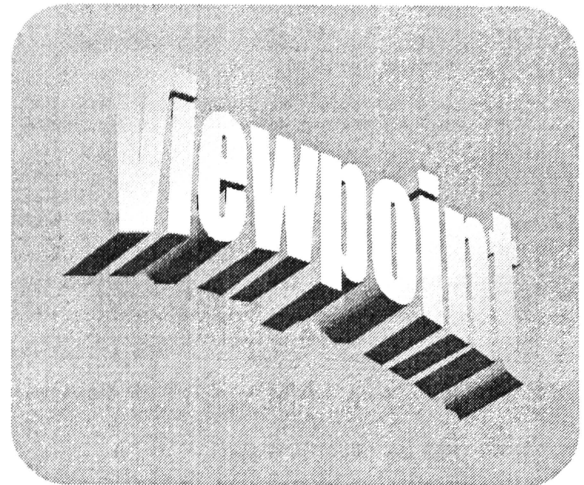


Rethinking Globalisation: A Book Review and a Reflection on Two Weeks in September 2001

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When I first read Bill Bigelow and Bob Peterson's (2002) intriguing collection of resources, *Rethinking Globalization: Teaching for Justice in an Unjust World*, I anticipated writing a short and enthusiastic review in which I would recommend it unreservedly to the attention of anyone involved in social and environmental education. But when I put my hands to the keyboard, I realised that I wanted to say more about why critical appraisals of globalisation are so important at this moment in world history and, thus, why this book's significance lies as much in what it stands for as its actual contents.



Bigelow and Peterson explain in an editorial introduction that their original intention was to focus on sweatshops and child labour around the world. Like many of us, they were outraged by stories of beatings at Nike factories in Vietnam, by images of children as young as six years old toiling over brand-name soccer balls in Pakistan, and by the pittance major brand-name clothes manufacturers pay workers in places like Haiti and Honduras. But they quickly came to realise that it is impossible to understand these examples of social injustice without also understanding the historical and political circumstances that produce the desperation that force many

workers around the world to work in such wretched conditions, including:

- The history of colonial domination of much of the world that took self-sufficient economies and horribly distorted them.
- The debt crisis, and how it has been manipulated by Western-led institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, which bully poor countries with 'structural adjustment programs.'
- The free trade, 'neo-liberal' emphasis of recent trade agreements like NAFTA [North American Free Trade Agreement], and now the World Trade Organization, that encourage poor countries to export their way to economic health and to specialize in the 'commodity' of cheap labor.
- Military interventions in places as far apart as Vietnam, Guatemala, and the Congo which have discouraged alternative routes to development (p. 3).

Bigelow and Peterson anticipate politically conservative criticism of their deliberate and passionate non-neutrality on globalisation by asking 'Is this book biased?' In responding to this rhetorical question they make a useful distinction between a 'biased' curriculum and a 'partisan' one:

Teaching is biased when it ignores multiple perspectives and does not allow interrogation of its own assumptions and propositions. Partisan teaching... invites diversity of opinion but does not lose sight of the aim... to alert students to global injustice, to seek explanations, and to encourage activism (p. 5).

Bigelow and Peterson rightly assert that in a world where 'vast inequalities of wealth yawn wider and wider' and 'the earth is being consumed and polluted at a ferocious pace', then 'for educators to feign neutrality is irresponsible'. Thus, 'the teacher who takes pride in never revealing his or her "opinions" to students models for them moral apathy' (p. 5). Bigelow and Peterson are refreshingly honest about the limitations of a book that tries to deal with such complex and politically charged subject matters in ways that are accessible to primary and secondary school students (and, of course,

conservative and/or timid teachers). Some of these limitations arise from the rapidity with which public perceptions can change in response to global events:

As we neared publication, the world was stunned by the horrific events of September 11, 2001. On one level, these events brought into focus other limitations of this volume. We don't directly address the issues of religious fundamentalism or terrorism. Nor do we feature articles that examine how globalization is playing out in the Muslim world—and how this might be related to the development of violent networks like al-Qaeda.

