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Neo-liberalism and the human rights creed: Conflicting forces vying for control of the global education agenda

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The aim of this article is to explicate and critically assess the roles and impact of the two major societal forces currently driving the global education expansion project, namely the neoliberal economic revolution and the creed of human rights. The article provides a framework for the collection of articles following in this special issue in that it focuses on aspects of education (both as praxis and as field of scholarly pursuit) as it is being impacted by the neoliberal economic revolution. It discusses the societal antecedents and the main tenets of this revolution and then does the same with respect to the impact of the creed of human rights. Special attention is devoted to how these two forces have been affecting the global education expansion project. The examination reveals that these two forces tend to be in opposition to each other in that they pursue quite different and occasionally conflicting agendas. A number of caveats need to be kept in mind if the global education project is to succeed in combining the advantages of both. It is also suggested that policymakers harness these two forces in tandem in countering the rising spectre of post-truth. The rest of the contributions to this special issue should be read against the backdrop of this critical interrogation of the two major forces that have been shaping twenty-first-century education.

Keywords: education; human rights; information and technology revolution; neoliberal economic revolution; post-truth; twenty-first century

Introduction

The global education expansion agenda has assumed the proportions of a major project by humanity. This is evident from *inter alia* the swelling enrolment numbers worldwide at all levels of education and the fact that one of the sustainable development goals of the global community deals with education as such. Higher education enrolments have increased more than fifteenfold during the second half of the twentieth century, from 6.3 million in 1950 to 99.5 million in 2000 (United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 1972, 2019b), and then more than doubled again in the ensuing sixteen years, to reach 215.9 million in 2016 (UNESCO, 2019b). The growth in secondary and primary school enrolments has been no less impressive. At the conclusion of the run of the Millennium Goals Project in 2015, the United Nations, that is, the international community in its organised or corporate form, formulated 17 sustainable development goals as its vision for the year 2030. One of these (Goal 4) is to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and provide lifelong learning opportunities for all (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2015).

It is a maxim in the scholarly field of comparative and international education that education systems are the outcome of societal contextual forces (Sobe & Kowalczyk, 2014). While comparatists usually conduct their analyses on the national level, the logic of this maxim could also hold for the global level. The thesis of this article is that two forces currently influencing and even determining the terms of the global education expansion project are lining up against each other, namely the neoliberal economic revolution and the creed of human rights. For the sake of clarification, we need to state upfront that we understand neoliberalism as explicated by Stiglitz (2019): neoliberalism or market fundamentalism refers to subsuming every societal sphere (be it politics, education, health services, or even sport and entertainment) to the dictates of unfettered market forces. While we (in this article and in our personal beliefs) have no problem with capitalism – that is a system of economic organisation where the forces of free market are being given free reign within the parameters of a system of ethical principles and social responsibility – we regard market fundamentalism as a system of total societal organisation that is fraught with caveats and pitfalls (cf. Stiglitz, 2019), also in the sphere of education, as we point out in this article.

The aim of the article is, firstly, to explicate the societal antecedents that have given rise to these two forces, and the main tenets of each as they determine the global education expansion project, and secondly, to interrogate and reflect critically on them and their impact on education, in the process pointing out the caveats that need to be kept in mind, particularly when efforts are being made to combine them to become a single driving force behind the global education project.

The Societal Antecedents of the Neoliberal Economic Revolution, and the Effect of this Revolution on Education *Societal antecedents*

One of the signature features of the modern world is the rise of the nation-state. The timeline regarding the commencement of the modern age reveals a high degree of plasticity; here it is taken as commencing after the Napoleonic era, that is, from the beginning of the nineteenth century. The government of the nation-state became a powerful factor in society: virtually all the power and authority were concentrated in a central point (Hartshorne, 1989:103). An indication of such concentration in a single locus of power in the nation-state is that

by the mid-twentieth century, typically a quarter to half of national incomes was channelled to the state by means of taxes, whereas in traditional societies, this figure had not exceeded five per cent (Idenburg, 1975:71). The technological innovations of the nineteenth century (such as railways and the telegraph) made possible the creation of nation-states and the exertion of power from a single central point. The notion of the nation-state reached its zenith deep into the twentieth century, not only in totalitarian fascist and communist states but also in Western liberal democratic states. Franklin D. Roosevelt's new deal and the Keynesian economic policy in the United Kingdom and beyond come to mind in this regard.

