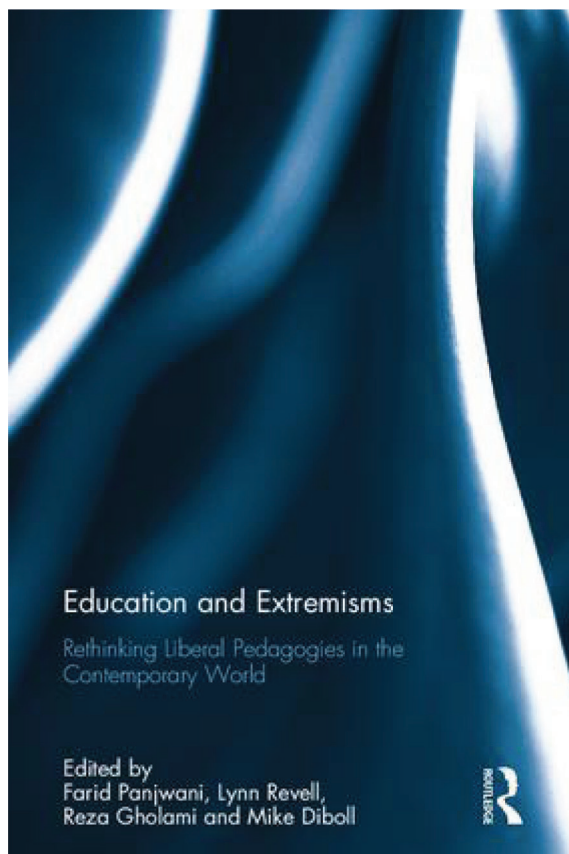# Book review

Helen Haste* – *Harvard Graduate School of Education, USA and University of Bath, UK*

Education and Extremisms: Rethinking liberal pedagogies in the contemporary world, edited by Farid Panjwani, Lynn Revell, Reza Gholami and Mike Diboll

The last few years have jolted us into an awareness that the comfortable trajectory of increased liberalism, tolerance, respect and multiculturalism might not be progressing quite as we thought and hoped. Educational agendas have been predicated on this assumed path. However, the religious and political radicalization of apparently well-educated, well-socialized British (and other) minority youth has sharply disrupted this. Extremism, often attributed to deriving from the same social and psychological processes as radicalization, has become more visible among disaffected minority youth and been validated increasingly through social media.

The British government reaction has been defensive: securitization, protection and programmes have been designed for 'prevention'. The unfortunate worthy but vague concept of 'fundamental British values' immediately marginalizes and 'others' people who seem to not subscribe to these values. There is, however, nothing exclusively British about these values, but labelling them as such immediately polarizes. The rhetoric of 'prevent' itself hangs on problematic terms like 'terrorism' and 'extremism'. The challenge is to find terminology that more adequately accounts for the troubling aspects of these developments and to find educational agendas that do not polarize by simply asserting a counter-narrative which does nothing to deal effectively with the issues.

This volume brings together a number of insightful papers which try to address these questions. However, although several papers do mention right-wing extremism and its antecedents, the majority deal with issues around Islam, including stereotypical responses from the public to the Muslim community and to the spectre of ISIS, as well as government discourses. Papers also address the Muslim community's responses to what is perceived as a deep-seated suspicion of Islam, latent also within the discourse of 'fundamental British values'. Some papers are case studies of different societies where Islam is the dominant faith (such as Pakistan and Nigeria). These provide insights into different ways in which faith intersects with cultural norms and narratives of social order.

The role of education is presented as problematic throughout the volume. On the one hand, the evidence indicates that many of those who become 'radicalized' (whether in politics or religion) are highly educated. So what makes them vulnerable to extremism? One suggestion is that a high level of education holds the promise of a good material and social lifestyle. Where an aspiration gap exists, for example in conditions of high unemployment, this can generate dissatisfaction and blaming. For less educated people, this blaming is likely to focus on concrete individuals or specific groups. For the highly educated, that cause may be located in political structures or in grand-scale conspiracies in the hands of powerful political or ethnic groups who then become a target of large-scale symbolic action – a 'misplaced utopia'. Panjwani and Khimani (Chapter 5) argue that this may be the case in Pakistan.

