

Hand in Glove: El Sistema and Neoliberal Research

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The following is a companion piece to 'Lifting the Veil: A realist critique of Sistema's upwardly mobile path', a forthcoming article in the journal ACT 15:1 (January 2016). The following article focuses less on El Sistema youth orchestras, and the model of social action they inspire internationally, than the uncritical promotion of the same belief system via supposedly independent research.

In recent years, El Sistema-style youth orchestras have gained popularity as a model of social action. Their proponents claim that giving children the opportunity to play in orchestras is an effective means of addressing inequality and crime. Nevertheless, critiques and controversy have taken root as scholars, music teachers, and others have started to provide realistic accounts of the exploitative aspects of the aesthetic doctrines which Sistema promotes.¹ In fact, mainstream knowledge in social science calls into question claims about the 'impact of the arts' as a means of increasing the well-being of deprived populations. Indeed, if we look back specifically on the development of El Sistema in Venezuela, from the 1970s onwards, it may be argued that, on balance, the organisation has done more harm than good.² The development of El Sistema there has been accompanied by the rise of violent crime, and the persistence of massive inequalities in educational provision - latterly, even under the conditions of an avowedly socialist revolution.³ Yet El Sistema's failures in its homeland are overlooked in a number of key reports influencing educational and social policies in the UK. Nobody really needs a crystal ball when it comes to Sistema, because the actual failures of the Venezuelan model are an ongoing historical phenomenon. Despite this, massive savings are envisaged from public investment in the same model. Just when financial institutions have demonstrated their incompetence in matters of forecasting, policy makers and researchers are, quite bizarrely, taking their lead from lending bank futurology.

Scotland is a country caught between important FIRE (Finance, Insurance and Real Estate) sector interests established north of the border, and a rebellion against UK austerity policies. In the absence of a sufficiently radical social democratic consensus on a way forward for Scotland, and with general dissatisfaction now expressed as a matter of the country's political sovereignty, it is not too difficult to see the attraction of Sistema Scotland to neoliberal policy makers. Key Scottish research projects, supposedly conducted in the public interest, dovetail with the 'spin' coming from Sistema projects internationally, to the extent that researchers would appear to have a hand-in-glove relationship with the Sistema network. This is no ordinary story of corruption, though corruption it is when the dominant ideology takes over independence in public research. In what follows I point out some ideas and concepts about society; they are among the standard critical tools given to university students. What they have in common in this case is that they are the very tools which have been abandoned by governmental research.

Doing Beautiful Research for the Rich and Powerful

Venezuelan women have won more international beauty pageants than the women of any other country. It is not of course the real diversity of Venezuelans' physical characteristics, or beauty, which matter; the prizes are awarded for the off-the-peg looks which emanate from the compass points of the Western fashion world. El Sistema's founder, Jose Antonio Abreu, has also been showered with international awards. He, and the Miss Venezuela impresario, Osmel Sousa, have been described as the two most important Venezuelan cultural managers of recent times. Thanks to Abreu, synthetic aesthetics, like those demanded by beauty pageants, are applied to the poor, few of whom are educated in the diverse musics of their own continent, or in popular culture more widely. When musical diversity appears, it is usually in a tokenistic manner. Yet in the key governmental research projects conducted in Scotland, which I discuss below, the results of the Sistema model of musical education go unquestioned, and the orchestral structure of European classical music is treated as something akin to a universal public good. Why is this so, in the context of multi-cultural society with multiple musical genres?

There are two explanations which deserve consideration first of all. In multi-cultural societies there are fairly complex aesthetic fractures which public musical education ought to address. However, in this instance they may be obscured by the historic spectacle of a religious conversion which involved music; it was seen to off-set the naked avarice of the European conquest of South America. In the eyes of some Europeans, such as Voltaire (1694-1778), it was a spiritual spectacle that compensated for the unrivalled barbarism of the conquest.⁴ This is the slice of history that was polished up to flatter Western audiences in the 1987 film *The Mission*.⁵ However, most people don't really expect the truth from such enthralling movies; and the only way the same spectacle of conversion to the aesthetic doctrines of the European Ancien Régime can look like an appropriate model of social policy today is by corrupting the processes of public decision-making.

It should not be forgotten that there are good grounds for suspecting El Sistema in Venezuela of being involved in corruption and clientelism.⁶ However, the second explanation of the organization's political success - one which is easier to trace - can be found at the level of research methodology. The government-backed assessments of Sistema Scotland, mentioned above, treat children as if their musical education should assist their self-advancement in a rapidly changing labour market. Often coming under the guise of rational-actor or rational-choice theories, the 'logic' of this approach confuses education, which is supposed to strengthen the mind, with mere training. It fails to address the complexity of expressive culture in which people do things that are not in their immediate self-interest. If they acted solely out of self-interest, culture would only be as interesting as beauty contests.