One corollary of the formation of nation-states was the creation of mass public education systems. A much-cited theory explaining the origin of schools is that of Yehudi Cohen (1970). According to him, schools as institutions emerged for the first time in antiquity after a state had assumed a critical size. The purpose of these schools, which were elite institutions, was to produce an elite, a bureaucracy loyal to the state, charged with the task of defending and bolstering the integrity of the state. Cohen also uses this theory to explain the emergence of mass public education systems from the nineteenth century onward: the rationale or prime purpose of these systems was to cultivate loyalty towards the state (Cohen, 1970). Cultural rationalism, one of the major paradigms in comparative education, supports this view in that it posits that the rationale of public education systems is to legitimise the existence of the state (Welch, 1991). Although an oversimplification of a complex situation, this view possesses a modicum of truth.

By the end of the third quarter of the twentieth century, it became clear from, for example, ever-growing public budget deficits, that the Western welfare state (by that time, the state had become a massive caring institution that provided welfare services from the cradle to grave) had become unsustainable. By 1990, for example, the public budget deficit in the United States of America amounted to USA\$200 million, and while government debt was increasing at a rate of eleven per cent per year, the gross domestic product grew only by eight per cent per year (Davidson & Rees-Mogg, 1992:394). The information and communications technology revolution had by that time also begun to erode the monopoly on information of the central state as well as loosen its grip on the populace, thereby strengthening the autonomy of civil society. The new technologies associated with globalisation furthermore resulted in economic internationalisation. Multinational companies became prominent in the economy, and an enormous international electronic finance market that operates 24/7/365 emerged. The increase in global capital flows became intimately connected with the

revolution in global communications in the shape of computers, computer software, satellites and high-speed electronic transfers.

By the 1970s it was clear that Keynesian policies had not succeeded in solving the economic problems as they had done in the 1930s. Instead, in the context of bloated civil service bureaucracies, the stranglehold of the oil producing nations on the West led to the hitherto unknown spectre of stagflation. The time was ripe for a change in economic policy. Conservative leaders who subscribed to the principles of neoliberal economics assumed power in the leading Western nations towards the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s (Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom in 1979, Ronald Reagan in the United States of America in 1980, Helmut Kohl in Germany in 1983, followed by others). This inaugurated what has become known as the neoliberal economic revolution in the West. (The "West" is used here deliberately to draw attention to the fact the main protagonists of the revolution were to be found in Western-Europe-North America. The views of John Milton in the nineteenth century and of Milton Friedman in the twentieth century, for example, became prominent in this regard.)

In the Eastern Bloc, the implosion of the once omnipotent state was even more dramatic. In the early 1960s, Khrushchev, in projecting the economic growth rates of that decade into the future, predicted-promised that by 1980, the Union of the Socialist Soviet Republics (USSR) would overtake the gross national product of the United States of America (Kasrils, 1993:87). However, by 1989, the gross national product of the USSR was only USA\$1 424 372 million, compared to the USA\$5 237 505 million of the United States of America (*The Europe World Year Book*, 1991:2896, 1992:2760). The technological revolution and the failed military intervention of the USSR in Afghanistan in the early 1980s made it even more clear that the USSR was on the brink of collapse, and this spurred on civil society, not only in the USSR but all over Eastern Europe, to reaffirm its power and reassume political control. After the fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989 the neoliberal economic revolution also engulfed Eastern Europe.

