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Can teacher protests reify what they protest?: Examining the rationalities of recent teacher activism through a Foucauldian analytics

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The Rationality of Protest: A Foucauldian Analytics of Teacher Activism¹

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Abstract

In the last four years, teacher-activists in the United States have engaged in an unprecedented wave of protests and strikes. The developing body of literature seeking to understand this flurry of activity has taken various analytical approaches; for example, distilling movements into their key tactics in the hopes of lending important tools to activists and movements both within and beyond education. However, largely unconsidered are the ways in which these tactics and relations come to be possible in the first place. This article applies a Foucauldian analytics of protest which, rather than focusing upon the actors and actions of protests, seeks to understand the rationalities, or systems of reason, by which these actors and actions become possible. Through the case of Arizona, the paper makes visible the ways in which some examples of recent activism have operated within a system of reason and conception of futurity which potentially reinscribes historic modes of governance while fundamentally limiting the possibilities of activist efforts. To conclude, the piece offers a counter-example with the intent to imagine further possibilities for teacher activism.

Keywords: teacher activism, RedForEd, teacher unions, governance, futurity, power

In the last four years, we have witnessed an unprecedented amount of teacher activism including protests, strikes, ballot initiatives, and sick-outs. Teachers in states such as West Virginia and Arizona were among the first to engage in what would become known as RedForEd, as they engaged in multi-day work stoppages focused on issues such as student funding, health insurance, and teacher salaries in the spring of 2018. This wave of activism, in which over 400,000 teachers engaged in labor protests, made 2018 the “biggest year for labor protest in a generation” (Van Dam, 2019). Following these actions, the wave of teacher activism quickly moved across other spaces such as Chicago, Los Angeles, and Oakland.

In response to this flurry of activity, as well as to teacher-activism focused on issues of health and safety during the COVID-19 pandemic, many scholars, historians, and activists have sought to understand recent teacher movements. Such efforts have centered upon, for example, the ways in which “militant” leadership helped guide activists in Arizona and West Virginia (Blanc, 2019), while others have offered insights into the importance of Latinx leadership within these movements (Carrillo, 2021). Elsewhere, scholars have focused on elements of the protests, such as the demands and bargaining

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processes in conservative states and more electorally liberal cities (McCartin & Sniederma, 2020) or the agency of teachers within RedForEd (Karvelis, 2019).

While each of these approaches offers something important to scholars and activists alike, this article asks: how do the actions of the activists become possible in the first place? For example, rather than detailing how teachers recruited support for their demands for higher wages, this article asks how such arguments are given rationality, a certain form of making sense, which ultimately allows for them to become actionable.

This paper first outlines the ways teachers in Arizona utilized a particular conception of the relations between education funding, the teacher, the child, the state, and the future in order to give their demands and actions rationality. Due to the largely digital forms of organization and discourses used by the movement, the analysis here focuses primarily on discourses occurring in social media spaces where the rationalities for protest were often developed and reiterated. Following this, the paper historicizes how such relations and their conceptions of futurity, ways of thinking about the future, became possible as a rationality for activist action in the spring of 2018. To do so, the paper sketches the historic assembly of a system of reason, which placed the teacher in relation to, not simply the child, but the child-citizen and the state's future. Through a Foucauldian analytics of protest (Death, 2010) informing its analysis, this paper focuses upon the mutually constitutive relations of power and resistance, in order to make visible the ways in which these forms of rationality serve to reinscribe, rather than reimagine, a conception of the relations between the child, teacher, and state oriented around governance and securing a stable future for the state. Finally, the paper concludes by offering an example of recent teacher activism which largely moves beyond such systems of relations, futurities, and forms of governance. This example, rather than serving to reinscribe the "colonising invocations" of futurity (Facer, 2018), materializes alternative systems of relation and conceptions of the future for teacher activism while simultaneously clearing the ground for further boundaries to be potentially confronted and transcended.

Futurity and Protest: Arizona as a Case

Arizona, which experienced the majority of its teacher-activist activity associated with the RedForEd movement during the spring of 2018, offers an interesting case through which we can examine the rationalities of recent teacher protests. To do so, however, is not to generalize across the entire RedForEd movement, nor even across the movements in Arizona. Instead, through a Foucauldian analytics of protest (Death, 2010), this paper isolates specific examples that make visible the ways in which protest and governance operate in mutually constitutive ways, given that protest paradoxically reinscribes and operates within systems of relations, modes of governance, and conceptions of futurity that fundamentally limit its possibilities. Further, it should be recognized that this article and analysis utilize both written materials such as the social media discourse and the demands of teachers, but the analysis of these artifacts is inseparable from my own subjective experiences as a member of the Arizona movement's leadership. This form of analysis and subjectivity is not a critique of my or anyone's actions but, instead, a way to develop an understanding of how these actions become actionable in the first place through particular systems of relations.