Evaluation of Big Noise

In 2011 a study of Sistema Scotland was published, commissioned by the Scottish Government and carried out by the research agency GEN, under the banner of 'social science in government'.⁷ However, the researchers used a 'logic model' which effectively stands in place of mainstream sociological understandings of class and

culture. The influential sociology of Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002), who spent a lifetime examining social stratification and aesthetics, is entirely overlooked. Equally relevant, and also ignored, are the insights of the British sociologist Michael Young (1915-2002), who coined the term meritocracy in his now classic 1958 study, *The Rise of the Meritocracy*. Meritocratic ideology is very close to the heart of the Sistema ethos, but its problems go unexamined. One of them is that there can be no real meritocracy without equality, and what concerned Young was the corruption of egalitarianism under the guise of Britain's 'opportunity state'. In place of ensuring equal treatment, the state distributes opportunities, often rather questionable ones at that. However, the general research ethos and the methods employed by GEN owe nothing to social scientists such as Bourdieu or Young, even though both are extremely relevant to any evaluation which, like the GEN study, seeks out public opinion. Young warns of blurring the distinction between work and play and giving the quite false impression that success in capitalist society is all the result of intelligence and effort. As he predicted, today's researchers treat play as if it ought to contribute to success in the labour market. Even if this ideology is accepted, with all its potential for psychological manipulation and damage, many people may well envisage more attractive opportunities than those supposedly provided by *playing* in an orchestra. Yet no comparative framework is visible in the GEN report. An important and closely related research issue, which Bourdieu points out, is that when it comes to consecrated culture, interviewees often feel impelled to say things which disguise more complex feelings.⁸ To be openly sceptical about the artistic achievements of high culture is itself a mark of distinction, and a sign of the self-confidence which tends to come with educational achievement or strongly held beliefs. The failure to go deeper into musical tastes and cultural subjectivity, including the complexity of cultural loyalties in a multi-cultural and multi-religious society, means that the basis for a genuinely public policy has been misconstrued.

Another major problem which can be seen in the GEN study is the effort to disaggregate the assumed benefits of the Sistema programmes from other causal factors in the public and private spheres. On page one, readers are told that 'Sistema

Scotland aims to work in areas where the need is greatest, focusing on communities characterised by high levels of deprivation such as unemployment, crime, anti-social behaviour and poor community cohesion.⁹ However, six pages later, one of the reasons given for locating Sistema Scotland's Big Noise project in Raploch, Stirling, is that 'the strong sense of community [there] was seen as providing valuable social capital on which Big Noise could be built.'¹⁰ Given the way this convenience is overlooked, it is worth recalling El Sistema's greatest individual success story, the famous conductor Gustavo Dudamel. He comes from a musical family and was not a deprived child. There is no evidence that on their own youth orchestras can meet the needs of the truly disadvantaged. Faced with the difficulty of 'disaggregation', the GEN report reassures readers that: 'Teachers and Big Noise are now working together, and planned developments in their partnership approach are likely to provide greater opportunities for measuring the educational impact of Big Noise in future.'¹¹ In what can only be regarded as patently Sistema-friendly research, the real difficulty, if not impossibility, of disaggregation (i.e. of distinguishing Sistema's effects from its supportive contexts), is given a wholly positive gloss in the GEN report. It suggests that Sistema will only assist and encourage what is present in terms of public services, good practices and conduct in private life, and it helps introduce these goods to others by binding people and services together in a cultural project. If Sistema presents a threat to a plural musical education, this is not considered here because the programme provides policy makers with theoretical glue (social capital) to apply to citizenry. The great irony, and somewhat shameful fact for the researchers, is that close analysis of Sistema's propaganda reveals the contempt for the poor that the organisation breeds, since it rests on the idea that the poor are not produced by the political economy so much as their lack of proper motivation. Social democratic reforms are therefore replaced by the attempt to spiritually and culturally transform the poor.¹²

Neoliberal policy discourse articulates this class racism, even while paying lip service to egalitarianism, by simply ignoring what should be the central question; namely, the suitability of Sistema-style musical education. Instead it would appear

that any sort of musical training is good enough, as long as it can be argued to have certain positive socio-economic effects. This view contrasts with the work of England's National Foundation for Youth Music. Although Youth Music is subject to the same form of governmentality which demands socio-economic impacts from the arts (the notion of art for art's sake now being the preserve of the rich), and it even supports some Sistema-inspired activity among the range of programmes it funds, the organisation is (significantly) described as a 'genre agnostic' funding body.¹³ If musical development is the aim, there needs to be a *responsive* attitude to ever-present musicality and its changing technologies. Facilitating musical development by letting young people take the lead, rather than organising and orchestrating them, is preferable. One thing that Youth Music's proponents can convincingly argue, sixteen years after its establishment as a charity, is that thrusting symphony orchestras on deprived children, from the earliest years, is a flawed approach.

However, in Scotland's official research this same approach, on the part of Sistema Scotland, is not considered in relation to the development of music and the arts; what takes precedence is the attempt to promote the spirit of individual upward mobility among populations cut adrift by free-market globalisation. In this context, the ethos of the TV talent show is seen to convey the right sort of attitude, both by Sistema Scotland and in the important gate-keeping research projects discussed here. For Richard Holloway, self-styled 'after religionist' and Chair of Sistema Scotland, the right attitude depends on emulation. In Holloway's words, 'you'll have to practice eight hours a day, six, seven days a week, and you'll have to get up in the morning and think about doing this day in and day out and then you will be, as it were, your own [Gustavo] Dudamel.'¹⁴ In the words of the GCPH (2015) study discussed below: 'The Big Noise programme is empowering; enabling children and young people to see that their future is not predetermined and that with the right attitude and work ethic their goals can be achieved.'¹⁵ On this count Sistema-style social action is undoubtedly attractive to neoliberal policy makers; in Scotland this may be partly because unlike older activities in community education and arts, Sistema is seen to encourage resilience, not the consciousness of exploitation and

resistance to it. On the basis of promoting *resilience* (now a key word in neoliberal policy discourse), policy research is commissioned, funds released and targets defined. Yet in general terms, the futurological targets are as unconvincing as the announcements of successfully completed five year plans were to citizens of former communist states.