A second feature of education which may be problematic in Western cultures, but especially in France and the UK, is the liberal secular emphasis on pluralistic narratives and downplaying the authority of a single source. These are the primary tenets of liberal education designed to foster critical thinking, open-mindedness and respect for diversity. However, extremism (both political and religious) appeals precisely because it is not ambiguous; it relies on authority of fact or text and it offers simple explanations, solutions – and enemies. Slater's analysis (Chapter 6) of religious orthodoxy demonstrates why liberal counter-narratives will probably not work against religious extremism. (The comparison with political extremism is tempting but we should be cautious.) The core features of authoritarian extremism are the unquestioned power of key figures in the social structure, in the textual sources and in the kinds of discourses offered within the text.

According to Slater there are four elements of religious authority that are reflected in the forms of traditional Islam that attract radicalization, which can be also found in other belief systems and domains. The four elements are the linear transmission of authority, a static conception of systems as unchanging, a strong focus on text and orthodoxy (which may be manifested as 'fact' in non-religious contexts) and the linking of the authority of leaders to the text. There is also a lack of historicity: texts are not considered within a historically sensitive context; they have singularity, timelessness

and universality. The key point about these elements is that they are accepted as manifestations of authority, fact and singular (or absolute) truth. There is no space for alternative narratives because there is no alternative authority strong enough, or clear enough, to counter them. Liberalism fails immediately as a counterweight because it both rejects singular authority and embraces pluralism. Yet at the same time, Slater argues, liberals do proclaim the superiority of the secular position, even while refusing to take sides within disputes among denominations on the basis of the principle of pluralism.

The two aspects of the question therefore pose challenges for education that are not met simply by applying a secular hegemony. Critical thinking needs to be interpreted in a way that creatively meets the relevant perspectives and engages with them. The authors of several chapters offer dimensions of this. Diboll (Chapter 11), for example, argues that support for ISIS in the UK is a form of counter-cultural resistance that could be challenged by making transparent the 'multiplicity-within-unity' of extremism, and enabling those vulnerable to radicalization actually to creatively address complex issues of identity. Marsden (Chapter 12) argues for purveying an ethic of care and relationship, recognizing moral interdependence and reciprocity rather than overemphasizing individualistic agency. Marsden also cites Lynn Davies who argues that tolerance and respect are not helpful concepts because they imply the superiority of those who 'tolerate' others or 'respect' those whose difference may imply inferiority. Instead what is needed is a deeper appreciation of plurality founded around human rights, identity, care and relationship.

Bowie (Chapter 14) also critiques tolerance as a strategy because it implies unequal relationships. Tolerance can also be basically passive and may not even engage with challenging extremism. He notes that tolerance is rather like hospitality – conditional and existing within boundaries set by the host. The goal, he argues, needs to be education for pragmatic peaceful co-existence, driven by active respect that also involves both appreciation of moral and civic functions, and of the critical dissonances and complexities within diversity. Self-critical reflexivity is a core element of this.

Gholami (Chapter 16) argues for cosmopolitanism rather than globalization. Cosmopolitanism involves reflecting upon one's experience of otherness: 'a cosmopolitan social ethic requires individuals to be open to and continually have "experiences of otherness" even fleeting ones as a given part of their daily living – signalling a new type of public consciousness' (p. 230). In particular, core to cosmopolitanism is recognizing obligations beyond one's own group.

This is a wide-ranging volume of papers that tries to embrace and address the many challenges currently facing societies who may fear that multicultural strategies are not effective enough. The papers provide rich evidence, and often original analyses, of difficult ideas, many of which are quite uncomfortable. The chapter by Gholami is particularly useful in drawing many strands together. Overall, this is a very useful collection on a timely topic that needs in-depth thinking and informed strategizing.