To see how this process is enacted, we can turn first to the demands of Arizona teacher-activists. These demands centered upon issues such as per-pupil spending, eliminating tax cuts, and a 20% raise in pay for teachers (“What are Arizona teachers’ 5 demands?”, 2018). In the discourse surrounding and supporting their necessity, teacher-activists often centered numerical figures such as the 1.1 billion dollars that had been cut from the education budget since 2008. Additionally, teacher-activists frequently pointed to Arizona’s near-bottom ranking in average teacher pay and per-pupil spending (Arizona Education Association, 2018), lending legitimacy and urgency to the demands for increased funding.

While these demands and rationalizations for the protests were common, what is of interest is how such discourses also moved beyond rationalities surrounding merely financial figures, into rationalities with a particular way of thinking about the future. As one organizer in Arizona put it, these demands were not simply about funding; they were about “securing the future of public education” (Karvelis, 2018a). This rationality directly linked financial figures to not simply increased wages or per-pupil spending but to the achievement of a desired, secure status for public education. In doing so, it positioned such financial figures as a way of reasoning about the future.

Yet, this state of security for education was not simply about the future functioning of classrooms or the retention of teachers. Instead, such possibilities became directly linked to the state. Increasingly, particularly in online discourses on social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter, where the majority of the Arizona movement was organized and discussed (Blanc, 2019), achieving a secure status for the future of public education became understood as a way of simultaneously ensuring a secure status for the future of the state as well. This was particularly common among legislators and electoral candidates who were sympathetic to the movement. As one legislative candidate stated: “I support #RedForEd because I am a parent, tax-paying citizen of Arizona and a good neighbor. I believe a well-funded and healthy education system is imperative for a sustainable economy and the future of our state” (Westbrook, 2018). Such a statement locates the rationality of RedForEd activists within the historic role of the school in the United States: an institution concerned with the future of the state and the production of its future citizens (Tröhler, et. al., 2011). Recognizing this allows for an understanding of the ways that RedForEd, while often conceptualized as a new form of grassroots teacher-activism, was commonly understood within historic rationalities surrounding the child, school, and future of the state.

Such discourse was also commonly present in the language of teacher-activists. For example, a “yes” vote on a teacher walk-out was rationalized on Twitter through language such as:

Yes to my own children’s education. Yes to my students. Yes to my colleagues.
Yes to the future of our state. Yes to the future of our nation. Yes to my profession. Yes to a fair and equitable education for ALL students. #RedForEd (Chadwick, 2018).

This text was also paired with an image of the teacher-activist who is seen wearing a RedForEd Arizona t-shirt. As a teacher-activist and designated spokesperson of the grassroots organization Arizona Educators United that helped organize the movement, I

also advanced such discourse. For example, I publicly questioned what teachers' low pay meant for the future of the state in the early moments of the movement (Karvelis, 2018b) and encouraged activists to join later RedForEd movement activities by directly linking such actions to "the future of Arizona" (Karvelis, 2018c).

Such discourse was not simply relegated to online movement spaces. It also materialized at the protests themselves. For example, while such rationalities were often spoken of, they also appeared on signs and shirts stating "The future of Arizona is in my classroom" or "Fund Our Future".

These various examples of movement leaders, legislative candidates, and teacher-activists show the ways in which the demands of teacher-activists transcended a rationality which was solely about financial figures such as per-pupil spending or teacher pay. Instead, these figures took on a new legibility as they became a way of also reasoning about the future of the state. Increasing teacher pay, for example, was not simply about increasing a teacher's standard of living or economic status. Rather, it was also about keeping "good" and certified teachers in the state, directly linked to the assumption that these teachers were more capable of creating the types of children that the state is assumed to require for its future security. For example, the Westbrook (2018) tweet above directly links increased funding to the development of a robust state economy. As the movement progressed, the grassroots organization which helped lead the RedForEd movement would also directly link an increase in funding to the development of an "educated workforce" (Arizona Educators United, 2021) and the ensuring of Arizona's success "both today and tomorrow" (Arizona Educators United, 2021). My own discourse (Karvelis, 2018b) in the early moments of the movement also linked higher wages to retaining teachers, producing better students, and achieving a stable, secure status for the state. Through such examples, we see a particular form of rationality emerge where numbers about, for example, teacher pay, are not simply numbers. Rather, the numbers become a way of reasoning about the future of the child-citizen and the (in)security of the state.

