as a vanishing mediator, allowing Conservative politicians to move between marketizing and traditionalist logics.

Note on Sources

This article draws on a range of sources produced in the development of Conservative education policy from 2001 to 2015. From 2001 to 2009, it examines pamphlets published through the Centre for Policy Studies (CPS) by active Conservative politicians. Of these, almost all authors were elected as MPs or MEPs and one was a life peer. In the period from 2009 to 2015, the article will also draw on speeches by senior Conservative politicians,

principally Michael Gove and David Cameron. Throughout the entire period these utterances will be compared against Conservative manifesto commitments. These sources were chosen because they represent the accounts of key actors in key positions within the Conservative Party's policy environment during the period when the policy was developed.

The choice of pamphlets published through CPS reflects its privileged relationship with the Conservative Party. CPS was founded by Keith Joseph, a close associate of Margaret Thatcher, and Thatcher herself was a co-founder (Denham and Garnett, 1999). Historically, CPS was seen as 'a recruitment agency for the Conservative Party' and one of the publications considered here was written by John Redwood who has long been associated with CPS (Denham and Garnett, 1996: 159). This article takes as its starting point Jackson's (2012: 52) observation that the general goal of right-wing think-tanks, including but not exclusively CPS, is 'directly influencing the views of a small metropolitan media and political elite that shaped policy debate in Britain' to produce a close reading of a limited number of significant texts. There is evidence to suggest that these pamphlets did have an impact outside immediate policy circles. Redwood's *Power to Parents* generated (negative) coverage in *The Guardian* (2002); Direct Democracy promoted its impact among the wider Conservative membership through articles on the Conservative Home website (Carswell, 2010).

The character of these sources naturally differs as a result of their different intended audiences. Think tank policy documents tend to be more technical in the style of the argumentation, but also more explicitly ideological in their conclusions with the goal of producing media attention, up to and including television broadcasting (Denham and Garnett, 1999). Speeches and manifestoes are intended for a wider public audience and as a result are often much less "wonkish" in their language, focusing instead on culturally resonant and anecdotal narratives rather than the drier theorising of marketizing ideas. The differing audiences of the texts may to a degree explain their variance. However, as will be shown below, marketizing and traditionalist themes are common to all the literature considered here to greater or lesser degrees. Moreover, the purpose of the analysis is not so much to ascertain how, when or if these discourses became hegemonic within the Conservative Party (or amongst wider publics), but to analyse the formal structure of the

arguments put forward in favour of school reform, of both the marketizing (neoliberal) and traditionalist (neoconservative) positions.

The ‘Failure’ of State education

The notion that the state is poorly placed to provide adequate education has a long history in conservative thought and liberal economics. In ‘The Role of Government in Education’, Milton Friedman (1982) made the case that education, though a public good, could be provided privately through the use of market facsimiles. He wrote:

> *Governments could require a minimum level of schooling financed by giving parents vouchers redeemable for a specified maximum sum per child per year if spent on “approved” educational services. Parents would then be free to spend this sum and any additional sum they themselves provided on purchasing educational services from an “approved” institution of their own choice (Friedman, 1982: 77–78).*

In essence, Friedman argued that education could be treated as a commodity like any other, using the principles of supply and demand.

This idea had influenced the late Thatcherite Grant Maintained (GM) Schools and City Technology College (CTC) initiatives. It also informed a frequently cited market reform in Sweden, from which the Cameron-era policy would take the name ‘Free Schools’ (Fredriksson, 2009). Conservative politicians nonetheless recognised that market reform in English primary and secondary education would require significant alterations to individual behaviours as well as an ideology to underpin the new marketized structure of education. A strong perception existed that the failure of the GM Schools initiative of the 1990s was due to ‘intimidating and wonkish’ language (Direct Democracy, 2007: 5). For this reason, Conservative education policy took as its starting point the failure of state education. In this, they were quite consciously emulating the positions of US conservatives:

> *The single most important component of the Republicans’ success is something that the British Right could mimic, namely their determination to*

> *articulate the electorate's disdain for politicians and functionaries (Carswell* et al.*, 2005: 29).*

They also echoed criticisms of welfare and education put forward by Chicago School and public choice theorists about the sclerotic and bureaucratic nature of government provision. Milton and Rose Friedman (1980: 117, 97) noted that spending 'someone else's money on someone else' leads to 'wastefulness and ineffectiveness' and that '[s]pecial interests that benefit from specific programs press for their expansion – foremost among them the massive bureaucracy spawned by the programs'. As will be shown below, British Conservative politicians made virtually identical claims about the failure of state provision and bureaucracy.

