Schools as Social Enterprises: The Las Casas Report, Evidence-Based, and Neoliberal Policy Discourse*

Jude Chua Soo Meng  
Associate Professor, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore  
Visiting Academic, Institute of Education, London/Visiting Research Scholar, Blackfriars Hall, Oxford University

In Mutual Futures: Ed Balls, Michael Gove and the Challenge to Faith Schools (2009), Francis Davis and Nathan Koblitz lament how quite often in policy debates within Catholic circles secular considerations are undermined by religious theorists, or else theological considerations relevant to policy decisions are left to a few “enthusiastic individuals.” My response to this is not only to welcome secular and evidence-based thinking but also to highlight the dangers of excesses culminating in an idolatrous and performative obsession with numbers. In the context of thinking through the policy to create social enterprise school zones, I propose a model of educational discourse that welcomes the secular and scientific but at the same time is critically open to synthetic, overarching claims of the “true” and the “just” that are typical of religious grand narratives. I end with the suggestion that such kinds of educational discourse might be neoliberal and consider briefly the implications of applying this label in the light of current indiscriminate use of the label.

Introduction: The Blackfriars Las Casas Report

In 2009, Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families, Ed Balls, required the following from the English Catholic Dioceses, through various policies: 100 million GBP for compulsory buildings works, 20 million GBP per annum for insurance premiums, as well as possibly outflows of millions of pounds of assets from the faith sector should a faith school seek to relocate its assets to another faith school in a different local authority area.

This potentially lethal but nevertheless hidden series of taxation attacks by the Labour Government was picked up by Blackfriars Hall Fellow and the then-director of Blackfriars’ Las Casas Institute, Francis Davis (now UK ministerial
advisor on the “Big Society” and his coresearcher Nathan Koblintz. Their response came in a very forward-looking pamphlet, *Mutual Futures: Ed Balls, Michael Gove and the Challenge to Faith Schools*. Davis and Koblintz propose that Catholic faith schools in England (and Wales) be reorganized and remodeled after social enterprises. This involves, amongst other things, “reimagining educational institutions for new times” and the following:

the creation of a national Catholic educational mutual comprising of 22 mutual societies based in the Dioceses: an institutional development that will open up a huge vista for innovation and freedom within Catholic education. *The assets of all Catholic and other voluntary aided schools could be transferred into these mutuals in an asset transfer that is underpinned by secure long-term funding.*

Within this faith-based mutual, assets would be transferable anywhere within the national mutual’s area of benefit so long as the proceeds were being applied for educational purposes with a priority for those in the poorest neighbourhoods. If at any stage the asset was not to be used for education funds would be returned to the central state (with the Church proportion remaining in the mutual for Catholic educational purposes).

This mutual would lead the Catholic education sector and its priorities would be driven by inclusion, social innovation and the development of secondary school and primary school pyramids offering lifelong learning campuses. Complementary initiatives such as credit unions of “banks for the unbankable,” language training for migrants, businesses and social enterprise advice could also be housed within the resources of the mutual.

What is more is that the school campuses would be designated, as part of the proposals in the Conservative social justice commission as “social enterprise” zones or social silicon valleys forming local hubs from which new institutions could be launched or renewed.

By doing this, the financial woes facing these Catholic schools could be mitigated, and a great measure of financial stability could be achieved.

**Against Idol-Gazing**

I have elsewhere expressed my strong support for *Mutual Futures* but was concerned to ensure that its ideas would not be limited in its relevance to the United Kingdom context. So in “Reorganizing Schools as Social Enterprises: On Play Schools and Gifted Education,” I argue for the educational benefits besides the economic ones it highlights.

Further to supplying centrally educational reasons for its policy recommendations so that *Mutual Futures*’ progressive proposals can be abstracted from these taxation debates in the United Kingdom and borrowed by policy makers
Schools as Social Enterprises

internationally, there is also the question of its approach to policy thinking, which also interests me and that I now hope to address in this article. After all, the pamphlet is also forward looking at the level of discourse. It has steered clear of theological arguments and offers very pragmatic and secular considerations for its proposals. It is explicit in its intention to offer a model of engagement and discourse that secular parties in (often evidence-based) policy circles would be receptive toward.4 By no means, however, does the report think less of spiritual considerations for or against its proposals.5 Indeed it laments, and so regrets, how quite often in policy debates amongst Catholic circles there is an intellectual dualism: secular considerations (frequently concerned with the instrumental and technical) are undermined by theorists of a more otherworldly bent, or else theological and religious considerations relevant to policy decisions are left to a few “enthusiastic individuals.”6 Secular and spiritual warrants are not harmoniously integrated. In lamenting this problem, Davis and Koblitz hope to address it. Therefore, in a climate where theological discourse dominates, their secular considerations in Mutual Futures introduce important secular concepts and arguments to their hoped-for religious audience.7