It was, however, in the Global South where the predicament of the monolithic state was at its greatest. Africa's total debt had increased from USA\$14 billion in 1973 to USA\$125 billion in 1987 (Kennedy, 1993:214), and by the mid-1980s, repayments of loans laid claim to half of the export earnings of Africa. The end of the Cold War meant that after 1989, the governments of the Global South could no longer play the Western and Eastern superpowers off against one another for foreign aid. The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund then began assuming the role of a lender of last resort and entered into structural adjustment

programme agreements with governments finding themselves in dire economic straits in the Global South. Such agreements invariably entailed a significant downscaling of government and the adoption of free-market policies. By 1988, over 28 African countries had signed such structural adjustment programme agreements (Campbell & Stein, 1992:6). In this manner, the neoliberal economic revolution affected the Global South as well. This revolution, with its roots in the Global North, in an age of globalisation, characterised by asymmetrical power relations, power concentrated in the Global North and by spilling over the Global South, displays a parallel to nineteenth century colonisation. This has become a reality that planners of education need to take into account.

The main tenet of the neoliberal economic revolution

The neoliberal economic revolution entails a contraction of the extent and role of the state and giving freedom to free-market forces. The state limits its functions to those that no other institution can supply, such as the maintenance of law and order, providing a national defence force, conducting foreign affairs, and withdraws from functions such as providing health services or public transport services, and from a regulating and commanding role in economic affairs. Not all governments have been willing to retract totally from these functions. Lee, Jeong and Hong (2018) show that although the Korean government has aligned itself with a neoliberal approach to education, it has committed itself to “push forward with policies that invigorate high-risk high-payoff research” (p. 50); it views students as “not only consumers but also inputs” (p. 54); the book abounds with phrases typical of neoliberalism, such as “comparative advantages,” “net expenditure,” the “autonomous financial capacity” of colleges, “higher quality for nearly all measures” and “one of the main purposes of the two-year colleges is to enhance a diverse technical workforce meeting the needs of the different industries” (pp. 55–59).

The impact of the neoliberal economic revolution on education

The neoliberal revolution has manifested itself not only in matters of the economy and the state but has also made its effect perceivable in a range of other societal sectors, including education (Davies & Bansel, 2007). While the main effect of the neoliberal economic revolution has been the downscaling of government funding for education and the concomitant increase in private education institutions and related systems (the higher education sector in particular, but not limited to this sector), its effect is also detectable in the fact that key precepts of neoliberal economics such as the profit motive and efficiency, have become the organising principles of education and education institutions.

The fixation on efficiency has given rise to performativity and performance management as well as a culture of accountability and managerialism which has caused a revolution in the higher education sector (although, as mentioned, its effect is perceivable on other levels of education as well).

This trend, namely the withdrawal of the state from education, is a manifestation of a central tenet of the neoliberal economic revolution. Its withdrawal has given rise to privatisation, decentralisation and school autonomy, the rise of structures such as charter schools, school voucher systems for educational financing, partnerships between the state and non-governmental organisations for the supply of education, and school choice. According to the creed of neoliberal economics, the value of education programmes is solely determined by the (immediate) income-generating potential of such programmes for graduates. Another effect of neoliberal economics on education is the rise of Mode II knowledge. This is a term created by Gibbons, Limoges, Nowotny, Schwartzman, Scott and Trow (1994) for describing the trend whereby knowledge is no longer generated, ordered and taught in a discipline-defined format (Mode I knowledge), but in a trans- and interdisciplinary open system, where knowledge is ordered and evaluated not so much in terms of scientific criteria as in terms of practical and utilitarian considerations (Mode II knowledge).

Our attention now turns to the other global force currently contending for recognition in education, namely the creed of human rights.

The Creed of Human Rights and its Impact on Education

The rise of the creed of human rights

Besides opening space for the neoliberal economic revolution, the crumbling of the nation-state also gave impetus to another movement that gradually formed a counter-force in shaping global education, namely the creed of human rights. For a long time in history, the state, in symbiosis with (a dominant) religion, provided a base for morality in society. In an age when science was still undeveloped and humanity did not stare in awe at the results of its own technological achievements, the powerful twin structures of the state and of religion were regarded as the joint source of all moral authority.

For centuries, even millennia, religion and state structures/secular political authority buttressed each other and provided reciprocal legitimacy. This is evident right from the ancient civilisations (where the scribes bolstered the administrative machine of both secular and religious authorities) to Medieval Europe (the Holy Roman Empire, with both the Pope and the Holy Roman Emperor heading a dual structure of religious and secular power), right down to the formation of nation-states in recent times, as can be illustrated in the case of Japan. During the creation of the nation-state of Japan in the second half of the nineteenth century, the

national government synthesised Shinto as the national religion (with the Emperor as its most prominent deity) from the variety of religions that was in existence in the various regions of feudal Japan (Buruma, 2003).