State education and provision of other services was also portrayed as undemocratic. Carswell et al. (2005: 35, 41) argued that in 1979: 'the problem was the command economy. Today it is the command state. Then, unelected trade union barons suborned British democracy; today, unelected apparatchiks do so from within the state machine', continuing, '[t]he centralisation of power in the hands of remote élites is denying people the public services they have a right to expect'. Norman Blackwell (2004: 18) claimed that, '[s]ince centralised control of education has failed, this is the only policy that can be advocated with conviction by those who believe in small government and in encouraging personal freedom and responsibility'. The Direct Democracy group (2007: 3) asserted that: 'Our schools are failing because of too much government'. David Cameron (2011) claimed that critics of the coalition academisation programme were 'simply defending the establishment – an establishment that has failed pupils and infuriated parents for too long'.

Michael Gove's speeches during his tenure as education secretary made similar claims about the failure of state education. Gove comfortably fits into a tradition of 'cultural restorationism' in the Conservative Party which dates back to at least the 1990s (Ball, 1993). His speeches were replete with distinctive rhetorical flourishes that reflect his nostalgic view of education – including references to Gladstone (Gove, 2011), Disraeli (Gove, 2007), Cicero and Wagner (Gove, 2009). His basic critique though was similar to that made by Redwood, Blackwell and Direct Democracy, of which he was a member. He argued, for instance, that:

> *One of the central goals is … the breaking up of bureaucratic control and establishment power, when bureaucracies and establishments are thwarting the common sense of the people. And nowhere is common sense more flouted than among the education establishment and by education bureaucracies (Gove, 2009).*

The think tank literature is more reticent about the issue of social values, favouring market theoretical arguments. Nonetheless, there are implicit suggestions of an impulse to promote particular values. In two publications, the Direct Democracy group (2005: 11; 2007: 72) produce (verbatim) the criticism that the National Curriculum is 'a principal method by which the left-leaning educational establishment imposes its orthodoxies on schools'. Redwood (2002: 2–3) similarly presents schooling in terms of 'cultural impoverishment', criticising the state of school libraries and opining:

> *[t]he world is portrayed in the dull black-and-white hues of political correctness. Where is the pre-twentieth century literature? Where is any history before Wilbeforce and Hitler? Where are the great texts of nineteenth and twentieth century advance in the sciences? There are often no Tudors and Stuarts, no Marvell or Swift, no Darwin or Einstein.*

Conservatives linked the views and attitudes of the educational establishment with what they argued was the class character of educational failure. Redwood (2002: 2), for example, claimed that 'more poor children are trapped in under-achievement by the assumptions of the political and educational establishment than by the simple fact of their poverty'. Blackwell (2004: 11), noting the political resistance which such a policy might provoke, argued that 'the potential gain in choice offered to many people on modest incomes could be seen as far more significant than the gain to a small number of better-off parents'. Conservative policymakers were concerned by the potential accusation that school choice would disproportionately benefit the middle-classes and increase inequality. Direct Democracy publications echoed these ideas, claiming that 'only the lucky few are able to access alternative provision; only the clever few are able to manipulate the state monopoly

to get the best for themselves' and that the role of the state should be to 'provide prospective parents with the wherewithal to use them in the form of education credits' (Carswell *et al.*, 2005: 67; Direct Democracy, 2007: 5).

The answer to the supposed failure of state education was the creation of a (quasi-)market in education which would create empowered consumers who were capable of exercising choice in their own best interests.