However, the events of September 11th are the clearest argument imaginable for the kind of inquiry that we propose in this book: A deep global literacy must come to be seen as a basic skill in every school. It is more urgent than ever that students take a profoundly critical look at the direction the world is headed. How is the reach of the global market impacting cultures everywhere? What are the consequences of the vast and growing inequalities of wealth and power? Is this the best we can do? What alternatives can we imagine? Addressing questions like these is not simply important from an academic standpoint. It is literally an issue of survival (pp. 7-8).

Unfortunately, from the standpoint of many of our current political leaders, the events of September 11, 2001, also constitute 'the clearest argument imaginable' for enacting policies that make matters much worse. The escalation of US militarism, and its enthusiastic support by the national governments of Australia and the UK, does indeed threaten our survival. Thus, I would like to offer a slightly different way of reading these events to support the case for 'deep global literacy'.

My personal understandings of globalisation and commitments to global justice have changed substantially in recent years as a result of working in southern Africa. In particular, both local and global events made my most recent visit to South Africa, during the first two weeks of September 2001, a profoundly different experience from my six previous visits since July 1998. When I left Australia on 30 August 2001 the plight of the asylum seekers on the Norwegian cargo ship *Tampa* was headline news. My own thoughts about the Australian Federal Government's response to this situation were already being shaped by my experiences in Africa. I wondered, for example, how Prime Minister John Howard and Immigration Minister Phillip Ruddick might have responded if the asylum seekers on the *Tampa* had been white farmers fleeing from Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe.

I arrived in Durban, South Africa, just as the UN World Conference Against Racism was beginning in that city. My work with doctoral students at the University of Durban-Westville was conducted against a backdrop of daily news of the various controversies that dogged the conference, especially the attitude of the USA that culminated in its

delegation withdrawing from the conference. A majority of the students with whom I worked were researching educational aspects of the HIV/AIDS pandemic that was affecting up to 40% of the population in some areas of KwaZulu Natal province. One student was documenting the impact of HIV/AIDS on teacher attrition. Another was conducting life history research with AIDS orphans. Others were tackling questions about inclusive curricula for township and rural school populations in which 10-20% of children are terminally ill with HIV/AIDS.

My last day in Durban was Tuesday 11 September. South Africa's television channels were saturated immediately with CNN coverage of the destruction of the World Trade Center towers and its aftermath, but on 12 September the nation's daily newspapers reported the events in different ways. Cape Town's broadsheet, *The Cape Times*, devoted 12 pages to descriptions and analyses whereas the tabloid *The Sowetan* (at over 2 million copies sold per day, South Africa's biggest selling daily newspaper) had just three pages, most of which were filled with photographs. From page 4, *The Sowetan* was business-as-usual. Many of the South Africans I mixed with over the next two days paid little attention to the events in New York and Washington, other than to bemoan the massive increase in (very inefficient) airport security and the resultant delays and changes to their travel plans. I was not particularly surprised by their relative indifference, given the everyday effects of the HIV/AIDS pandemic and some of the world's highest violent crime rates (this is not to say that South Africans ignored events in the USA: in mid-October 2001, the anthrax 'attacks' in the US were enthusiastically mimicked as a popular—and by South African standards non-violent—mode of monkey-wrenching until the government legislated heavy fines on anyone caught perpetrating an anthrax hoax).