The development of science and technology, the rise of rationalism (fifteenth century) and of the enlightenment (sixteenth century), and the onset of modernity began eroding the authority of religion. The scientific revolution (which can be traced back to the formulation of Robert Boyle's law in the seventeenth century) and the industrial revolution (mid-eighteenth century) set the table for technological development, thereby bringing about a change in how causality in the world was viewed: explanations in this regard changed from vertical (religious, God-given and -determined) to horizontal (natural, spontaneous). Whereas, in the case of the former, empirical phenomena were ascribed to actions of God, the gods or benevolent/malevolent supernatural forces (such as guardian angels or demons), and in the latter they were explained in terms of empirical causes (Idenburg, 1975:40).

As long as the borders of the nation-states corresponded with those of a single, dominant culture and religion, the mutually reinforcing structures of religion, state and culture had a fair chance of maintaining and enforcing authority and serving as a basis for morality. However, this kind of power configuration has been under threat in recent decades, not only because of the crumbling of the nation-state but also due to the rise of increasingly multicultural, including multireligious, societies. The globalising world, with increasingly porous borders among states and among societies, now calls for a cooperative global ethic (Prozesky, 2018).

The creed of human rights stepped into the vacuum left by the dissipation of the state-religion power structure. Not long after Bishop Bossuet (1627–1707), in the spirit of seventeenth-century absolutism, published his much-referenced piece on the divine rights of kings (according to which kings had an absolute or sovereign right to govern, bestowed by God), Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) claimed that the *raison d'être* of a state was to fulfil its side of a social contract between people and the state. This was followed by eighteenth-century philosophers and political theorists, such as John Locke and Thomas Jefferson, who tabled the idea of universal natural human rights according to which all people possessed natural, inalienable (i.e. beyond the reach of any government or democratically elected majority) rights. In 1948, the United Nations General Assembly accepted its *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (United Nations, n.d.). Based on this statement by the international community, manifestoes of human rights became part of the constitutions and legal frameworks of many countries. In this manner, the creed of human

rights became the reference point of a new moral order in the world.

Impact of the human rights culture on education

The impact of the creed of human rights on education is three-fold: views about education as a human right, the development of human rights education and the need to see human rights education as a foundation for creating a better world.

As far as education as a human right is concerned, education has for a long time not figured in what people considered to be the standard set of basic or natural human rights. For example, neither in the Bill of Rights in the Constitution of the United States of America, which dates from 1791, nor in the Declaration of Fundamental Human Rights, which was part of the French Revolution of 1789 reference was made to education. In fact, public systems of universal school attendance, even at primary school level, are of a very recent origin in history, appearing for the first time in history only in the nineteenth century in Western Europe and North America. Europe attained the fifty per cent adult literacy level, that is, when most adults could read and write, only in 1850 (Roberts, 1985:640). In England, it was only due to the Forster Act of 1870 that a system of public elementary schools was established (Duggan, 1916:396).

Education gained a place in human rights documents only during the second half of the twentieth century. Section 26 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* by the United Nations (n.d.) proclaims the following regarding education:

- 1) Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.
- 2) Education shall be directed to the full development of human development of the human personality.
- 3) Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.

Such vague specifications regarding how much and what type of education should be regarded as a human right are typical of references to education as a human right in other documents as well – a problem to which will be returned below.

The second impact that the creed of human rights has had on education is the call for human rights education. This call has been spearheaded by the United Nations, an international organisation that has given prominence to human rights education. The ten years from 1995 to 2004 were declared as the United Nations Decade for Human Rights Education. At the end of that decade, in December 2004, the General Assembly of the United Nations launched the World Programme for Human Rights Education as a global initiative, structured in consecutive phases, to promote the implementation of human rights education in all sectors.