The Creation of the consumer

The alleged failure of the state to adequately represent the interests of parents and children, especially those from lower-income backgrounds, was best solved, according to advocates of the free market, by placing the individual at the centre of the system through a voucher or credit system. Think tank publications are explicit in their presentation of education as a consumption good and parents as consumers. Blackwell (2004: 38), for instance, dismisses objections to the creation of an education market in 'an increasingly consumerist society' and argues that league tables and 'other indicators of quality schooling will inevitably emerge to satisfy the needs of the consumer'. Carswell *et al.* (2005: 20) describe 'the voter' as a 'highly sophisticated consumer'. Redwood (2002: 17) describes the reform as possessing the potential for 'consumer empowerment'. As will be shown below, the establishment of the parent-consumer is absolutely critical to the functioning of not only the marketizing portions of the academisation discourse, but also as a means to mediate between the market and traditionalist ideas.

A serious potential objection to this reorganisation of public services was that it would disproportionately benefit the already wealthy (see e.g. Green, Allen and Jenkins, 2015; Gorard, 2016; Allen and Higham, 2018). To combat this, the consumer in an education market was valorised not only as the ordinary parent fighting back against the sclerotic state, but also as a careful aggregator of utility. Redwood (2002: 24), for example, noted that 'it [is not] the case – as is often implied – that only middle-class parents have the *nous* to exploit freedom of choice'. These ideas about the nature of a putative education market conform closely to Chicago School and public choice assumptions about the nature and potential of markets. Buchanan and Tullock (1999: 19) argue that the distributive capacity of

markets means that theorists need make ‘no specific assumptions concerning the extent of equality or inequality in the external characteristics of individuals in the social group’ so long as prices accurately reflect the value of a commodity. Friedman’s ideas about school vouchers, or education credits, cleave closely to this logic, since, formally, all parents would be given equal purchasing power by the state.

Within the logic of market theory, equal capacity to access the market not only solved the potential for inequality, but also held out the possibility of enhanced democracy. *Power to Parents* demonstrated this notion of democracy in public services particular to free market reformers. While he argued that “choice” and “freedom” liberated schools and parents, Redwood noted that the GM initiative of the 1990s failed partly as a result of the necessity of balloting parents on changed school structures. He argued that this formal democratic process ‘allowed local politicians to scare some parents off, and slowed the process down’ (Redwood, 2002: 11). Instead, he claimed, freedom should be mandatory: ‘All state schools should be set free by Act of Parliament’ and ‘reconstituted as public interest, not-for-profit private companies’ (Redwood, 2002: 11). The consumer therefore sustains the reform by guaranteeing the adequate functioning of the market which in turn produces market democracy.

As Schwarzkopf (2011: 109) notes, for free market thinkers, in a market democracy the consumer is king and ‘[t]his king exercises sovereignty through choices which act as individual votes’. What is notable here is that for Redwood the formal democratic process is in direct conflict with the sovereignty of the consumer, preventing him or her from realising the freedom to choose. The creation of ‘choice’, then, was predicated on this very particular notion of consumer democracy, to which formal democracy was extraneous. Redwood’s argument implicitly considered atomised consumer choices in market transactions the proper expression of democracy, since, for him, formal democracy is subject to irrationality, unlike decisions made through markets. The notion of the consumer in the market society is therefore a formalistic one. Supplier and consumer are viewed as positions in a structure without any particular content. Paradoxically, the much-trumpeted individualism of the

consumer is rendered totally irrelevant by his or her integration into a market of choices. This market holds out a fantasy of a perfectly efficient and equitable system.

Within this fantasy, school choice became an emancipatory reform. However, beyond the creation of the consumer there were a series of other structural conditions which had to be met for it to be achieved. All of the policy thinkers under consideration here, including Cameron and Gove, noted that expansion of supply was a necessity for any education market to function effectively. This would place education providers in competition with one another to provide the best value for money to parents who had exercised their right to choose. Schools would be granted 'the all-important freedom to fail' (Direct Democracy, 2007: 10). The extension of the private sector into English schooling reflected two key priorities of Conservative educationalists. Firstly, it supposedly imitated the UK's existing independent sector, and, secondly, it allowed for the introduction of the profit motive. Blackwell (2004: 9) was explicit that the aim of the introduction of a voucher or credit-based form of schooling was to remove 'any real distinction between former state schools and former independent schools' with the implication that the voucher would act as a subsidy for parents of children at independent schools. The obvious potential for the entrenchment of social inequality in this measure is accounted for in advance by the positioning of the parent of modest means as an empowered consumer in the education marketplace.