However, in moving forward, there lies a danger in the opposite direction: Religious ideas and categories are displaced at the expense of promoting secular, evidence-based policy thinking and practice. This is something that Davis, I suspect, will want to avoid. There is some gesture in the Catholic scholarly community in the United Kingdom of an aspiration toward such secular and evidence-based work and thinking. Speaking of his recent founding of the International Studies in Catholic Education, Gerald Grace of the Centre for Research and Development in Catholic Education (CRDCE) at the Institute of Education (IoE), London, explains that there is a need to build up “a more systematic scholarly and research-based approach to Catholic education,” and evidence is a key idea in what he means by research. Grace writes,

The Catholic Church is a frequent target for … polemical attacks which are given considerable amplification by mass media agencies and journals. Catholic educational institutions it is claimed are characterized as indoctrination centres, marked by social exclusion and exclusivity, and institutional hypocrisy, and as having the effect of being deleterious to community and social cohesion. These claims are based, in general, upon ideological assertions and polemical arguments having no basis in reliable evidence. The need for a strongly developed field of scholarship and research from the international missions of Catholic education is very clear. This is not a case for developing research as a form of apologetics but rather as a resource for reliable evidence-based argument in the public arena.8
Any trend toward the naturalistic and scientifically rigorous must be welcomed, as should sensitivity to their limitations and excesses. Already within the educational research community, some have distanced themselves from the evidence-based movement. Fazal Rizvi and Bob Lingard, for instance, rather modestly prefer talk of evidence-informed policy and practice, acknowledging that political and normative judgments that may not count as evidence should have a role in policy formation aside from evidence. In the same breath, they recommend the broadening of what counts as evidence to include research along critical and qualitative lines, insinuating therefore that quantitative work that traditionally counted as evidence under the evidence-based movement may not be sufficiently insightful for policy thinking. The evidence-based project therefore shares the same embarrassing limitations as London’s Bradford Way School of philosophy of education popular in the 1950s and represented by R. S. Peters and Paul Hirst. Rizvi and Lingard find their detailed technical conceptual analysis of what teaching and other educational concepts to be too formal and universal to be applicable, and David Halpin finds it downright useless and frustratingly pointless, substituting in its place the imaginative but critical projections inspired by literary texts such as St. Thomas More’s *Utopia* or theological concepts such as St. Thomas Aquinas’s idea of hope. Perhaps then Catholics should not look too enviously at secular research paradigms to the neglect of our own religious discourses and intellectual offerings. This is particularly so when the experience of others suggests that evidence-envy narrows educational thinking, and when those who have been there are already looking elsewhere to supplement their own educational thinking and are looking, as it seems in Halpin’s case, right in Catholics’ own backyard.

There is another more worrying tendency in this trend toward evidence. One encounters excesses of the type that are labeled “policy as numbers,” which is the pervasive policy aim to achieve particular types of numbers, motivated perhaps by the Cartesian need for something “clear and distinct,” and ends up with what Jean-Luc Marion might describe as a kind of mirroring idol and, therefore, not at all open to sapiential truth’s disclosure. Here, while there is a presentation of something fully visible, these numerals become projected as exhaustive representations of reality and ultimate value when they are in fact nothing other than a constructed ontology constituted by our own deflecting obsessions, supported by and supporting forms of structural amnesia. In spite of the “evidential clarity,” we find in the forms of research that employ and yield numerical data and conclusions, reflective educational researchers will acknowledge that these will never capture all that is important or illuminating, and some may in fact be merely banal corroborations of common sense, a kind of empty empiricism—
Schools as Social Enterprises

quite a contrast with the philosophically critical thinking in faith that puts within our reach the substance of glorious things, though invisible. Ironically, rather than a display of scientific humility, investigators or institutions may boast of the long string of digits in the form of those million-dollar grants that fund their very costly work. This is not yet to mention the fact that in many quarters, the obsession with numbers takes on a life of its own, so that what matters is not even the numbers yielded by that piece of research operating as proxies for descriptive insights, but the number of times such a research is cited or the impact factor number of the journal in which it appears.

The scholarly culture at the end of such a trend is one of abominable idol-gazing: the performative obsession with what works to achieve distorted numerical indicators and forgetfully indifferent to questions of ultimate truth or justice. As a countercultural response, I offer the rapprochement model of engagement that celebrates the marriage of faith-based and secular thinking for educational policy analysis: fides et ratio. This article therefore develops extended policy considerations that showcase religious thinking that supports and relevantly connects with Mutual Futures original secular education policy analysis and its recommendation to organize schools into social enterprise zones. Furthermore, if educational policy is “an assemblage of values,”14 and the “allocation of such assembled values,”15 at least we should persevere in giving voice to those faith values and categories so that policy makers, who cannot do public policy in liberal democratic countries by ignoring these voiced values, will be compelled to “assemble, organize and order”16 them into their policy plans.