When research becomes a vehicle for propagating policy discourse, implying to researchers, teachers, parents and children that resilience is a desirable concept, and that Sistema is incomparable and unique (rather than comparable and possibly restrictive), it goes far beyond its ostensible goal of evaluation. Embracing neoliberal ideology, it not only lends support to Sistema's ideas of social action, it also takes on the spiritual belief system represented by Sistema, even though some of the problems of expecting the Western symphony orchestra to bridge class and ethnic identities ought to be obvious to social science researchers. Mass aesthetic conversion is no easier to pull off than mass religious conversion. Here, independently minded research might examine the distinctive socio-cultural dynamics within Britain's immigrant populations, since in many instances socio-economic status may have little to do with a lack of social glue or poor motivation, and more to do with the unequal treatment that Britain's opportunity state perpetuates. One can easily imagine, for example, the uproar in Britain if Sistema were to promote Qawwali music from India and Pakistan as an officially sanctioned path to upwardly mobility and the answer to a vast range of educational and social problems; or the uproar in France if Andalusian orchestras of North Africa were harnessed to compensate for structural inequality.

Looked at from this counterfactual angle, Sistema-inspired projects appear to be quietly stoking up a 'clash of civilizations', something which influential conservative thinkers such as Samuel Huntington (1927-2008) see as the realpolitik of economic regionalism. There are many shortcomings to be seen in Huntington's analysis, and unsurprisingly, given his ideological position, egalitarian education does not figure at all in his prescriptions. However, if public education systems do not build mutual

respect and demonstrate equal treatment, then Huntington's worldview becomes more credible; many of those that can afford it will look to private education as a solution and often this comes under the guise of faith-based schools. Given the establishment of far-right identity politics from Italy to India, civilizational politics ought to be major concern for public research today. But these problems are entirely overlooked by the research approach discussed here.

From a different perspective, Sistema provides a means to invite a charitable NGO to patch up failing education systems. In the eyes of business leaders the problem is not that education systems are reproducing inequality, but that they are failing to adequately train the workers of tomorrow. Mounting a seemingly friendly attack on non-productive leisure time by blurring the distinction between work and play, and making the idea of creativity conform to business and corporate requirements, are both training priorities which Sistema hardly bothers to disguise. However, any effort to address the failures of education systems requires the recognition of structural flaws which stem, in large part, from the way schooling is used to reproduce class distinctions and advantages. On this count, if we read against the grain of neoliberal research, El Sistema has assisted in the continuation of Venezuelan policies that have failed to counter extremely uneven provision and uneven achievements. Even in the avowedly socialist context of Venezuela's Bolivarian revolution, between 15% and 26% of pupils go to private schools, compared to around 7% in Britain and none in Finland, a country which has maintained one of the most esteemed - and most strictly egalitarian - education systems in the world.¹⁶

Historically, Sistema is the latest of many creative initiatives in Britain which have had the effect of preserving private education alongside the relative scarcity of resources to meet the challenges of public education. Meanwhile policy makers deploy the rhetoric of 'excellence'. In this way Sistema fits neoliberal sales talk very well, since the implication is that the organisation delivers educational excellence into the public education system. Given the way researchers have buried the issue of

the actual quality of Sistema's musical training, and given the huge disparities of the education systems in the three countries mentioned above, Sistema can hardly be regarded as a provider of excellence in any structural sense. El Sistema's record in Venezuela suggests that its promise to compensate for complex injustices has very little foundation. Indeed, given the rhetoric of socialism and revolution coming from recent Venezuelan governments, the organisation might be accurately described as a very effective support act for the structural perpetuation of inequality.¹⁷ It may be that only a minority of Venezuelans espousing the ideas of "21st-Century Socialism" recognise in El Sistema a spectacular detour from traditional social democratic objectives in education. For others, with more conservative leanings, it may be precisely this aspect of El Sistema that appeals.

A Poor Compensation

The attempt to compensate for structural inequality is made explicit in a high-powered evaluation of Sistema Scotland's projects, the initial findings of which were published in 2015. This evaluation was headed by Glasgow Centre for Population Health (GCPH), with Education Scotland and Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU). The evaluation explicitly follows in the footsteps of the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), predicting future savings from investing in Sistema projects. To calculate the same sort of efficiencies and benefits (used by the IDB to justify its loans at commercial rates), the researchers contrast 'upstream' investment in Sistema to 'downstream' costs of crime and poor health linked to low educational achievements. By throwing these variables together in a cost-benefit analysis of mythical proportions, massive long-term public savings are envisaged. Essentially, the overall logic is this: playing in an orchestra boosts 'engagement in learning and education', and doing better at school 'may lead to improved employability'.¹⁸ This 'potentially' adds up to a whole experience that will make people feel better and be healthier later in life, increase community well-being, and counter criminality. In keeping with the marketisation of the public sector, the basic selling point for Sistema's services to society can be crudely, but not inaccurately, summed-up as "Buy More Pay Less".