The *New Internationalist* magazine titled its November 2001 issue 'Twin Terrors' to remind readers that terror is manifested in more ways than are captured by the term 'terrorism'. Under the heading 'Two Terrors', *New Internationalist* quotes a passage from Mark Twain which, when combined with some quantification of 'enduring terrors', puts the loss of lives in the US on 11 September into a different perspective from that portrayed in mainstream media:

Two Terrors

There were two 'Reigns of Terror', the one wrought murder in hot passions, the other in heartless cold blood; the one inflicted death upon thousands of persons, the other upon hundreds of millions; but our shudders are all for the 'horrors' of the momentary Terror; what is the horror of swift death... compared with life-long death from hunger, cold, insult, cruelty and heart-break. (Mark Twain writing about the French Revolution in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* [c. 1899])

Enduring Terrors

Number of people who died from hunger on 11 September 2001*: 24,000

Number of children killed by diarrhoea on 11 September 2001*: 6,020

Number of children killed by measles on 11 September 2001*: 2,700

* Assuming annual deaths were evenly spread

Number of malnourished children in developing countries: 149 million

Number of people without access to safe drinking water: 1,100 million

Number of people without access to adequate sanitation: 2,400 million

Number of African children under 15 living with HIV/AIDS: 1.1 million

(*New Internationalist* November 2001, pp. 18-19).

A colleague and I did a rough extrapolation from the above figures to conservatively estimate that if the USA suffered the same 'enduring terrors' as, say, sub-Saharan Africa, their death toll would be equivalent to having the events of September 11 repeated *at least once per week*. What do we have to do to make these enduring terrors as shocking and horrifying and unendurable as al-Qaeda's attacks on the USA? Who will make a first strike against the West's own 'axis of evil' that produces more than 30,000 deaths per day from starvation, diarrhoea and preventable diseases in the majority world?

In Australia we can add to these 'enduring terrors' the statistics on death rates, life expectancy and infant mortality that demonstrate the appalling health disadvantage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Thus, I believe that the fallout from the *Tampa* incident (and Australia's treatment of asylum seekers) and from the events of September 11 clearly presents us with (re)new(ed) and urgent educational challenges. I do not think that it is any exaggeration to claim that Australia as a nation now faces an international cultural reconciliation agenda at a time when we have demonstrably failed to advance our home grown reconciliation imperatives (with respect to Australia's indigenous peoples and immigrant cultures) as far or as fast as we should.

In the light of these reflections, *Rethinking Globalization* is a source of educational hope and inspiration. It explores some of the most complex issues and forces that are facing and shaping the world today by presenting a rich and diverse collection of resources—interviews, poems, stories, skilfully written background readings, cartoons, and many practical ideas for teaching (including complete instructions, worksheet masters and other materials for a wide range of simulations, games, role plays and other learning activities). *Rethinking Globalization* invites both browsing and close reading by educators, parents, and anyone else interested in delving into the functions and effects of globalisation. Two of the book's largest sections, 'Just Food?' and 'Culture, Consumption and

the Environment', occupy a quarter of the book's contents and are directly relevant to teaching environmental education across the curriculum. I particularly liked 'Capitalism and the Environment: The Thingamabob Game' and 'Critical Global Math Literacy', both of which demonstrate how the complexities of ecologically sustainable economic production, consumption and growth can be experienced meaningfully in classrooms. Many of the suggested activities have been trialed by the editors in their own classrooms (Bigelow and Peterson are respectively junior secondary and primary school teachers) and the book consistently reflects the realities of working with school-age children.

The *Rethinking Globalization* home page at www.rethinkingschools.org/rg/ has links to all supplemental materials and the complete Resources section, with clickable links to all websites mentioned in the book, and other downloadable references and resources. The editors have also established an ever-expanding questions and answers page on this site. Copies of *Rethinking Globalization* are offered at discounted prices for bulk purchases (2-10 copies: US\$15.00 each, 11-24 copies: \$12.50, 25 or more copies: \$10.00). ☺

Reference

Bigelow, B. and Peterson, B. (eds) (2002) *Rethinking Globalization: Teaching for Justice in an Unjust World*, Rethinking Schools Press, Milwaukee, Wisconsin USA www.rethinkingschools.org. Paperback, 402 pp., ISBN 0-942961-28-5. US\$18.95.