Seen from the point of view of discourses, this article is an argument on behalf of a particular kind of talk about school enterprise zones and of education more generally as much as it is an article that reflects on the substance of school enterprise zones in themselves. My argument is (1) an effort to offer an example of faith-based policy speech (oratio) that is open to metaphysical truth or that draws our attention to social justice issues and to (2) encourage such faith-based thinking by demonstrating their conceptual potential, at least in this instance.

Caveat: International Relevance and the Cardus Education Survey

As I have developed them, my reasons for supporting the organization of schools into social enterprise zones are ahistorical in the sense that they are not bound to the present historical situation. Although they support Davis and Koblintz’ arguments for the pragmatic need to reconceptualize schools into social enterprises, given the very specific historical context of having three massive taxations
stealthily imposed by Ed Balls, they are nonetheless detachable from the taxation debate in the United Kingdom. That being the case, my arguments are not to be construed as expressing support for any political party or an endorsement of a party’s associated policies in education or elsewhere. Most importantly, my recommendations in favor of social enterprise school zones can therefore be arguably generalized to secular and Catholic faith schools (where relevant) internationally.

For example, the configurations of schooling and curricula that highlight the relevance of religious concepts and practices discussed below may also interest those concerned with Christian education in the United States. According to the recent Cardus Education Survey on Christian schools in North America, led by David Sikkink of the University of Notre Dame, it was reported that unlike Protestant schools Catholic schools had the tendency to privilege academic achievements over spiritual formation. According to the report, “This research finds Catholic schools providing high quality intellectual development but at the expense of developing faith and commitment to religious practices in the graduates…. Catholic schools seem largely irrelevant, sometimes even counterproductive to the development of students’ faith.”17 The question was then put to administrators and educators as to what might be done to address this.18 As with the Cardus research, this article should also “catalyze conversations.”19 The discussions below suggest that religious concepts and practices warrant and sustain the mission of social enterprise school zones, implying the need to as well as opportunities for featuring related religious formation and practice for both students as well as for educational administrators. If pressed to do some radical “imagineering,”20 one should speculate whether intentionally promoting an organizational culture of social business entrepreneurship in US Christian schools among administrators and students could lead to a scenario that not only further frees those Christian schools that are struggling financially (thus enhancing their autonomy), but also generates opportunities for religious formation in a way that is not tangential to the students’ own academic formation and preparation for financial freedom as well as personal autonomy and religious liberty. Such religious formation would instead integrate seamlessly with the students’ secular formation, resulting in the development of a student who could possibly embrace a faith-based entrepreneurial mind-set after graduation if business becomes a profession of choice. He or she could also draw on this mind-set—indeed, this habitus—in order to inform his or her other profession of choice and consequent decisions and contributions in the public square. While this article will not develop this line of thought on behalf of the US educational scene, it is possible to extrapolate these ideas in the search for solutions.
The God Who Saves