The introduction of the profit motive fulfils the final plank of the formal market logic used to justify the need for school privatisation. Write Carswell *et al.* (2005, p: 71–72):

> *there can be no objection to the profit principle in education. Financiers looking for a return on investments are the natural source of the capital needed for the establishment of new schools, which would otherwise have to come from the taxpayer; and shareholders are the most effective guarantee of high standards and good management. In Sweden (often held up as the social democratic nirvana) chains of profit-making schools, educating tax-funded pupils, are a particular feature of the system.*

The figure of the consumer is the central node around which the rest of the formal logic of school choice operates. Without the empowered parent-consumer there is no requirement

for the creation of competition, large-scale expansion of supply or the introduction of the profit motive. The positioning of a consumer in a quasi-market system presented by Conservative politicians also held out the possibility of a classless society. This idea will be explored below.

'Real choice' and the 'universal aristocracy'

Conservative reformers were preoccupied with the idea of class and sensitive to the accusation that marketizing reforms would disproportionately benefit the middle-classes. This theme is particularly clear in Michael Gove's speeches as Education Secretary. Gove (2011) polemicized 'liberal learning' as a 'civilising mission' and a 'moral duty', which invoked, apparently intentionally, high imperial paternalism (Gove, 2011). He also clearly revelled in this appeal to liberal and conservative statesmen of the nineteenth-century, noting that he admired their 'intellectual and cultural self-confidence, and in particular the great ambitions they harboured for the British people' (Gove, 2011). This neoconservative emphasis on traditional authorities is mirrored in much of Gove's agenda for the English National Curriculum, most notably the history syllabus (Burn, 2015). He also argued for the power of educational reform using the example of Jade Goody, a British celebrity who rose to fame through Big Brother and died of cervical cancer in 2009 (Gove 2013b). Before her death, Goody set aside the money for her children to receive a private education at an elite school, a theme which Gove played with in several speeches. He used the example of Goody, a long-time single mother from a working-class background in Essex, as an argument in favour of the expansion of elite education to all, but implicitly to the English working class. Perhaps intentionally, this made his articulation of education policy even more reminiscent of mid- to late nineteenth-century attempts to 'civilise' the working class, epitomised by praise for 'innovative approaches to liberal learning'; the 'entitlement to knowledge and cultural capital' and 'rigorous educational achievement' (Gove, 2013a).

In keeping with this emphasis on working-class attainment that he associated with Goody, Gove (2013b) used the Italian Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci to further his case for an emphasis on traditional disciplines in schooling. He summarised Gramsci as an opponent of 'progressive education', noting that Gramsci felt this 'risked depriving the working classes of the tools they needed to emancipate themselves from ignorance' (Gove 2013b). In other

words, the competitive elitism of traditional education created the necessary conditions for egalitarianism, or, at least, social advancement. Gove had evidently misunderstood Gramsci, whether wilfully or otherwise, since Gramsci's writings on education do not point in the direction of competition, traditionalism and the rote-memorisation of facts, but in the rejection of the idea that education should simply perpetuate social difference by transforming the worker from 'unskilled' to 'skilled' in return for a wage and acquiescence to the wider social relations of capitalism. Rather, Gramsci's (2003: 40) point is that democracy 'must mean that every "citizen" can "govern" and that society places him, even if only abstractly, in a general condition to achieve this'. Gove's view of education, on the other hand, is closer to the neoconservatism of Leo Strauss (1995: 314), where '[d]emocracy, in a word, is meant to be an aristocracy which has broadened into a universal aristocracy' than he is to the Gramscian argument that a supposedly progressive technical education disempowers the working-classes. Where Gramsci (2003: 32) maintains that '[t]he study and learning of creative methods in science and in life must begin in this last phase of school, and no longer be a monopoly of the university or be left to chance in practical life', his observation is not a defence of the old traditional system, but a recognition of the implications of educational stratification for a democratic society. Strauss (1995: 311), much more in keeping with the outlook of contemporary Conservative reformers, describes liberal education as 'studying with the proper care the great books which the greatest minds have left behind', an altogether less democratic and more passive exercise.