Readers of the GCPH (2015) study who are not blinded by the arrangement of information, or distracted by the technocratic language, may notice that its central logic is rather similar to the plotline of a second-rate Hollywood movie. Criminals are idle and dim-witted low-lifers who deserve to meet a bad end. On the other hand, honesty and hard work (encouraged by Sistema Scotland) are ultimately rewarded by a happy life for heroes and heroines. Rather embarrassingly for the universities responsible for a virtually identical research hypothesis, a lot of movies get much closer to the truth. Crime, especially serious crime, is organised by people who are not unintelligent or lazy under-achievers, but are unrestrained in their ambitions and capacities. The petty criminal might be fodder to the criminal elite, but that does not mean the poor are all potential petty criminals waiting to be led into a life of crime. Indeed, criminals are a small minority, and they may be about as thinly spread in society as musicians. In other words, there are two different subcultures and the first one won't magically disappear by boosting the numbers of the second one, any more than increasing the numbers of orchestral musicians might diminish the popularity of gangsta rap.

As for the fate of believers in meritocracy, their efforts and intelligence may indeed lead to increased employability, but only in fairytales and neoliberal research reports are jobs plentiful and a source of happiness and health. There is an epidemic in mental ill-health and it is found, not least, among musicians and employees of British universities.¹⁹ Moreover, although many criminologists recognize a correlation between unemployment and crime, the connection is by no means straightforward, and it is contested. Because women tend to be more responsible for childcare than men, unless alternative care is made available, increased employment opportunities for women are also taken as a causal factor of increased crime.²⁰ Notwithstanding such paradoxes, the question that ought to be asked is: why are we looking to music to solve childcare issues, and what are the potentially negative effects of giving youth orchestras that role?

Despite GCPH's admission that 'measuring the impact of the arts is an inherently complex and highly contested area', no effort is made to address this problem.²¹ In place of a historical examination of the pros and cons of the arts in providing socio-economic and political compensations, a lot of hedging appears. For example, in a related presentation, the researchers have provided a 'health warning': improved school attendance cannot yet be attributed to Sistema Scotland's Big Noise programme.²² Here again we see problem of disaggregation, highlighted by the important statement that 'any endorsement of Sistema Scotland is also an endorsement of a range of partners.'²³ However, when it comes to the delivery of general well-being via Sistema Scotland, GCPH's full report is littered with contradictory information.²⁴ There is, for example, a brief account the sort of ill-being feeling that can be produced by playing in an orchestra after a full day at school; 'children described feeling tired during sessions and wanting to go home'.²⁵ Such feelings, and the multiple reasons for dropping-out of Sistema Scotland's projects, do nothing to dissuade the researchers from reaffirming their 'success' and 'inclusiveness' time and time again. It is noted that Sistema is a 'top-down' initiative rather than a collaborative one and not something people would ask for; but once it is given there are enough people who like it.²⁶ It fails to engage minority ethnic groups; yet it is a 'unifying force' which is fostering 'resilience'.²⁷ However, the authors are very clear that Sistema Scotland's 'Big Noise' programme is not yet underpinned by the quantitative evidence which music partners, local authorities, and schools are looking for; rather, the 'high level of investment (...) is being made on the basis of "good faith"'.²⁸ More research may well gather positive quantitative evidence in the midst of worsening general conditions. Be that as it may, given the stark realities of inequality in Venezuela, the basis of good faith ought to be examined critically, but such reports fail to do so; overall, the reader may wonder whether behind the technocratic hierarchy of information, this research is actually an exercise in Orwellian Doublethink.

On the basis of sound evidence that already exists it could be reasonably argued that the Sistema-style youth orchestras help some children, some of the time. But nothing

so modest is being suggested. Given the skewing of research to portray Sistema interventions as effective socio-educational policy, a 'health warning' about the predictive capacities of the research is particularly apt. However, it is very like a tobacco company which prints an officially worded warning on cigarette packets whilst adding chemicals which make the cigarettes more addictive and more dangerous. It is a sign of the uncritical and explicitly promotional culture brought about by neoliberalism, which is also rolled out through a university system increasingly devoted to 'research impacts', that the GCPH-headed research is illustrated with the sort of images used by Sistema for public relations purposes. There is no critical perspective on the role of spectacle in such an organisation. Such insights, hardly rare in social science and very relevant in this context, have not simply been ignored; they have been turned upside down so that research becomes a vehicle for – rather than an analysis of – Sistema's propaganda.

Telling the Truth

In a country clearly at odds with Westminster rule, but whose elected politicians, for the most part, adhere to neoliberal mantras, Sistema may be a welcome diversion from more radical debate about Scotland's educational future. A Finnish-style education system is not a solution to all society's problems, but if one wants the whole of society to care about the quality of the whole education system, there is no surer way than to abolish private education. The favourite social enterprise for the rich is only tolerated when, like Sistema, it promises to identify the deserving poor and rescue them in a charitable fashion. The famous Eton College has excellent facilities for a diverse music education including a rock band studio, and it offers scholarships and bursaries based on merit to pupils from low income areas, with the promise that families will only pay what they can afford.²⁹ What disadvantaged populations need is this "rich" education for everyone.³⁰ By comparison, what Sistema offers looks like a rather impoverished brand, and it fits hand-in-glove with discretionary powers and the ideas of targeted welfare used to justify what is an increasingly vicious welfare state. Some observers might also be sceptical about the above reports because they both come from Glasgow. The city has made

considerable investments in cultural regeneration, yet a little-known fact is that over the years of 'regeneration' in the 1980s and 1990s, Glasgow's population declined by about half, and by a good deal more in some of the city's poorer areas. The famous branding slogan, 'Glasgow Smiles Better', belied a massive population clearance.³¹