In what follows I first explore the relevance of religious concepts for the theoretical coherence of the business model one labels as a “social enterprise.” The Las Casas Report, we recall, envisions social enterprises as a way in which schools can exist, and rightly so. The concept of a social enterprise—sometimes, a social business enterprise—is one that marries two rather distinct models of organizations. On the one hand is the profit-maximizing model of enterprise or business. On the other is a social charity, aimed at serving social goals but reliant on charitable funding. To borrow from Muhammed Yunus, one can offer a kind of integrated model—an organization that does well, by doing good. A social business enterprise is one that makes money but at the same time promotes social ends. This is no mere arbitrary concoction; there is good reason to consider why in principle organizations can be social businesses. A basic premise that is relevant here is that there is a plurality of unique choice-worthy goals; benefits are not defined by a singular unidimensional axiology. This is a point well grasped by behavioral and welfare economists as well as by ethicists. New classical natural-law theory, for instance, defends the thesis that the first principles of practical reason recognize at least seven incommensurable basic values—or basic goods—worth seeking: truth, life, friendship, aesthetics, skillful play, practical reasonableness, and religion. Against utilitarian models of decision making that irrationally weigh incomparable options and wrongly take as their point of departure a value monism, classical natural-law theory recognizes that there are many instances where a sound way forward requires an act of free choice before incommensurable possibilities. If money is an instrumental good, then it is something for choice, but it would be a mistake to disregard other forms of goals that are also goods as the possible goals of one’s actions. Given the various incommensurable goods worth choosing, organizations can be designed, redesigned, and allowed to evolve in such a manner that they promote a combination of goods as primary goals as they freely choose; there is in principle no one right way an organization should turn out. When one features bounded rationality’s inability to compute for the one best and most optimal means to achieve incomparably complex possible combinations of goals, one sees that there is need for free stylistic architectural choices insofar as the mission and vision of the organization is concerned. The only limits in this regard are what are impossible and practical (i.e., moral) norms that prescribe that one not be closed to the goods and that one not directly promote the evils (the opposites of the basic goods) or damage the common good, which are the conditions (e.g., rule of law) that are favorable to the achievement of the basic goods. Schools are also organizations. Understood in their focal and
important sense, schools would also have these characteristics in their “central case” and would be crafted in accordance with a sound grasp of which are valuable and how to deliberate among these valuable options. Like some business organizations that have profit-making as an aspect of their commitment, schools will be very much weighted in the direction of promoting teaching and learning in students, leading to the grasp of truthful facts, good grades, and so forth, and quantitatively measurable by performance indicators. However, like a social charity, other commitments can also justly be featured: promoting in students and staff a willingness to secure social justice, spiritual growth, capacities for the experience of the aesthetic, friendliness and tolerance, virtues supporting the harmonious integration of one’s desires and will, and so on. Put another way, there should be “an ethos of openness” toward the basic goods.

Now these warrants are not to be thought of as unconnected to debates of a nature that if not “religious” is at least a metaphysical nature. Thinking seriously about the foundational premises of what we have spoken about thus far, one sees that the whole discussion is built on a set of axiological norms that prescribe incommensurable goods that are (or are not) worth seeking and that ground the openness to these incommensurable basic goods. At the basis of these norms are the first principles of practical reason that natural-law theorists consider self-evidently true and normatively authoritative. Taking their normative authority seriously (as we ought to if we are to be reasonable) demands that we endorse at the same time certain theoretical corollaries and that we reject other incompatible propositions. Some of these corollaries and propositions have much to say about one’s metaphysical worldview. At the very least they contradict and are incompatible with particular metaphysical commitments that when ruled out leave us with an account of the world that one may describe as theistic, or at the least as deistic. A commitment to the substantive normativity of practical reason rules out worldviews that would allow for the arbitrary development of our moral epistemic capacities relevant to these normative precepts. Any (critical) precept whose genesis is arbitrary cannot in the final analysis have objective normative authority. Of these worldviews are atheistic ones in which our epistemic capacities relevant to these normative precepts developed and survived through natural selection after random mutation. The worldview that can possibly save the idea that the substantively normative practical reasons are reliable is one in which our moral epistemic capacities evolved under some form of guidance, rather than not arbitrarily. It would not be enough to stop there either; the guidance would need to be from some source that is itself of an invariant nature in all possible worlds and from eternity and, indeed, uncreated in order to rule out any kind of charge of arbitrariness. When such an uncreated eternal and invariant source is avail-
able, then there is just simply no other way its guidance might have occurred. There is logically no other possible way that that source could have been, nor ipso facto any other way its guidance might have occurred, and hence, the charge of arbitrariness in this context has no bite. If we could call this source God, then the worldview that would save the normative authority of practical reasons would be one in which God exists. There are other corollaries about God that would need to be affirmed, and some of these are: that God is existence (esse), that there is a real distinction between essence and existence (esse) in creatures, that God sustains creation with existence (esse), that each creature’s existence (esse) is limited by its essence, and that God’s existence (esse) is unreceived by any separate essential principle and is unlimited.

In sum, all these theistic (or at the very least, deistic) metaphysical commitments support and save, as an explanation would, these secular warrants for envisioning schools as social enterprises. It is important to recognize that this particular argument does not prove God’s existence; what it does is simply show that a belief in God is needed if we take our practical reasons seriously. It demonstrates the tight conceptual intimacy between a robust theory of entrepreneurial social caring and metaphysical speculation; love is bound up with truth. Conceptually such a social enterprise stands or falls to the extent that the associated theistic metaphysical worldview is defensible or not. In this respect, then, the ongoing studious defense of the very concept of schools as social enterprises demands research not only in the secular fields but also in the support of a contemplative research program on metaphysical and theological matters.

The Folly of the Cross

The contribution of religious studies does not end here. God-talk and religious thought should not merely support the theoretical coherence of envisioning schools as social enterprises. Religious ideas can also support the practical management of any social enterprise, not least of which are schools designed to operate as such.