The Child, Teacher, and State: Systems of Relation

This article moves now to understand how such a system of relations concerning teachers, children, and the future of the state develops and becomes both possible and actionable in contemporary teacher activism. As Tröhler et al. (2011) state, the historic purpose of the school in political states, or nations, such as the United States and France has been to prepare the future citizen that the state is assumed to one day require. For Tröhler et al., the developing states of France and the United States historically mobilized the school as a space to instill values and morality. These values and moral virtues were not neutral but linked directly to the future of the state. To develop, for example, the perceptive, moral child was also to create the desired citizen of the state. Such a process of acting upon the child to materialize the desires of the nation rendered what Popkewitz (2012) calls the soul of the child as a site of administration. Here, the soul becomes a site of administration, a space where the desires of the nation are acted upon in the present in relation to a concept of the desired, good future.

Throughout time, these processes shift and become dis/reassembled in various ways. For example, the desired child of today is not often spoken of as the moral, cosmopolitan

child. Yet, rather than simply disappearing, these ideas shift and become reassembled into altered concepts of who the child-citizen should be. Today, the idealized citizen which schooling is assumed to produce is often thought of as the creative, independent problem solver who operates as not simply a citizen of the nation, but rather a global citizen. Such conceptions have become integrated into fields such as music and arts education, which has advanced a concept of artistic citizenship, utilizing arts education to create a global citizen imbued with creative qualities and virtues which will bring harmony to the world (Elliott, 2012).

While each of these constructions of the idealized, desired child-citizen are anything but neutral, what is of interest here are not the desires embedded within ideas such as creativity and cosmopolitanism, but rather the system of relations which locates the school and the teacher as capable of producing these types of children and people. That is, in these examples across various periods, what becomes constructed is a particular relation of the work of schooling to the future of the nation. As those such as Tröhler et al. (2011) and Popkewitz (2012) demonstrate, the teacher and the larger project of schooling are conceptualized as being tasked with the responsibility of producing a particular type of child. Specifically, this child is produced and desired not simply in the hopes that they develop, for example, a more robust mathematics education or a greater artistic ability. Rather, these qualities become ways of thinking about the kinds of people (Hacking, 2007) that the future of the state is assumed to require as the school functions as a site for their production.

It is through this historic assembly that the child, the teacher, and the state become placed in a particular relationality, one where the teacher is assumed to produce the citizen that the state will require. This relationality, while acted upon in the present in classrooms across the nation, is about the future. It is about who the child will become: the idealized, desired child-citizen who will bring a state of security and stability to the future of the state.

The Mutually Constitutive Process of Protest

Teacher-activists in the case of Arizona often rationalized their demands through the system of relations outlined above. Of concern in this article is the way in which such rationalizations serve to, in part, affirm and reinscribe such a relationality. That is, rather than moving beyond modes of governance that utilize the teacher as an actor who produces the citizen which the state will one day require, such rationalities of protest implicitly reinscribe these modes of governance as neutral, natural conditions through which the project of education is understood and acted out. As teachers rationalize their demands through not simply increased funding but also the idea that such an increase will allow for them to produce the idealized future security of the state, they potentially stabilize such forms of thought.

However, as Death (2010) argues, it is simultaneously this very mode of rationality that also makes protest effective. By utilizing a rationality that has become natural and perceived as common sense, such as the idea that funding schools creates better futures for the state, the protest itself, as well as its demands, also potentially become perceived as natural and commonsensical. In this way, protest no longer becomes a binary relation of power and resistance. Rather, power (such as the mode of governance that places the

teacher in relation to the state's future) and protest (such as demanding increased funding from state governments) mutually constitute one another as they operate through shared rationalities.

Recognizing this offers at least two understandings: (a) an alternative understanding of how/why teacher protests in states such as Arizona were able to achieve some of their demands, and (b) a way of understanding the fundamental limits placed on the activism efforts of teachers. For example, through the rationalities used by Arizona teachers, the teacher is placed in the historic system of relations surrounding the teacher, state, child, and future that positions the teacher as an actor who can create a secure, stable future by producing the desired child-citizen. In such a system of relations, only certain things can come to matter. In consequence, demands concerning issues such as affordable housing or student access to healthcare, two issues which lie beyond the system of relations that historically places the teacher in relation to the state's future, become understood as potentially irrational, fundamentally limiting the possibilities of discourse and action.