The first phase of the programme (2005–2009) focused on integrating human rights education into elementary and secondary school systems. The second phase (2010–2014) focused on integrating human rights education in the higher education system and on the training of civil servants, law enforcement officials and military personnel. UNESCO also published a *Plan of Action – World Programme for Human Rights Education* in 2006 (UNESCO/Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2006).

A working definition of the concept of human rights education was proffered by the United Nations in its *Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training*, dated 20 December 2011. Article 2 of this document (United Nations, 2011) describes human rights education as comprising education about human rights, education *for* human rights and education *through* human rights:

- (a) Education about human rights, which includes providing knowledge and understanding of human rights norms and principles, the values that underpin them and the mechanisms for their protection;
- (b) Education through human rights, which includes learning and teaching in a way that respects the rights of both educators and learners;
- (c) Education for human rights, which includes empowering persons to enjoy and exercise their rights and to respect and uphold the rights of others.

The third impact that the creed of human rights has had on education after the recognition of education as a human right and after the promotion of human rights education, was to employ the views, strategies or approaches to education described above as a means of attaining the type of world envisioned by the human rights lobby. The three views (education as a human right, human rights education, and employing education to work towards a better world) not only inspired national education policies and initiatives but also served as a script for global education initiatives. The United Nations' education arm, UNESCO, was created in 1946 with the objective

... to contribute to peace and security in the world by promoting collaboration among nations through education, science, culture and communication in order to foster universal respect for justice, the rule of law, and the human rights and fundamental freedoms that are affirmed for the peoples of the world, without distinction of race, sex, language or religion, by the Charter of the United Nations. (UNESCO, 2013)

During the first decades of its existence, UNESCO touted the goal of universal adult literacy by the year 2000 for inspiring the international community. The year 2000 came and passed with this goal not anywhere near attainment, also not after the United Nations' Literacy Decade, 2003–2012, the follow-up project supposed to focus the attention of the international community on the ideal of universal adult literacy, literacy at that point in time being

regarded as the desired minimum education level for all.

The attention of the international community expanded in 1990 to *Education for All* (also known as the Jomtien Declaration). Convened by the executive heads of the UNDP, UNESCO, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the World Bank, some 1,500 people, representing 155 governments, 33 intergovernmental bodies and 125 non-governmental organisations, institutes and foundations, gathered between 5 and 9 March 1990 in Jomtien, Thailand. Departing from the view that it was a cause of concern that more than 40 years after the adoption of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, still more than 100 million children of primary school age in the world had no access to schooling and that there were more than 960 million illiterate adults in the world, the Jomtien Declaration formulated the goal of basic education for all in the world (encapsulated in the slogan "Education for All") (University of Minnesota, 2019). Basic education was taken to mean nine years of schooling, that is, primary and lower secondary education.

Ten years later, in 2000, a follow-up conference, the World Education Forum, was held in Dakar, Senegal, where 164 governments pledged to achieve Education for All by 2015 and issued a document entitled *The Dakar Framework for Action* (UNESCO, 2000). Yet, even by 2017 (according to the latest available data), 64 million children of primary school age and 61 million children of lower secondary school age in the world were still not attending school (UNESCO, 2019a).

In 2000, the 191 member states of the United Nations adopted the *United Nations Millennium Declaration*, in which the nations committed themselves to attain eight millennium development goals by 2015. The goals were to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, to achieve universal primary education, to promote gender equality and empower women, to reduce child mortality, to improve maternal health, to combat (human immunodeficiency virus) HIV/AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome), malaria, and other diseases, to ensure environmental sustainability, and to develop a global partnership for development (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 2000). The formulation of these goals was premised by the creed of human rights (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 2000:6–7).