Organizational theory often highlights the natural tendency in organizations toward exploitation. Exploitation here has no immoral connotation, but it rather refers to activity that is aimed at achieving known goals through repeating behaviors that experience suggests achieves those goals. In exploitation one thus copies successful models of behavior or else repeats traditional behaviors that have been effective. Given that in exploitation the goals and the means to achieve these goals are known, organizations avoid unproductive inefficiency through policies that identify indicators of success that correspond to these known
goals and means, and directing attention toward these indicators as target goals. Participants are rewarded or punished to the extent that they either achieve or fail to achieve these indicators. Such managerial strategies of evaluation and inspection, the *panopticon*, are described sometimes as policy technologies of reason because they cohere with consequentialist thinking—a dominant and influential paradigm of rationality. The belief is that participant activity will be coordinated and focused on fulfilling the best-practice means toward achieving the indicated targets. The result, however, is that while they do indeed engineer these desired behaviors, if they do, they also lead to a host of other side effects. Of these side effects is the performative obsession with indicators, either directly the result of or at the very least catalyzed by these managerial policy technologies of reason.

Corroborating this, Stephen J. Ball has highlighted, in a series of stimulating works, what he calls “the terrors of performativity” in schools and organizations as well as in society as a whole. At the core of the performative ethos is the obsession with fulfilling defined indicators that are usually measurable. Under the terrors of performativity, organizations are quite often blind to other goals that may be of value but that are not endorsed by the same indicators. At the same time, the terrors of performativity displace attitudes and vocational values and principles not captured and endorsed by the performative indicators. When performativity is totalizing, the epistemology of participants is colonized by the consuming desire to achieve these indicators to the neglect of and disregard for other values and goals.

Such damaging cognitive structures, when institutionalized, shift the educational organization away from its focal meaning or central case toward the periphery. These cognitions have been described as “unscientific designerly ways of thinking,” in the sense that they are unreasonably closed to what is reasonably possible when thinking in the “design mode.” Teachers, being professionals, operate predominantly in the design mode because a major concern of theirs is the artificial engineering of reality or of environments to arrive at a preferred state—that is, the design. The design-studies literature suggests by contrast that (good) designerly ways of thinking are not constrained to be linear or limited. Rather, good designerly thinking can be aware of and attentive to other goals or perhaps goals that may emerge in time. Attentiveness to these other or new goals broadens one’s repertoire of one’s sense of self—of who or what one thinks one is or can be.

Organizations concerned with exploitation sustain their exploitative feats with technologies of rationality, but all organizations if they are to adapt well to the challenges of their environments or to innovate in order to compete well in the markets need to *explore* new goals, ends, or products as well as new and better
ways of achieving these goals. The need to explore, and to stimulate exploration, is especially warranted for exploitative organizations where the terrors of performativity have a strong hold on members’ designerly cognition—if not to steer organizations toward the central case, then at least so that they can adapt well in their environments. With schools and educational institutions as a backdrop, I highlight the following scenarios, which are not exhaustive. Sometimes traditional goals that have been highlighted in the past and are all consuming under the terrors of performativity no longer satisfy current needs.

For example, schools that have established ways of achieving traditional performance indicators such as those captured by particular high-stakes exams may no longer serve relevant needs, especially when these primitive indicators and modes of evaluation no longer measure well the educational outcomes that matter in the very fluid and complex twenty-first century. Schools therefore need to explore new outcomes (i.e., new design goals), new ways to achieve these (i.e., new design means), and new forms of evaluation (or assessments). It is also possible that the terrors of performativity generate such a focus on those goals that other valuable achievements, central to participant well-being, are displaced. For example, teachers in England complain of the totalization of the performative ethos that breeds competitive Machiavellian teacher identities, instrumentalizing all forms of social relationships and cancelling spaces for a professionalism inspired by vocational values that desires to truly serve student and collegial welfare without any hidden agendas; for example, those aimed at the promiscuous fabrication of selves that draw on whatever discourses and indicators are in vogue. Here schools need to find ways to open up social spaces where such vocational values can survive and where a more fluid, a more constructive, and a less narrow concept of the professional self can thrive and grow.

Engineering behaviors that explore new goals and means—that is, introducing new preferences and hence changing dominant preferences—to unsettle (cross) the terrors of performativity and its side effects is not always welcome because exploitation, by its very nature being risk averse and keen to repeat current models of success, cancels out exploration. Therefore, it becomes necessary to artificially stimulate exploratory modes of thinking. Exploration appears foolish because unlike exploitation that promotes what one already prefers (means and end), exploration recommends that you consider that which you might currently not prefer. Policies that artificially engineer exploration are hence suitably labeled policy technologies of foolishness because these promote doing something before you know it is good for you or are convinced that it is desirable to “leap before you think.” Yet their contribution is that they expand members’ cognitive
boundaries and expose members to new logics (including those prescribing new means and new goals) that were otherwise not available to them.