In response, it is worth considering how to move beyond such a mode of rationality and its system of relations. Facer (2018), in discussion on governance and futurity in education, proposes that, "futurity is embedded at the heart of the educational process" (2018, p. 204). They delineate three potentially troubling modes of futurity with the hope of opening space necessary to imagine alternative conceptions. First are forms of futurity which treat the future as a landscape where optimal choices can be made. For example, funding schools is a simple, optimal choice that secures the future. Second are the "fantastical and often colonising invocations of the future" (Facer, 2018, p. 204) that attempt to develop particular values, practices, and modes of living. These forms of colonization often center upon perpetuating rationalities and desires already accepted by the state, such as the teacher as an actor who can produce an intelligent, moral child-citizen for the state's future. It is this perpetuation that colonizes the possibilities of the future through its attempt to create a particular state of being and living. And lastly, is the conceptualization of education and schooling as a defensive mode of protection against unknown and frightening futures.

I suggest that these modes of futurity were taken up in the Arizona case examined above. In particular, most visible are the first and third modes of futurity that treats the future as "an easy narrative... of inevitable future trajectories" (Facer, 2018, p. 206) and education as a bulwark against the unknown. For example, statements in the early moments of the movement linking low teacher pay to teachers leaving the state asking, "What does it mean for AZ's future?" (Karvelis, 2018b) give teacher protests a particular rationality that operates through these modes of futurity. This rationality is one that links the teacher to the development of a stable, foreseeable future if demands are met, while positioning education as a defense against an unknown but frightening possible future for the state.

Through mobilizing such a rationality for protest, teacher-activists gave their protests and demands a readily legible rationality that potentially helped achieve several demands, while also enacting a mode of futurity, which is potentially dangerous. For Facer (2018), these futurities become "fantastical" and hold "colonizing tendencies" which strive to produce a particular state of affairs for the state rather than, on the other hand, "open up the possibilities of working with the future on a more robust basis" (p. 204).

Alternative Futurities and Rationalities of Protest

Following Facer (2018), this article suggests that, in response, we increasingly consider forms of futurity “that recognise...that the good society and the good life will not be built through education alone but are fundamentally interconnected with all other aspects of social change” (p. 206). Potentially, we have glimpsed what such alternative approaches to futurity in teacher-activism would look like. For example, Chicago Teachers Union forwarded common good demands in their bargaining efforts, centering issues such as requiring nurses in every building and affordable housing for students (Belsha, 2019). Such demands were rationalized, largely, through claims that elements of life in the city of Chicago that extend beyond the walls of the school impacted both education and the child and were, thus, important considerations within teacher-activist and union efforts during the 2019 strike. Here, an altered system of relations is used to give rationality to these demands. First of all, the Chicago Teachers Union relocated its rationalities of protest beyond relations which simply locate the teacher as an actor that produces effective citizens for the state within a wider system of governance, and instead incorporated issues such as healthcare and housing. It moved beyond modes of futurity that mark education as a solution for the unknowable future of the state and create easy, foreseeable trajectories on which education can intervene. Of course, Chicago’s demands and rationalities are not perfect. For example, it is easy to imagine the ways in which having nurses at every school becomes a way of ensuring teachers are available to focus on the work of preparing the state’s child-citizen. However, what Chicago provides is a glimpse of what it may look like to begin to move beyond the systems of relation and futurity that other efforts, such as Arizona, often embraced and instead toward alternatives that rethink what matters in educational futures.

It is examples such as these that this article suggests have become increasingly important in the time since the wave of teacher-activism in 2018, as issues surrounding COVID-19 and racial injustice have become key elements of teacher-activism across the United States. As teachers continually engage in their activist efforts, it becomes pertinent to understand the ways in which the rationalization of demands potentially serves to bolster forms of power, such as the state, which teachers are attempting to challenge. Furthermore, as this article has sought to demonstrate, it is pertinent for scholars and activists to increasingly consider the ways that such rationalizations also potentially reinscribe and perpetuate historic systems of relation, locating the teacher as an actor within the state’s forms of governance which treat the child’s soul as a site of administration in correlation with ideas surrounding the desired future of the nation. Finally, these rationalizations not only bolster forms of power and governance but also operate within futurities which seek to envision easy, transparent future trajectories and offer education as a cure-all, potentially limiting the fundamental possibilities of political action and teacher-activism in the process.

This article, through the case of Arizona, has sought to make visible how such processes have been enacted in the very recent past. To do so, however, is not to critique actors or actions but instead to attempt to understand how these actions become possible in the first place. What results through such an analysis is a reimagining of the possibilities of teacher activism, moving beyond the futurities and systems of relations that have historically limited what is accepted as rational forms of thought, action, and

politics. Instead, we may envision new rationalities, futurities, and the possibilities they help to materialize.

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