When the due date for the attainment of the millennium development goals arrived (2015), the leaders of 193 countries came together and formulated 17 sustainable development goals as their vision for the world in 2030: no more poverty; zero hunger; good health and well-being; quality education; gender equality; clean water and sanita-

tion; affordable and clean energy; decent work and economic growth; industry, innovation and infrastructure; reduced inequalities; sustainable cities and communities; responsible consumption and production; climate action; life below water; life on land; peace, justice and strong institutions; and partnerships for the goals (UNDP, 2015). Goal 4 of the sustainable development goals, namely quality education, was expounded at an international conference held from 19 to 22 May 2015 in Incheon, South Korea, attended by 1,600 delegates from 160 countries, including 120 Ministers of Education (UNESCO, 2016). This conference subsequently produced the Incheon Declaration in which the goal, now specified as “inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all,” was formulated by the international community as the Vision for Education for 2030 (UNESCO, 2016). The preamble of this declaration states that the creed of human rights has served as its source and inspiration (UNESCO, 2016:6).

Discussion: The Tacit Clash between these Two Global Forces

It is clear from the above outline that the worldwide education expansion and reform project has so far been tacitly affected and even determined by the dynamics of two opposing forces, each with its own agenda and priorities. On the one hand, neoliberal economics has been favouring elitist and selective education (education not necessarily intended for the masses), as determined by the needs of the (labour) market. On the other hand, those basing their views of education on the creed of human rights insist on mass education – inclusive education for all.

The neoliberal economic revolution has many benefits and achievements to its credit. Because of it, the world has been experiencing one of the longest, most vigorous and most sustained economic upswings. Even the economic slump since 2008 could not make much of a dent in the neoliberal trend when viewed over a longer term: in the ten-year period from 2005 to 2015, the global annual economic output has more than doubled, from USA\$29.6 trillion to USA\$78.3 trillion (World Bank, 2016), to USA\$80.684 trillion in 2018 (estimated) (World Bank, 2018).

The creed of human rights also has much to its credit. Since 3,600BC there have only been two hundred and ninety-two years of peace in the world. Put differently, there have been 14,531 wars, in which more than 3.5 billion people were killed (Strohmaier, 2014). Rummel (1994) calculated that in the twentieth century, 168,198 million people were killed in government-sanctioned violence around the world. While the world at present is not without war and violence, a projection based on the first fifteen years of the twenty-first century shows that these figures will not be matched in the

entire twenty-first century (Harari, 2015:14–21). It would be reductionistic and simplistic to ascribe this tendency to the creed of human rights alone; it would be equally naïve, however, to assert that the new global moral order based on the doctrine of human rights has had no impact or influence on this development.

Both the neoliberal economics trend and the human rights trend are open to criticism. They both represent forces from the West tending to impact on the extra-Western world, a process facilitated by the forces of globalisation. The economic growth that has resulted from giving space to the free market, and the freedom and equality provided by the creed of human rights where it had embraced in the Global South count in their joint favour. The Bill of Rights as part of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa 1996 (Republic of South Africa, 1996), and the Manifesto of Human Rights adopted by the African Union come to mind as examples of the latter.

Neoliberal economics can furthermore be criticised for tending to reduce the human being to a production and consumption unit, even to the extent of dehumanising the human being (instead of being seen as *homo educandus*, the learner/student is viewed as *homo economicus*, a form of human capital, a client, and a consumer). The cult of performativity and managerialism that neoliberal economics has infused into education and particularly into the education system (management and leadership) has been severely criticised, particularly (but by no means limited to) at higher education level. It has been argued that under a neoliberal economic management regimen, the university cannot fulfil its true roles as an institution of higher learning, among others, the unhindered scholarly quest for truth, to be the conscience of society, or to be a repository of cultural treasures and promoter of cultural development (Locke, Cummings & Fisher, 2011).

Human rights, and the human rights creed as a regulating principle in and of education, have been criticised on quite different grounds (Wolhuter, 2019), such as: How, where and on whose authority can an individual lay claim to his or her human rights? There is still no unanimity in the international legal and scholarly and political discourse as to whether group rights in fact exist (Can only individuals claim human rights, or can cultural, religious, language or whatever groups do the same?). Another complaint is that the right to education has been described in rather vague terms in human rights documents, such as the *United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. How much education is a person entitled to or does a person only need sufficient education to be able to function effectively or successfully in society? What kind of education is required, and for which community or society? There is also the question as to

whether human rights are truly natural, that is, do they pre-exist the efforts to articulate them? It has also been alleged that the creed of human rights has been used to silence emancipatory narratives and/or minimising or negating the roles of non-state actors (Wolhuter, 2019).