One such policy technology of foolishness is the toleration of hypocrisy, and treating hypocritical pretentions as transitional. Under this policy, leaders who make good sounding speeches celebrating noble values but have not always had a track record of promoting these noble values are not always ashamed. This merely drives up their defenses further, and they are encouraged to be hypocritical if only because of the possibility that they are experimenting with being good and with the hope that their own self-induced exposure to these good reasons in their speeches would lead to cognitive conversion. With some modification, the policy technology of foolishness that tolerates another’s own self-induced hypocritical experimentation can be further redesigned to actively stimulate in others transitional hypocrisy, such as through pedagogical tools that when applied help members think through another person’s cognitive lenses, whether that person be real or fictional, in order to expose members to new logics. James March (with Theirry Weil) encourages the reading of Cervante’s *Don Quixote de la Mancha* in his classes at Stanford University. The pedagogical strategy is to generate the exploratory occasioning of an awareness of an alternative mode of thinking, which March has labeled “the logic of appropriateness,” in contrast to the dominant logic of consequentialism:

Quixote provides another basis for action—his sense of himself and his identity and the obligations associated with it—a logic of appropriateness. Don Quixote creates a world in which he can live the life he considers appropriate. He draws sustenance from its correspondence with his ideals, without worrying about its consequences. He substitutes the logic of identity for a logic of reality: “I am a knight, and I shall die a knight, if it so pleases the Most High.”

The logic of appropriateness, or of identity, grasps deontological rules associated with a sense of who or what one is or what one aims to be, and such rules need to be obeyed come what may. One’s merit and sense of joyful achievement derives not from the utilitarian consequences of one’s actions but from the correspondence of one’s action with an exemplar.

Broadly, Christian spirituality quite often draws its moral logic from the following of Christ, who is God: his person, his ideals, and his ways. For example, in the history of the Order of Preachers (Dominicans) one reads of Bartolomé De Las Casas “thinking through Christ” and drawing on those reflections relevant reasons to oppose the conversion of the Indians through violent coercion. Gustavo Gutiérrez explains that for Las Casas,
this was no mere question of pastoral strategy. A peaceful evangelization is
dictated by the very content of the message to be preached. If the message is
life, then the means may not be death. The image of the “Father of mercies,”
Jesus’ divine Parent, would be obliterated. Coercion in evangelization makes
God appear as “a violent, wicked tyrant,” who approves of all the harassments
and injustices perpetuated by self-styled believers.56

The dominant line of thought here is not what, from the point of view of pro-
ducing desirable consequences, works or performs but rather what Christ would
have done: “The source and model must be Jesus. After all, ‘he was the first to
do and perform himself whatever he taught and commanded his apostles.’”57
Consistent with this logic of appropriateness, religious orders often either drew
from a life (vita) to inform their rule (regula), or were very interested in craft-
ing an appropriate life for their founder when such was missing, from which
their members would later draw inspiration for their own formation.58 In sum,
it appears quite clear that Christian religious and spiritual writings—not least
those celebrated in liturgy and sung in choir—offer much material for exploring
a logic of appropriateness, containing the terrors of performativity, broadening
our grasp of what truly matters, and raising our consciousness about possible
injustices—all beneficial for how we might better deliberate our policies and
choices. For leaders and participants of professional institutions operating in
design mode on a frequent basis, regular readings (lectio) of such spiritual works,
or crafting of speeches (oratio) expressing such high-minded ideals exposes one
to insights, possibly valuable ends, and perspectives that the terrors of perfor-
mativity conveniently displace, thus repairing blind spots and stunted designerly
ways of thinking and knowing.

“Neoliberal” Policy Discourse:
Thinking Education through Economics

What can we call this line of thought in education policy? Is there a convenient
label with which to characterize policy that engages economic concepts, goals,
and realities and welcomes, over and above the scientistically quantitative, the
contribution of ethically and metaphysically robust narratives and discourses?