Not only is a meaningful discussion of musical cultures avoided in the reports above, but they also fail to compare Sistema to similar but earlier movements such as Scouting. The omission of such comparisons – important for assessing the newer program's promises – is very convenient for Sistema. For much longer than Sistema, the Scouts and Guides have also attempted to promote civic virtues among the young. By also encouraging an active lifestyle and outdoor activities the Scouting movement may claim to promote all-round health, rather more credibly than Sistema's advocates. However, home-grown initiatives such as Scouting are widely recognised as militaristic and rather conformist in character: praiseworthy in some ways, perhaps, but an unreliable instrument of social policy. Sistema-style social action goes further than Scouting, because it is a particularly conformist intervention in the curriculum of schools which – unlike Eton – are under-resourced and ill equipped to provide a pluralistic musical education. In this context it is almost as if the question of how to teach history in districts of educational under-achievement and disadvantage were to be resolved by outsourcing the task to the Territorial Army.³²

Thanks to the way researchers have embraced neoliberal thought, Sistema Scotland has escaped comparative evaluation as both a musical and a social project. What comes across most of all is the political slavishness of the key research projects. It recalls another example of slavishness: the widespread adoption of Bill Gates's ideas to improve public education in the US. The Small Schools Initiative, like Sistema, promised to spread social capital among the young and promote educational and social well-being.³³ In the end Gates admitted that his scheme had been a huge flop. Arguably the most important lesson to be drawn from it is the way policy makers and researchers are all too ready to take up ideas backed by private investments

without considering their relationship to issues of progressive taxation and structural reform. In the reports discussed above, the type of futurological cost-benefit analysis used by the IDB to justify its loans to Venezuela for El Sistema has a crucial role. However, the wider strategic justification for such loans in Latin America has been ignored. In the analysis of the major multilateral lenders to El Sistema, such as the Latin American Development Bank (CAF), investing in the development of human capital is made to appear preferable - in the medium term at least - to Latin American states raising tax revenues.

For such a strategic analysis to be credible it must acknowledge the problems that have resulted from low taxation, but the solution promoted by CAF - the promotion of transparency leading, gradually, to a broader tax base - is highly ideological and very unlikely to suffice.³⁴ In the 2012 report, *Public Finance for Development: Strengthening the connection between income and expenditure*, CAF presents a theoretical ideal of reciprocity between state and society which effectively smoothes over the turbulent history of state formation and taxation in different countries. As the history of the United States would suggest, there is no straightforward path to progressive taxation, rather there are periodic movements that go in different directions. This is because taxes are not simply, as the authors of the CAF report stress, one of the ways states become more accountable and transparent to citizens. Notwithstanding this virtuous relationship which produces public goods, struggles concerning taxation are also struggles over the distribution of power in society. Therefore, a realistic account of taxation policy needs to take into account the role of political capital which is created by trade unions and related social movements. In place of such a discussion of class conflict, CAF presents the mythical notion of reciprocity between state and society coming at no particular cost to the rich, and with no radicalization coming from the grass-roots. Because this sort of partial reasoning about costs and benefits, comes from lenders who profit from identifying the gaps in public spending and filling them, they ought to be looked at critically by public researchers. Predictably, this is not the case in the Scottish studies discussed above.

Low rates of progressive taxation and 'flat taxes' are of course a rallying point for the rich. The well-to-do sections of society in Latin America have often called on military rulers to protect their privileges. These and other efforts from the political right mean there is less money for 'the left hand of the state' (i.e. health, education, welfare, etc.), unless natural resource revenues, as in a country like Venezuela, cover the shortfalls in public finance. But over time they do not; and with the state's left hand disabled, the demand is created for private services, loans, charity, and interventions from Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) like Abreu's El Sistema or Gates's Small Schools Initiative. When it comes to civil society, NGOs are also the key actors which lenders such as IDB and CAF refer to and fund. The plutocratic virtuous circle looks like this: Lower Tax = Increased Profit = Increased Capacity for Voluntary Giving = Increased Private Influence = Low Tax. For lenders who profit from this circle, the beauty of reductive forms of social capital theory, is that unlike some of the more disreputable infrastructure projects and misconceived industrial projects they 'sold' to developing countries, the demand for 'investments in people' may become all the greater as the taxation base is cut back.³⁵ Yet, when health care, schooling and other public services are pared down at the same time as finance capitalists benefit from eye-watering bailouts, questions are rightly asked about who benefits most in a system that now appears geared to provide socialism for the rich and capitalism for the poor. The rhetoric of investing in people and mythical cost-benefit calculations cast a veil over this political paradox and its real consequences.

The true human costs of poverty and inequality are immeasurable. How, for example, are the costs of infant deaths (which correlate with socio-economic inequality) to be adequately calculated?³⁶ Even if neoliberalism is ideologically palatable to the public in 'UK PLC', its shortcomings in publicly financed research ought to be of concern; the independence of research is still the best guarantee of value for taxpayers' money. Because the critical terms of research are increasingly tailored by the state in the UK and other countries, greater competition for public funds does little to deliver truthful research.