Even if, despite their inherent opposition to each other, the advantages of both neoliberal economics and the creed of human rights-based approaches could be conjoined to form a single platform on which world education could be promoted, the combined approach to education would be fraught with pitfalls. Biesta (2015) argues that the objectives of education are multidimensional. According to him, there are three major domains of educational objectives: the acquisition of skills, socialisation, and the empowerment of the individual. If education predicated on neoliberal economics provided for the acquisition of useful skills, and education predicated on the creed of human rights could provide for socialisation, education for individual empowerment could still be lacking. It seems, therefore, that a neoliberal economics and a human rights approach in combination should at least be philosophically underpinned by another theory, such as the capabilities theory, in order to ensure the all-round education of individuals (Besant, 2014).

Due to the fact that neoliberal economics-minded education planners seem to be inclined to shape education according to labour market needs, it should be pointed out that vocational education, which at various times in the second half of the twentieth century was much in vogue, also has no unblemished track record (Wolhuter, 1993:204–209). If this is true of the twentieth century, there is even more reason to be sceptical about the situation in the twenty-first century. Florida (2002) writes about how the leading economies in the world are being propelled by a class of creative people, and in its most recent report about the nature of work, the World Bank (2019) singles out technology as the one distinguishing feature of the global workplace as it constantly creates a demand for different skills and new kinds of work.

Regarding the educational objective of socialisation, it is highly doubtful that the creed of human rights will be able to promote the learner or student with the complete toolkit he or she requires as educand for arriving at a meaningful response to the challenges of the twenty-first-century world. The World Economic Forum (2019, held in Davos) has enumerated the following as the most compelling challenges facing humanity in the world today: weapons of mass destruction, failure to mitigate the effects of climate change and of adapting to such change, extreme weather events, water crises, natural disasters, biodiversity loss and ecosystem attacks, critical information infrastructure breakdowns, human-made environmental disasters,

cyber-attacks, large-scale involuntary migration, data fraud and theft, asset bubbles in a major economy, and the spread of infectious diseases. The efforts of the compilers of the Incheon Declaration to bolt human rights education onto the sustainable development goals, the tenets of the creed of human rights appear to have led to the adoption of a far too blunt an instrument for equipping the educand to take on all these challenges.

Conclusion

An impressive and exciting global education expansion project is currently gathering momentum. This project, as described, is being driven by two forces that in some ways are contradictory in nature, namely the neoliberal economic revolution and the creed of human rights. Both have merits and can boast of successful track records.

While it can be argued that these two represent the major forces driving education expansion and reform in the contemporary world, another force, a potentially ominous one if managed inappropriately, is looming. Mention has been made above of traditional or convention Mode I knowledge production, and the recent rise of Mode II knowledge production. Due to the rise of mass data banks (stemming from exercises such as the Programme for International Student Assessment [PISA] test series), individual, democratised access to these data sets and other information in an age of the information and communication technology revolution, and the power of the social media in constructing and disseminating post-truth, scholars (e.g. Sismondo, 2017; Strohmaier, 2014) have mooted Mode III knowledge production to refer to this individual, social-media supported knowledge construction and dissemination. Post-truth, as is evident in the politics and media reports of social life, has become a societal force with potential devastating consequences.

While neoliberalism and the creed of human rights are two forces working in different and occasionally opposite directions, they remain givens in the contemporary world. At the risk of being accused of naiveté, the following could be considered by education policymakers. The benefits of these two forces — free market forces creating affluence, and the ethical/moral framework offered by the creed of human rights — could be harnessed to ensure that Mode III knowledge production is not abused for producing post-truth with its potentially disastrous social consequences. It is suggested that the articles following hereafter be regarded as contributions to a discourse regarding the forming and equipping of the upcoming generations during the twenty-first century in the tension field created by the interaction of neoliberalism and the creed of human rights, while at the same time taking into account the potential pitfalls of Mode III knowledge production.

Authors' Contribution

This article is the outcome of the two authors' combined labour. Each author is responsible for 50 percent of the outcome.

Note

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