These deficiencies notwithstanding, the invocation of Jade Goody and Antonio Gramsci explicates Gove's attempt to reconcile the substantive conservatism of the new curriculum with the market forces through which school choice would occur. Just as earlier conservatives had claimed that choice and competition would improve outcomes across the education sector, so Gove claimed that working-class parents would appreciate that a traditional liberal education is the key to social advancement. Much like other Conservative policy intellectuals, Gove considered it straightforwardly clear that, given the choice, working-class parents, once empowered as consumers, would, like Goody, choose an elite, private education for their children. However, unlike Gramsci's view of a democratizing education, Gove imagined a Straussian 'universal aristocracy' in which children received the authority of canonical texts.

This ambivalence towards the democratising potential of education reflects a much more profound split in conservative thought between the deregulatory impulses of free-market liberals and the moral paternalism and traditionalism of neoconservatives. This dilemma – is education equalising and democratizing or a means of propagating (national) myths and specific values? – is one which has run through conservative education reform for at least three decades (Ball, 1993; Burn, 2015). Gove's use of Goody is a particularly good example of an attempt to attach traditionalist moral values to the formal parent-consumer of market theory and in so doing to mediate between the two ideological positions.

Whereas previous agendas had tended to discursively emphasize either traditionalism or choice, ambivalence about the impact of markets and the social function of education were intensified by the approach taken under Cameron's leadership, which, characteristically, tried to have its cake and eat it. Criticising this agenda in the 2005 manifesto, for instance, *Neighbourhood Education* noted that:

> *The Conservatives campaigned at the last election on a promise of "school discipline". Yet saying "school discipline" is one thing, achieving it is another. … the impression is given that a Conservative education minister would somehow be able to thrust his hand into every classroom in the land to impose his particular methods (Direct Democracy, 2007: 3).*

In this respect the 2010 Manifesto was more reminiscent of the 2001 and 2005 platforms than the consumer choice core of the policy or even the 'Big Society' agenda on which other elements of coalition-era social policy would be based (Gibson, 2015; Harvie, 2019; Hoctor, 2021a). Key themes were falling academic standards, violence in the classroom; poor discipline and teacher training practices. Where it did mention the marketisation aspects of the policy, which in certain respects were the primary attraction, they were euphemised. Of the Swedish Free School reform, the manifesto claimed that:

> *[Free Schools] have been founded by foundations, charities and others – and they have attracted pupils by offering better discipline and higher standards. Because any parent can take the money the Swedish Government spends on their child's education and choose the school they*

want, standards have risen across the board as every school does its best to satisfy parents (Conservatives.com, 2010: 50)

The 'others' here are a significant category as they are the for-profit educational chains, which were not only running significant numbers of schools but also expanding internationally, including running several English schools as part of trusts. It is therefore notable that official Conservative utterances went to significant lengths to obfuscate the portion of the academisation agenda – privatisation – that had provided the impetus for the development of the policy in the first place.

These dual impulses reach the heart of the political and strategic quasi-market dilemma. While the market can be used to aggregate consumer choices, it does not, in theory at least, produce any specific changes in consumer preferences. Nonetheless, the government, parents and children themselves are naturally concerned with the product of education, not just in the sense of qualifications, but also the content of that education, its wider social implications and so on. The political dilemma for Conservative politicians was that of presenting a relatively unpopular policy: the quasi-market; with its neoliberal implications, alongside more popular ideas, like discipline and social advancement, even though there is no necessary relationship between markets and specific social values.

Much like Michael Gove and the 2010 Manifesto, David Cameron struggled to resolve the paradox generated by a choice-orientated market system and the impulse to instil 'Conservative' values. He listed the government's goals for education thus:

One: ramping up standards, bringing back the values of a good education.

Two: changing the structure of education, allowing new providers in to start schools – providing more choice, more competition, and giving schools greater independence.

And three: confronting educational failure head-on.

