

Chapter 4

Solving the Wicked Problems of the Anthropocene

Karl Marx's Paradigm and Australian Educational Research

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ABSTRACT

As a research paradigm, Marx's insights can be used to grapple with the 'wicked problem' of the Anthropocene: to explain the current crisis; judge the various scholarly representations of it; and point towards a transcendence of the 'problem'. In the same vein, this chapter seeks to provide a Marxist paradigm for educational research in the era of the Anthropocene. The chapter thus identifies two 'wicked problems' and suggests solutions: firstly, the urgent need for a robust and plausible paradigm for programs of educational research seeking to discover, analyse and understand the dynamics of the Anthropocene from the micro-political to the macro-political, which Marx's paradigm provides; secondly, a guide to the type of action needed to make educational institutions democratic and sustainable and part of the solution to the 'wicked problem' of the Anthropocene, rather than sites that reproduce a workforce ready to be exploited and oppressed, which Marx's paradigm also provides.

INTRODUCTION: THE TWO "WICKED PROBLEMS" OF THE ANTHROPOCENE

This chapter falls into five sections. After identifying the scope of each section, a conceptualising of the Anthropocene is provided in the introduction. That conceptualisation adopts the conclusion offered by several Marxist ecologists that

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the Anthropocene itself is today's most 'wicked problem'. The case is made that to overcome the Anthropocene two immediate wicked problems present themselves to educational researchers: the need for a robust and plausible research paradigm; and the need for a guide to the type of action that can make educational institutions democratic and sustainable and part of the solution. This chapter contends that Karl Marx's paradigm provides a solution to both these research 'problems'.

The second section briefly makes a case for Marxism as a powerful source of critique. Its power is that it continues to provoke uneasiness amongst those its analysis targets, which has always been one of the paradigm's intentions. A media commentator's hostility towards a school's acceptance of cultural diversity – the school's actions are considered tantamount to a 'neo-Marxist' conspiracy of teachers and teacher educators – reveals that at least for one powerful media outlet the fear of Marxist influence in educational provision is never far from the surface.

Following this, the chapter's most substantial section, entitled 'Part One: Karl Marx's paradigm', undertakes a review and exposition of the basic assumptions of Karl Marx's (and Frederick Engels's) methodological paradigm. Four basic assumptions of Marx's paradigm are uncovered: materialism, humanism, historicism, and class struggle. In the next section, entitled 'The form and purpose of Marxist educational research', these four assumptions are reformulated as four points for applying a Marxist paradigm to educational research.

Finally, 'Part Two: 40 years of Marxist paradigms in Australian educational research' provides a brief and very selective history of 40 years of Marxism's application in Australian educational research, referring to authors such as Bowles and Gintis, Harris, R.W. Connell, Kalantzis and Cope, Raduntz, McQueen and Poynting, and Banfield.

Conceptualising the Anthropocene

Marxist scholars such as John Bellamy Foster, Paul Burkett, Ian Angus, Brett Clark and Richard York, amongst others, have argued that we are living in an epoch of potentially terminal ecological crisis. For them, there is no greater 'wicked problem' than the widening rift of 'unequal ecological exchange' between humans and nature. For them, there is an increasing disjuncture between our particular 'social metabolism and the universal metabolism of nature' (Foster 2016, p. 400)¹. They call this new and dangerous epoch the Anthropocene. It is defined as the period during which human activity has become a global biogeochemical force: our activities – production and consumption most centrally – are now the dominant influence on the biosphere, including the climate and all environments. These scholars have demonstrated two complementary approaches to solving this 'wicked problem': a recovery and application to human-environmental relations of Marx's methodological

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