Resilience crops up a lot in the GCPH report discussed above. When it comes to socio-economic policy, the discourse of resilience is one of the important hands on which many gloves can be fitted, but this is also one where there is striking difference between governmental research at the national level and international research. Most governments are not doing nearly enough to address climate change, but this does not mean they do not think about it a lot. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) makes some of the consternation visible.³⁷ In the IPCC (2012) analysis the world is divided between those wealthier countries with the resilience to withstand the worst knock-on effects of climate change, and other poorer countries, likely to be subject to increasing instability and revolutionary change. There is not space to properly discuss the IPCC's division of the world here. Suffice it to say that the invention of a CO2 curtain may naturalize securitization, instability and crises which have geo-political and human-induced characteristics; in other words, it is a conceptual division which is open to much abuse. The idea that the resilience of political regimes can be equated with stability is extremely questionable; stable regimes often come at the expense of overturning the rights of citizens, just as 'revolutionary' change is not always aimed at emancipation. In any event, the IPCC's macro-level discussions make the happy endings envisaged by Sistema-friendly research look even more fictive. In the context of a divisive environmental crisis, the investment in individual upward mobility through symphony orchestras looks like just one of many attempts to make the American Dream ideologically applicable at a time of impending strife. It would be much more fitting to look at the prospects of socio-cultural equality given that US ideology is in fact faltering. As one sociologist puts it, with increased inequality, and a decline in social mobility, 'the American Dream is dying'.³⁸

The sense of widespread socio-environmental crisis, openly, if not transparently, discussed by the IPCC, makes it very difficult to take the reports discussed above seriously as research on children's future. But even without recalling the IPCC's 'big picture', the sense of reading foregone conclusions in Sistema-friendly reports becomes clearer if they are compared with a 2009 collaborative study by the Sistema

Scotland Knowledge Exchange Team (SSKET), published by the Scottish Royal Academy of Music and Drama (now the *Royal Conservatoire of Scotland*).³⁹ Based on a series of twenty meetings, this is a more tentative report, and its character can be seen immediately in the cover image showing people engaged in different conversations. The photograph is suggestive of some communication difficulties being overcome, but it also registers a certain tension and fragility, rather than the usual joyful picture of organised harmony. The SSKET report examines the capacity for knowledge exchange among the different interest groups in and around Raploch and reveals tensions between Sistema Scotland's 'missionary'-like agenda and the concerns of local people. Such people raise structural issues about educational and cultural provision, and do not appear to be short-sighted rational actors. The report also points out that conducting open-ended research about Sistema Scotland met with resistance from the organisation, which called for some compromise on the part of the research team. In the words of the researchers, 'Sistema felt it important to be in control of the image/story presented', and although their work is much more revealing than the evaluations discussed above, reading their report one gets the sense that political compromise rather than research autonomy won the day.⁴⁰

Yet it doesn't take much open discussion to reveal some of the ways that Sistema-style social action enhances certain prejudices, instead of unifying communities as it promises. One of SSKET's research aims was to foster open discussions that would 'dissolve hierarchies'. The researchers say this was partly achieved but that larger groups would have been needed in order to 'allow critical voices to be heard but not so exposed.'⁴¹ The interesting thing about this is the way it suggests some of the more repressive aspects of local bases that drive communitarian politics. For example, discussions with neighbours which expose ideological differences can sometimes be more daunting than the sibling infighting in trade unions and political parties. An organization modeled on El Sistema, which stresses harmony, agreement and consensus (as opposed to debate and political accountability), may reinforce the most restrictive aspects of community activism.

One of the ways that we can identify the neoliberal ideology which influences the GEN and GCPH research evaluations is the way they eschew any discussion of the demoralisation of the deprived populations which Sistema targets for orchestral morale building, i.e. their lack of social glue, their need of cultural empowerment, and so on. Surely the taxpayer can expect public research to diagnose the nature of disease before investing in the cure. But there is no meaningful discussion of the political causes and character of social fractures, nor of the sense of disempowerment which affects working class 'communities' in the UK, which boasts the most repressive labour laws of any advanced country. Why would this be a relevant consideration? Firstly, the complex impact of anti-trade union legislation on the whole political culture of the UK is surely part of the problem which calls for analysis. Moreover, using the language of community empowerment while keeping silent about a repressive political consensus (one which works against both the employed and the unemployed), sounds very like researchers speaking with a forked-tongue.⁴² Secondly, one of the ethical conundrums in the arts is the way they are used to dignify an attack on genuine solidarity, i.e. the sharing of risk to livelihood.⁴³ In place of this demanding sense of solidarity, NGOs such as Sistema offer up the professionalised ethics, patronage systems, and the politics of gift-economics. The problematic character of this plutocratic dispensation is captured by the concept of NGOism, and this is yet another critical lacuna in all the reports discussed above.⁴⁴

Political and academic critics of NGOism see a massive network of organisations, paid for from above, and largely devoted to middle-class ideas of development. The issues of NGOism bring us back to where we began, because when trade unionists share risk in more vulgar-looking struggles for pay or better working conditions, many in society will recognise their militancy as historically significant, socially courageous, and in some sense beautiful, *only* after the event. Martin Luther King (1929-1968) made his last, and most famous, mountaintop speech, to striking sanitation workers, the day before he was shot. But even then, how many people who know of King's tragic speech also know of the workers' struggle overshadowed by his assassination?

Capitalism cannot obliterate solidarity; all it can do is create synthetic alternatives, and beautify them according to the profit motive. This is true of theories of spreading social glue (social capital) offered by development bankers as an alternative to progressive taxation and to justify interest-bearing loans. It is also true of the historical inaccuracies in a film like *The Mission*. The Jesuits did not stay to fight alongside their Guarani converts; in reality, European blood was never spilt.⁴⁵ Indeed, when Christian spiritual benevolence has taken the form of compensation for conquest and exploitation, it has always been a very mixed blessing.⁴⁶ Every imperially-minded takeover in history has been justified not only as logical, but also as good. Opening up public education to Sistema-style social action is no different.