Summarised abstractly in this fashion, it is already possible to sense an implied contradiction between aims one and three, and aim two. How will the policy introduce greater individual choice and re-establish mass values? This tension was heightened by Cameron's claim that the policy could offer freedom for schools that was dependent on 'the values you bring to the classroom'. This referred to an emphasis on basic attainment and core subjects, through mechanisms such as the English Baccalaureate, a traditionalist curriculum and greater classroom discipline (Burn, 2015). The proposition that the policy would enhance schools' freedom, including autonomy to set their own curriculum, while simultaneously imposing specific teaching methods became difficult to sustain, especially as this was to be introduced alongside major changes to the structure of assessment and a focus on 'rigour'.

Nevertheless, in other ways, Cameron's presentation of the academisation and Free Schools policy was consistent with the ideological framework of market theory. This was especially true of his deployment of the concept 'real choice':

> Everything I've spoken about so far is about driving up standards. But the truth is this: The way we make sure these things happen in every classroom, in every school is by changing the way education is delivered in our country. It's about changing the structure of education – spreading choice, giving schools more independence, recognising the need for competition so we create real and permanent pressure in the system to encourage schools to drive improvements.
>
> That's what we're doing.
>
> Instead of parents having to take what they are given, we are giving them real choice in where their child goes to school and backing that decision with state money, with an extra payment for those from the poorest backgrounds. And to make that choice really meaningful, we are making everything that matters about our education system transparent (Cameron, 2011).

Cameron's claim that the introduction of choice would lead to an increase in standards at all schools is a direct echo of Chicago School ideas about the market.

Moreover, Cameron's assertion that the introduction of 'competition' is the only means by which 'choice' can be 'real' and that parents should not have to accept 'what they are given', radically alters the frame of how English education would be provided. In this telling, freedom can only be achieved through entrance into the market, since only a competitive market can allocate resources efficiently and effectively. While this, in theory, gives parents 'real choice', more often the choice appears to be made somewhere else, by politicians, policy wonks or multi-academy trusts, their stakeholders, investors or whoever. Despite the supposedly radical nature of this choice, it represents a narrowing of the political framework in which choices are made to those acceptable in market theory: the one choice which becomes unavailable in this schema is that of a well-funded, locally-run comprehensive school. Indeed, within market discourse only a consumer without appreciation of his or her own best interests would make such a choice, since decisions arrived at through negotiation in a formal democracy are not rational.

It is therefore, in a sense, analogous with Žižek's (2008: 166) elaboration of Soviet 'real democracy'. This, he argues, is just another name for 'non-democracy'. Žižek notes that in Soviet elections candidates were vetted in advance, since the 'true interests of the People' may be 'subjected to all kinds of demagogy and confusion' (Žižek, 2008: 166–67). This is an exact corollary of the argument made implicitly by Cameron (and much more explicitly by Redwood). In 'real democracy' the Party takes important 'democratic' decisions. In a marketized system these decisions are taken by the market (or a multi academy trust, which is the next best thing). The consumer occupies a formal place in a market democracy, rather like the citizen under Stalinism. He or she is free to vote, but choice is constrained in advance to avoid the potential for a confused or irrational outcome.

The positioning of the parent as consumer also holds out the possibility of a classless society, as did the PR men of a previous generation. However, what is presented is a strictly anti-universalist vision in which only the individual is in a position to make a decision for him- or herself. The achievement of the classless society is contingent not only upon the

assertion of individualism, but also the engineering of 'middle-class' behaviours. This has the consequence of fetishizing middle-class pushiness, while also creating the conditions whereby both exceptional and poor educational outcomes are the responsibility of the parent: the principle of *caveat emptor* applies. If sufficient supply is available then, as in any other commodity market, the consumer is ultimately responsible for failure to properly exercise their ability to choose. This is the thickest possible form of 'equality of opportunity'.

The effect of the introduction of the market therefore produces the formal, theoretical effect of classlessness, but it does this through the expedient of prohibiting consideration of factors extraneous to the distributive logic of the market. Reforms were justified by neoliberal notions of consumer choice as the true expression of democracy and, in order to sustain the illusion of market democracy, Conservative politicians were forced to constrain and limit choices to those which were subject to the quasi-market system. This typically entailed the extension of market mechanisms in ways which individualised consumers and reduced the involvement of the state. The rapid expansion of the academy as an institutional form was presented as a guarantor of 'real choice' for parents but arguably, the reform has had the opposite effect, severing the relationship between school and locale and narrowing the range of options available to parents, even as they were discursively positioned as empowered consumers within an education market.