One possibility is to refer to it as neoliberal educational policy thinking. Samuel
 Gregg recently produced a study of the economist Wilhelm Röpke. In that work,
Wilhelm Röpke’s Political Economy, followed by another piece in the Harvard
Journal of Law and Public Policy, Gregg details Röpke’s brand (or perhaps,
as Gregg helpfully reveals, “rebranding”) of neoliberal economics through his
struggle with scientism in the field and rejection of economics conceived merely as a positivistic enterprise in favor of a concept of economics that includes the normative or ethical and his willingness to draw on ideas outside of economics proper—and yes, even from religious sources. Gregg reveals in Röpke’s neoliberal economics his acknowledgement of the Christian belief in man’s sharing of the likeness of God and for that reason of man’s having a certain inviolable dignity, which economic theory must seek to protect and respect. For Röpke, one respects such dignity by engineering environments in which man may be free from undue coercion that may repress the development of his personality and his autonomy informed by reason. This for Röpke was doubtless achieved through a free market economy. A free market displaces the intrusive (soft) despotism of socialism, which robs man bye and bye of the fervor of creative enterprise and of the practically reasonable desire to form associations for mutual aid, as well as those moral habits that sustain these associations. The goal was not to promote the free market for the market’s sake nor even for mammon’s sake but to see in the free market a kind of social architecture that would engineer incentives to choose and act freely in such a way that would befit the human being whose dignity is of a person made in God’s image. In the light of Gregg’s study of Röpke, therefore, the adoption of the neoliberal label seems fitting.

However, this is a label that needs to be continuously and urgently reclaimed. For many in education, neoliberalism represents their accepting in policy thinking a certain kind of free-market perspective that promotes open competition with strong accountability that breeds the performative obsession, with indicators, that has led to a host of related consequences such as the fabrication of identities and inauthenticity in the educational system from leadership down to the classroom teacher. In short, there is an aversion to thinking about education through economic categories. A recent caricature of neoliberalism by Dave Hill and Ravi Kumar reads:

For neoliberals, “profit is God,” not the public good. Capitalism is not kind. Plutocrats are not, essentially, philanthropic. In capitalism it is the insatiable demand for profit that is the motor for policy, not public or social or common weal, or good. With great power comes great responsibility. Thus privatized utilities such as the railway system, health and education services, and water supplies are run to maximize shareholder’s profits, rather than to provide a public service and sustainable development of third-world national economic integrity and growth. These are not on the agenda of globalizing neoliberal capital.
Further, neoliberalism’s semiotic association with the beliefs of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) is not helpful. Hill and Kumar, for instance, write of the OECD’s generating and disseminating a capitalist/neoliberal “business agenda for schools,” and, though in themselves scholarly and stimulatingly insightful, studies by Rizvi and Lingard on the OECD also speak of its promotion of neoliberal principles. Therefore the OECD’s now neoliberal harm continues to be reiterated, most recently by Ball in his otherwise excellent piece despairing of the effects of performativity and managerialism.

Of course, what educational theorists have to say about neoliberalism seems very curious if one takes into account Gregg’s study of Röpke’s neoliberalism, which is in main a counterexample to their characterization of what their neoliberalism stands for; here in the neoliberalism of Röpke is the concern for human dignity and the freedom that befits that dignity, all of which is in stark contrast to what educational sociologists collect under the phrase neoliberal discourse. Indeed what educational sociologists the likes of Ball seem to prefer (but never for their descriptive neutrality quite clearly say)—the importance of human autonomy and authenticity, namely, the opportunity for free choices—almost appears to be something that could be consistent with Röpke’s neoliberal concern for human dignity.

Therefore the neoliberal label covers a broad spectrum. The indiscriminate use of the blanket phrase in educational policy analysis obscures the fact that under that label’s umbrella are those educational policy thinkers who may simply be so called because what they welcome are analogous to the operations of particular forms of free-market scenarios in the economic realm: open competition and accountability measured by indicators that are ordered toward economic goals narrowly conceived. Such family resemblance talk of neoliberalisms’ appeal merely to some superficial similarities among the compared analogues also obscures the fact that there can be drastic differences between them. Such differences include, for instance, the principled concern to protect and respect human dignity, which we find in Röpke but not in other versions of neoliberalism. We might find in some neoliberalisms but not in others a notion of freedom cashed out in terms of the capacity in self-mastery to follow through with the moral dictates of the natural law, and an account of human anthropology open to a plurality of incommensurable basic goods in contrast to the belief in the narrowly self-interested, unbridled agent lacking civility and self-restraint.

There may well be a strawman neoliberalism at the periphery, but the neoliberalism that is valued as a core idea, in its central case, or as a focal meaning, is that which would find ways of freeing the human being from various structures that disrespect his immense dignity, whether this is debilitating poverty or the
narrowing of the speculative and practical intellect, as ongoing scholarship suggests. Rather than slavishly reproduce such usage, the neoliberal label ought to be employed discriminately, informed by an understanding of economic history that tells of the spectrum of ideas that can come under that label, directing readers away from concepts in the periphery toward those at the core.

