

Having situated themselves as occasional visitors who will only speak nearby, Strong-Boag and Gerson do not permit themselves to connect on a visceral level with Johnson, to explore that connection and share it. Yes, they are Euro-Canadian academics, but they are also human beings endowed with an imagination and with the ability to empathize with someone from a different era and from a different background. Mixed metaphors notwithstanding, they have – indeed, we all have – the ability to walk a mile in someone else’s shoes and, in the process, to get to know that person under the skin.

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Alison Taylor. *The Politics of Educational Reform in Alberta*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001. Pp. 400.

I read this fine book against the backdrop of the latest crisis around education restructuring in Ontario. The Conservative government seized control of three of the province’s largest school boards to enforce spending cuts in line with the centralized funding formula. These boards were the most recent site of resistance in the ongoing struggle around education reform in Ontario since 1995, when the Conservatives were first elected. Alison Taylor’s book provides important tools to help understand these struggles. This book offers powerful generalizations about contemporary education reform strategies that are grounded in the rich and detailed examination of a case study: the implementation of education reform in the early years of the Klein government in Alberta, 1993-95. The Klein government played an important pioneering role in the development of the right-wing education reform agenda in Canada.

Perhaps this book’s greatest single contribution is that it shows the logic of the right-wing education reform agenda. It is tempting, when governments do things that do not make sense from one’s own perspective, to suggest that they are simply making mistakes that will be set right after the next election. This book does not give in to that temptation. Rather, it reveals the rationality of the Klein education reform agenda, showing it as a deliberate strategy

to remake education policy in the face of ongoing resistance. The remaking of educational policy necessarily involves the destruction of the previously existing framework as well as the development of a new one. Taylor examines this process of destruction and remaking through the lens of a Gramscian understanding of hegemony as developed by writers associated with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Britain. Hegemony is a strategy for ruling in which the dominant groups in a situation of structural inequality attempt to win the consent of the dominated in conditions of ongoing contestation. No hegemonic strategy can succeed in establishing permanent consent in the face of changing realities and the continuing potential for opposition. Rather, consent moves through a series of "settlements," periods in which a particular policy framework obtains a significant degree of consent from the dominated. These settlements can be challenged from below, when the dominated begin to contest the conditions of their subordination, or from above, when the powerful decide that it is too costly to keep up their side of the deal.

The Klein government in Alberta challenged the existing educational settlement from above, at a time when it still had considerable resonance from below. This was a somewhat messy process. The powerful, particularly in this case business-people and government policy-makers, decided to transform dramatically the terms of an educational settlement that was no longer satisfactory from their perspective. This meant developing a new policy framework that could both draw on certain forms of dissatisfaction from below and represent the new educational goals of the powerful.

The necessary element of destruction in this kind of change might appear irrational to people who have consented, at least in some partial way, to the already existing settlement. The settlement actually worked in that it obtained some degree of consent from many of the key constituencies involved by meeting, at least in some limited way, some of their needs. In this context, it is no simple matter to develop a new settlement from above. It requires a careful process of harvesting and accumulating the real dissatisfactions with the existing settlement and then developing a new approach that has the potential to win some support, at the very least as the only realistic alternative. It is the great achievement of this book that it traces out this complex process of beginning to forge a new educational settlement. This is an important book that should be read by anyone seeking to understand the contemporary process of education reform.

Alison Taylor combines a powerful theoretical analysis with a rich and detailed ethnographic account that is effectively contextualized historically. She documents the attempt to forge a new educational settlement in Alberta, reporting on interviews with people in a variety of locations in the process, including business-people, labour leaders, education policy-makers, teachers, high school students, and parents. The information from these interviews provides a firm basis for Taylor's rich account of the complex and contradictory process of negotiating a hegemonic settlement that can win consent.

Taylor's presentation reminds us that the social groups involved in this process are not uniform, showing important differences in perspective on key issues. There are, for example, important points of disagreement between the business-people she interviewed. Yet, at the same time, she shows that there is a tendency for the perspectives of individuals on these issues to be influenced by their location in the process. For example, teachers, though their views are far from uniform, do tend to see these issues differently than business-people.

It is a great strength of this account that it presents these people as active agents, with their own integrity and perspective grounded in a material location. Hegemony does not work through duping the dominated, but rather through a more complex process of partially meeting and/or redefining needs and effectively constructing realism in a way that closes off potential alternatives. In the remaking of Alberta's educational settlement, the construction of realism was in large part framed by the development of a "fiscal crisis of the state" that put funding constraints at the centre of the education reform project. Alison Taylor shows, for example, that the openness of some educators to business partnerships was connected to the expectation of ongoing underfunding. This is a real negotiation, then, but one that is conducted in the light of the ability of the powerful to define much of the context, through their control of key financial and policy resources.

The final accomplishment of this book is that Taylor shows that the destruction of the old educational settlement in Alberta and the development of a new one was not inevitable. There were oppositional forces that had real power. This book provides an understanding of the reasons that this opposition did not mobilize its full potential in ways that might have altered the outcome. Those interested in developing counter-hegemonic strategies that can have an impact on the ongoing battles around education reform

would do well to arm themselves with the powerful analysis in this book.

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