



# The weak human and the saving grace of the welfare state: German pupils' perception of future social change and drivers of change



Johan Nordensvärd\*

*London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), Department of Social Policy, Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE, United Kingdom*

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## ABSTRACT

Social change has often been seen as a desired goal of critical pedagogy. Interestingly; there is little research about how pupils in Germany perceive the concept of social change and what drives social change. This article presents the outcome of a three year long research project that aimed to analyse how a sample of German pupils makes sense of social change and what forces drive social change in society through future narratives (written assignments and interviews). The study finds that pupils have an implicit and explicit understanding of politics and the state as a driving force, but that this is challenged by external drivers such as the global economy/technology and internal drivers such as human self-interest/egoism and insecurity/fear. In this study, the pupils often describe the present economy as being organised and the future economy to become more and more disorganised. Using future narratives in critical pedagogy can be a way to work more closely with the students and their perceptions of social change and drivers of change.

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## 1. Introduction

Social change has often been seen as a desired goal of critical pedagogy. Jara suggests that education should help pupils to become agents of social change and enforce an ethical and emancipating rationality [30]. Freire argues that humans are not passive spectators of history, but they interact with the social world to change it [14]. Education is often understood in critical pedagogy as an opportunity to develop political alternatives to contemporary society and predominant discourses. According to Giroux, one of the most important aspects of education is to give pupils the possibility to “imagine different futures” [18]. Achieving social change is a goal of critical pedagogy and Freire argues it “is not a call to armchair revolution – true reflection – leads to action . . . an authentic praxis” [15]. Social change is therefore seen as one of the most important aspects of critical pedagogy. Interestingly, there is relative little research about how German pupils perceive the concept of social change and what drives social change. This paper suggests that if we want pupils to become agents of social change there is a need to analyse how pupils make sense of social change and how they understand the drivers of social change.

This article aims to use future narratives as a way to research how young people make sense of social change and drivers of change. One could argue that such a method focused on social change could create an education that is more engaged with how pupils make sense of the social world they experience, as well as their fears and dreams. Kellner suggests that critical pedagogy should not only critically evaluate the contemporary neo-liberal social order with regard to education (increased

\* Tel.: +44 0 20 79557364.

E-mail address: [j.o.nordensvard@lse.ac.uk](mailto:j.o.nordensvard@lse.ac.uk).

focus on testing and standardisation), but it should propose alternative practices [33]. Such an approach could play an important part in closing the gap between “experts’ conceptions and the life worlds of the pupils’ and it could thereby take into account “the novel life conditions, subjectivities and identities of youth” in school curricula and teaching subjects [33].

Young peoples’ views of the future have however been elaborated within the field of futures in education. A focus in this research has been to analyse how images of the future reflect pupils’ overall outlook of the future [10–12,19,24,25,32,47]. Much of the research has been discerning preferable and non-preferable futures and analysing the relationship between the story (what kind of future) and storyteller (age, gender, nationality, religion, culture) [16]. Hicks argues that the mainstream understanding of futures and drivers of change has been linked up to neo-liberal discourse. “What educational interest there is tends to be in the form of tacit or taken-for-granted futures since mainstream education sees the most important drivers of change as the knowledge economy and future developments in technology” [26].

Hicks mentions the Beyond Current Horizons programme that explored “the socio-technological developments likely to shape the future and the subsequent challenges this will pose for education” [12, p. 9]. He argues that this study dismissed the thought that young people should be “taught to think creatively and critically about the future” and that education was portrayed to “merely responds to extrapolated socio-technological demands” [26]. Hicks argues that education “always reflects the values of the dominant political ideology which in the West is that of neoliberalism” which “advocates an unfettered technocentric and business-as-usual future based on free market economics, constant consumerism and narcissistic individualism. This ideology is inevitably reproduced in schools and underpins most western views of the future” [26].

The starting point of this article is the aim to analyse how young people make sense of social change/drivers of change. This article presents the outcome of a three year long research project that aimed to analyse how a sample of German pupils in the subject of Politics makes sense of social change and what forces drive social change in society. The study was performed in three classes (12th/13th grade) at two different Gymnasiums (equivalent to High Schools in the US or Grammar Schools in the UK) in the subject Politics from the city of Oldenburg in Lower Saxony in Germany. The pupils were aged between 17 and 19 years; the sample size was 52 pupils. The study worked with future narratives as a framework where pupils understand the future as a narrative which is driven by actors and forces that change society in a particular way.

The outcomes of this study suggest that pupils have an implicit and explicit understanding of politics and the state as a driving force, but that this is challenged by external drivers such as the economy and internal drivers such as human self-interest/egoism and insecurity/fear. The pupils have a general perception that there is a correlation between human nature and the nature of the economic globalisation that weakens the individual but also the state and society. Some pupils argue that economic globalisation and/or political failure will lead to the dismantling of the welfare state and that the insecurity of the labour market and the lack of the welfare state will make citizens too fearful to participate in social movements and labour unions. Many pupils are concerned that the state is colluding with the interests of the economy.

This study suggests that we should understand the pupils’ future narratives through the theoretical framework of Lash and Urry that depicts a transition from an organised economy to a disorganised economy. In this study, the pupils often describe the present economy as being organised and the future economy to become more and more disorganised. The pupils describe most of their future as an extreme version of a global disorganised capitalism, however many pupils wish that a presumed organised capitalism steered by the Germany state would carry on. Apart from some pupils like Julius most other pupils in the sample would prefer what the organised capitalism and the Keynesian economic model would stand for. This highlights an interesting ambiguous and partly nostalgic view on both the state, civil society and the economy.

Section 2 discusses the conceptual framework and the case study, Section 3 presents the empirical results of the study, Section 4 discusses the findings and Section 5 presents the conclusions, suggestions for further research and practical use of future narratives in critical pedagogy.

## 2. Conceptual framework and case study

### 2.1. Conceptual framework

This section will elaborate the conceptual framework, key definitions and the method used for this study. The key focus of the paper is to link critical pedagogy to the analysis of young people’s future narratives.

Education is often defined as the activities of educating or instructing; activities that impart knowledge or skill on the side of the teacher and “knowledge acquired by learning and instruction” on the side of the learner [41]. Education involves the profession of teaching as well as schools as prime institutions for teaching and learning. Such definition neglects a more political and critical aim of education. This becomes even clearer when we talk about a subject such as civic education. There is little consensus of the content of civic education in Germany since some argue that the focus should be on defining and delivering core “content” (triad of polity, politics and policy and the analysis of policy cycles) whereas other focus on “competencies”/“skills” which focus more on political skills such as making political judgments or being competent democratic citizens (compare [35,3,27]). There is also a lack of consensus about which function citizenship education should have. According to Sander we can talk about three different functions of civic education:

1. Education should create legitimacy of rule (Herrschaftslegitimation) and protect an existing social and political order from critique.

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