However, I am not at all optimistic that any of this will happen soon, given the pressure to conform and publish in specific “premier” educational journals. The perception is that these journals and their editors, who themselves perpetuate such indiscriminate use, will not likely find these deviations or discriminations intelligible. Indeed for this very reason, the dynamics of educational academia often is itself the illiberal source not only of the narrowing of the mind but also of moments of fabrication. With the continuously unqualified use of the neoliberal label and the semiosis that unfortunately results from such conventions reinforced, on the one hand, educational theorists will continue to turn our sights away from what that representamen could otherwise signify by deflecting attention away from traditions of thinking that legitimately carry that label. On the other hand, they will continue, in this respect, to conspire toward the narrowing of the mind that true neoliberalism must also address or oppose. In other words, the very effects criticized as consequences of the (pseudo and peripheral) neoliberal are ironically perpetuated even by the platforms that highlight it.

Therefore, the neoliberal label will need to be reclaimed from outside orthodox educational theory in publication avenues and disciplinary forums, unfamiliar to educationists, where there is greater freedom to distinguish and develop a semiotically more precise notion of neoliberal educational discourse that is attentive to human dignity and not averse to economic and business concepts and models.

Further Research: Radical Orthodoxy

To summarize, I argued that the notion of social enterprise school zones is supported conceptually by a theistic metaphysics and also that religious ideas can help balance exploitative tendencies in the management of such social enterprise school zones. I also suggested the need to reclaim the neoliberal label for this way of thinking about educational and economic realities. What else is needed for this debate, or how could it further develop?

I suggest that there is room to develop ideas approaching those of “radical orthodoxy.” In whichever camp one finds oneself, much of educational theory (including critical educational theory’s attempt toward a radical critique of neoliberal orthodoxies and even if at some point its theorists distinguish the different neoliberalisms) is still wrapped in the cloak of unradical and pseudo-
orthodox “secular social sciences.” Such a secularism is embarrassed by and totally eschews religious questions and themes and undermines any attempt to appreciate faith-based discourses. Ironically there may really be no such thing as a secular social science, and it could ultimately be from such pretentiously secular social sciences that we need to free ourselves altogether. I end with a reminder by Simon Oliver (referencing John Milbank):

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\text{[T]he secular is not simply that which is left behind once we have rid ourselves of religion and theology. The secular view holds its own assumptions and prejudices concerning human society and nature which are no more objective or justifiable than those of the ancient medieval philosophers and theologians. If Milbank’s crucial point is that the secular is not simply the rolling back of a theological consensus to reveal a neutral territory where we all become equal players, but the replacement of a certain view of God and creation with a different view which still makes theological claims, that is, claims about origins, purpose and transcendence. The problem is that this “mock-theology” or “pseudo-theology” is bad theology. Secularism is, quite literally, a Christian heresy—an ideological distortion of theology.}^{68}
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This suggests that if the secular social science—critical, or neoliberal—is no more and no less than (bad) theology, then our aspiration ought to be to think about education through more reliable theological categories, but nonetheless, still \textit{theologically} and hence “social scientifically.”\textsuperscript{69} For the moment, \textit{theological} thinking about education lags behind secular social-scientific studies of education. Celebrating the Christian theological tradition and drawing on its offerings for educational-economic thinking (or what is synonymous, doing “neoliberal” policy analysis) is also another of the Catholic educational research community’s tasks for the future.
Notes

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2. Davis and Koblintz, *Mutual Futures*, 11, emphasis mine. Davis and Koblintz also give a handful of examples of Christian social innovation in Appendix A that are useful for further researching how these are organized, owned, and managed, at whose financial risk, and how some of these operations might be borrowed or adapted to social enterprise school zones. The details of its operations will need to be further worked out in context but are beyond the scope of the present article. I thank John Finnis nonetheless for pressing me for some of these concrete details.


13. Like Lingard, my criticism is not of quantitative research methods but rather of the unreflective misuse of such research conclusions. See Lingard, “Policy as Numbers,” 355–82.


26. As Yunus himself said, human beings are multidimensional and immensely colorful—by that he meant that human action could be motivated by an ordering toward the promotion of so many other kinds of goods besides the promotion of wealth. Yunus, “Social Business Entrepreneurs,” 39–44.


38. Given that many of the metaphysical commitments above parallel or cohere with important axioms under Thomism traditionally conceived, the study of classical Thomism and the defense of the twenty-four Thomistic theses would have much relevance, while at the same time, such a research program would be constantly open to new philosophical and theological developments outside of Thomism if it is not to be stagnant.


45. Meng, “Saving the Teacher’s Soul,” 159–67.


58. See John Van Engen, “Dominic and the Brothers: *Vitae* as Life-forming *exempla* in the Order of Preachers,” in *Christ Among the Medieval Dominicans*, ed. Kent