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Notes and References

¹ Some of these perspectives from Britain and Latin America were evident in the conference, *El Sistema and the Alternatives: Social Action through Music in Critical Perspective*, held at the Institute of Latin American Studies, Senate House, University of London 24-25 April 2015. A full list of papers is available at <https://geoffbakermusic.wordpress.com/el-sistema-the-system/el-sistema-and-the-alternatives-social-action-through-music-in-critical-perspective/> (Last Accessed 25 June 2015).

² See Logan, O. (2015) 'Doing Well in the Eyes of Capital: Cultural Transformation from Venezuela to Scotland', in *Contested Powers: The Politics of Energy and Development*, McNeish, J.A., Logan, O. & Borchgrevink, A. (eds.) (London: Zed Books).

³ Just as Bolivarian revolutionaries speak about the need for revolution within the revolution, the support for El Sistema, which continued under Hugo Chávez (1954-2013), could be thought of as the counter-revolution within the revolution. See Logan, (2015) op.cit.

⁴ See Voltaire (1819), *OEuvres complètes de Voltaire: Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations* Tome III (Paris: L'imprimerie Crapelet), p.351.

⁵ Written by Robert Bolt, directed by Roland Joffé, released by Warner Bros (1986).

⁶ See Baker, G. (2014) *El Sistema, Orchestrating Venezuela's Youth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) p.152.

⁷ See *Evaluation of Big Noise, Sistema Scotland* (Edinburgh: The Scottish Government, 2011), henceforth GEN (2011). Available online, <http://www.gov.scot/Resource/Doc/345409/0114922.pdf> (Last Accessed 11 June 2015).

⁸ See Bourdieu, P. & Darbel, A. (1991) (with Schnapper D.) *The Love of Art - European Art Museums and their Public* (Cambridge: Polity), p.108.

⁹ GEN (2011), p.1.

¹⁰ Ibid. p.7.

¹¹ Ibid. p.33.

¹² See Logan (2015) op.cit.

¹³ More often than not, what may be described as 'Sistema-inspired' work is actually part of the wider repertoire pursued by Youth Music's funding applicants. There is a sense that the Sistema-tag is being adopted as a successful brand which sells in the

public sector. However Nick Wilsdon of Youth Music explains that: 'We require applicants to clearly identify a regional need, demonstrate an understanding of the target participants and develop a programme of work that meets those needs whilst putting young people at the centre of the delivery process. The fact that they are Sistema-inspired would have no bearing on our decision to fund them or not, they're subject to the same criteria as everyone else.'

¹⁴ From film voice-over by Richard Holloway, Chair of Sistema Scotland, and former Bishop of the Scottish Episcopal Church, speaking about El Sistema's celebrated 'graduate', the conductor, Gustavo Dudamel. Shown at the 'Big Concert', Stirling, Scotland, 21 June 2012.

¹⁵ GCPH (2015) *Evaluating Sistema Scotland - Initial Findings Report (Summary Version)* p.15. Available online at, http://www.gcph.co.uk/assets/0000/5059/Sistema_summary_updated.pdf (Last accessed, 11 November 2015).

¹⁶ UK Government statistics quoted by BBC. http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/studentlife/debate/2008/42_state_vs_private_school.shtml (Last accessed 25 June 2015). In Venezuela the 15% of pupils found in private schools rises to 26% at high school level. At the other end of the spectrum are the estimated 195,000 Venezuelan children who are still not receiving primary school education. See Tamara Pearson (2010) *UNESCO: Education in Venezuela Has Greatly Improved*, Venezuelanalysis.com (Published online: 27 January 2010) <http://venezuelanalysis.com/news/5107> (Last accessed 25 June 2015).

¹⁷ Without the sort of spectacle provided by an organisation such as El Sistema, it is difficult to imagine Latin American socialists, with Che Guevara as an ideological cornerstone, being able to justify the liberalism of their education policies, especially by comparison with traditional social democratic resistance to this aspect of liberalism in Scandinavia. Although improvements are evident in Venezuela, and much work has been done to tackle illiteracy, the structures of educational inequality are still firmly in place.

¹⁸ See GCPH (2015) op.cit. *(Summary Version)* p. 8.

¹⁹ See 'Mental health problems rife among professional musicians, by Frances Richens, in *Arts Professional*, available online at, <http://www.artsprofessional.co.uk/news/mental-health-problems-rife-among-professional-musicians> (Last accessed 25 June 2015).

²⁰ See Braithwaite, J., Chapman, B. & Kapuscinski, C.A. (1992) *Report to the Australian Criminology research Council, Unemployment and Crime: Resolving the Paradox* (Australian National University).

²¹ See GCPH (2015) op.cit. (Summary Version), p.5.

²² See presentation, *Evaluating Sistema Scotland*, Seminar, 18 May 2015.

Available online at,

http://www.gcph.co.uk/assets/0000/5062/Sistema_evaluation_slides_18th_May.pdf

(Last accessed 11 June 2015)

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ See GCPH *Evaluating Sistema Scotland - Initial Findings Report* (June 2015)

Available online at,

http://www.gcph.co.uk/assets/0000/5424/Sistema_findings_report.pdf

(Last accessed 12 November 2015)

²⁵ Ibid. p. 32.

²⁶ Ibid. p. 88.

²⁷ Ibid. pp. 34-57 ff.

²⁸ Ibid. p.38.