Conclusion: the parent-consumer as vanishing mediator

Governments and political parties across the world are drifting in directions which have variously been described as Radical Right or reactionary (Mudde, 2016; Müller, 2017; de Orellana and Michelsen, 2019; McManus, 2019). This article assessed the tensions between neoliberal and neoconservative trajectories in English education reform. It took as its starting point Brown's argument that the 'market-political' and 'moral-political' rationalities of neoliberalism and neoconservatism work together to undermine democracy. Unlike much of the existing literature on neoliberalism and neoconservatism in education, it proposed to assess these trends through an assessment of a small number of texts in a critical reform phase for English education, during which the pressure for the introduction and expansion of a quasi-market was high among Conservative politicians and at a time when neoconservative ideas were also present at senior levels in the Party. Conservative

intellectuals produced relatively coherent justifications of market logics in English education. This account foregrounded a posited failure of state education; argued for the creation of a ‘parent-consumer’; and claimed that only a consumer in a market was capable of exercising ‘real choice’ in their own interests. Though it clearly informed communication with wider publics, marketizing logics were often downplayed or euphemised for fear of alienating voters with ‘wonkish language’. Instead, Conservatives, especially Michael Gove, attempted to move between two distinct, and at times contradictory, discourses.

Given the wider political context of the surge in support for traditionalist and nationalist right-wing political projects, the deployment of and movement between market- and moral political rationalities is particularly worthy of study. While I suggest that it is correct to posit a certain irreconcilability between neoliberal and neoconservative positions in British education discourse, the entirely formal character of the consumer is central to the resolution of this dilemma. In Conservative discourse, the parent-consumer is capable of accurately perceiving his or her own interests through the rational navigation of market structures, while also demonstrating a marked preference for traditional moral values. In this way, though the tension between the two portions of the discourse remains, its proponents are able to move between economic and cultural articulations of education policy smoothly through the mediating function of the parent-consumer. In Jameson’s (2008: 309–343) terms, the parent-consumer is a vanishing mediator. While it is unlikely that the content of these British discourses would be successful in other national political contexts, given Britain’s socially embedded class system and imperial history (and nostalgia), the figure of the sovereign consumer is central to marketizing discourses on an international basis (Olsen, 2019). The flexible nature of the figure of the consumer in British education discourse is therefore noteworthy.

For British Conservatives, the discourses respond to an internal ideological tension between, on the one hand, the impulse to defend policies which encourage marketization of public services and therefore conform to a neoliberal vision of accumulatory practices and, on the other, a concern for traditional models of social regulation, centred principally around the family, nation and middle-class social values. Ongoing debates about the death (or non-

death) of neoliberalism will increasingly be required to provide an explanation for the mechanisms through which market logics and traditionalist cultural and nationalist logics are held together (Brown, 2019; Plehwe, Slobodian and Mirowski, 2020). Brown's (2019: 58) explanation for this phenomenon locates the growth of 'angry right-wing populism' in 'neoliberal effects such as growing inequality and insecurity'. Neoconservatism has also been understood as a 'moral support' for neoliberalism (Harvey, 2005; Hancock, 2016: 102). The identification of racial and gendered resentments as central to increasingly violent right-wing discourses suggests not that these originate in neoliberalism as such, but rather that antagonisms aggressively persist through successive social systems (Jameson, 2002), especially since, as I have shown here, traditionalism has been a persistent feature of Conservative education discourse since the 2000s, and, indeed, even earlier (Ball, 1993). In any case, what is as important as understanding where these discourses come from is understanding how they work, especially since it has proven so difficult to disrupt the marketizing and traditionalist impulses in right-wing discourses. I suggest that the search for vanishing mediators between neoliberal and neoconservative logics, including, but not limited to, the figure of the consumer, is one possible route to a better understanding of the functioning of contemporary right-wing politico-ideological projects.

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