²⁹ See Eton College Scholarships,

<http://www.etoncollege.com/Scholarships.aspx>

(Last accessed 12 November 2015).

³⁰ Actual resources and facilities are among the many egalitarian issues cast aside by neoliberal education reforms, another is pupil-teacher ratios. See Smyth, J. &Wrigley, T. (2013) *Living on the Edge Rethinking Poverty, Class and Schooling* (New York: Peter Lang) p.140 ff.

³¹ Thanks to Very Rev. John D. Miller, a former moderator of the Church of Scotland, for pointing this out to me. Miller's Castlemilk parish in Glasgow lost up to two-thirds of its population in the 1980s and 1990s. In his words; 'The biggest single change in Castlemilk has been the disappearance of its population...' See 'A man of God and of the People', *The Herald*, 7 July 2007 available online at, http://www.heraldscotland.com/news/12779576.A_man_of_God_and_of_the_people/ (Last accessed 11 November 2015)

³² See also the discussion of the historical linkage between military and orchestral development in Baker G. (2015) *El Sistema, Orchestrating Venezuela's Youth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) pp.194-198.

³³ See 'The Plot Against Public Education' by Bob Herbert, *Politico Magazine*, 6 October 2014. Available online at,

<http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/10/the-plot-against-public-education-111630.html#.VXqRx0azncx>
(Last accessed 11 June 2015).

³⁴ Sanguinetti, Pablo; Berniell, Lucila; Álvarez, Fernando; Ortega, Daniel; Arreaza, Adriana; Penfold, Michael . 2012. *Public Finance for Development: Strengthening the connection between income and expenditure* (RED). Caracas: CAF Development Bank of Latin America

³⁵ For an incisive and detailed critique of the partial deployment of social capital theory (often excluding Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical and empirical studies), see Fine, B. (2010) *Theories of Social Capital: Researchers Behaving Badly* (London: Pluto Press).

³⁶ See Dorling, D. (2011) *So You Think You Know About Britain?* (London: Constable) pp. 6-39.

³⁷ See IPCC (2012) *Managing the Risks of Extreme Events and Disasters to Advance Climate Change Adaptation - Special Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* (New York: Cambridge University Press)

³⁸ 'See 'The Rich Haven't Always Hated Taxes' by Shamus Khan, *Time*, 18 Sept. 2012, <http://ideas.time.com/2012/09/18/the-rich-havent-always-hated-taxes/> (Last accessed November 2015).

³⁹ SSKET [Sistema Scotland Knowledge Exchange Team] (2009) *Final Report October 2009* (Glasgow : Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama) Available online at, https://www.rcs.ac.uk/common/documents/PDF/SSKET_FinalReport_5_Jan_2010.pdf
(Last accessed 11 November 2015)

⁴⁰ Ibid. p.17.

⁴¹ Ibid. pp.6-7.

⁴² GCPH say, for example, that: '*Over the long term, increased empowerment and community engagement, as well as improved employability and employment outcomes may lead to improved health and wellbeing among the Big Noise participants.*' [my italics]. See GCPH (June 2015) op.cit. p.54.

⁴³ There is often a significant difference between artists' ideas of solidarity and their deeds. The discrepancy tends to favour artists' alibis. However a notable exception can be found in the discursive origins of Augusto Boal's Forum theatre in the early 1960s. Boal's company toured an agit-prop play promoting the cause of land reform in rural areas of Brazil. A member of one their audiences, a peasant named Virgilio, took to heart the lyric 'let us spill our blood' and proposed an immediate plan of

action after the performance. It then became apparent that the performers were unwilling to take the risks which they exhorted audiences to embrace. Virgilio is reported to have remarked; 'So, when you true artists talk of the blood that must be spilt, this blood you sing about spilling – it's our blood you mean, not yours, isn't that so?' This moral dilemma became one of the foundational issues which Boal's model of theatre as a process of socially therapeutic catharsis set out to resolve, albeit by rejecting agit-prop rhetoric. It has sometimes been pointed out that another, no less creative route, would involve a more reflexive consideration of solidarity. See Boal, A. (1995) *The rainbow of desire, the Boal method of theatre and therapy* [translated by Adrian Jackson] (London: Routledge) p.3.

⁴⁴ For further discussions of "NGOism" see Opoku-Mensah, P., Lewis, D. and Tvedt, T. (eds.) (2007) *Reconceptualising NGOs and Their Roles in Development: NGOs, Civil Society and the International Aid System* (Aalborg: Aalborg University Press); 'A Country without a State: Governmentality, Knowledge and Labour', Folorunso, F., Hall, P. and Logan, O., in McNeish, J.A. and Logan, O. (eds.) (2012) *Flammable Societies Studies on the Socio-economics of Oil and Gas*, (London: Pluto Press). See also Yúdice, G. (2003) *The Expediency of Culture: Uses of Culture in the Global Era*. (Durham: Duke University Press).

⁴⁵ In *The Mission*, the Jesuit missionaries of the 1750s are portrayed standing shoulder to shoulder and dying with Guarani people under attack by Portuguese and Spanish forces.

⁴⁶ Historically, one of the Church's most impressive defenders of indigenous Americans, against his own people, is Bartolomé de las Casas (1484-1566), a Spanish Dominican friar and the first Bishop of Chiapas, in present day Mexico. Before entirely repudiating slavery in his influential religious-political efforts and writings, he recommended the exploitation of Africans as slaves, rather than Americans. Las Casas is accused of being partly responsible for initiating the Transatlantic Slave Trade.