

# Book Review: Benign Violence: Education In and Beyond the Age of Reason by Ansgar Allen

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In **Benign Violence: Education In and Beyond the Age of Reason**, Ansgar Allen challenges the view that education is, at its core, an incontestable social good by outlining how its structures are underpinned by systemic violence. While Allen's argument may not entirely sway readers away from the overwhelmingly positive value typically attributed to education, it nonetheless asks serious questions about the role that the education system and examinations have played in shaping us and our world, writes **Mithilesh Kumar Jha**.

**Benign Violence: Education In and Beyond the Age of Reason. Ansgar Allen. Palgrave Macmillan. 2015.**

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Ansgar Allen's *Benign Violence: Education In and Beyond the Age of Reason* provides a powerful Foucauldian critique of the education system that has come to dominate and subserve the 'interests of the present', and in the process has created a whole range of 'desirable' and 'undesirable' bodies in liberal democracies. Precisely because of the benign nature of its violence, education has enabled the governmental techniques of discipline and control to become more effective and hence the 'managing' of the population less chaotic. Allen demonstrates this through critically examining the genealogy of examination as it has evolved since the beginning of the twentieth century and has been used to make meritocracy a key feature of modern society. Allen rightly argues that: '(e)xamination has come to shape an entire set of perceptions. It conditions how we relate to ourselves, how we relate to one another and how we relate to our present' (xiv). In other words, examination has come to shape not only us, but also the world that we inhabit.



Contrary to the liberal ideal that freedom and compassion should be the outcomes of 'true' education, Allen demonstrates the transition from the Enlightenment's optimism and aspirations to the structured chaos and systematic brutalities that condition the range of choices an individual or a group of individuals may or may not have today. All must operate/act within the limits set by the education system. Even academic research must conform to this. 'Innovative' and 'futuristic' research, in the opinion of the author, is merely an extension of the dominant version of the present, and therefore is inherently limited in its scope for radically altering the basic structural injustices in the system. In the words of Allen, education has created a 'justly unequal' world, which is harder to bear than an 'unjustly unequal' world (243).

The book is divided into three parts – 'Bodies', 'Populations' and 'Meritocracies'. The use of each of these terms in plural form indicates their inner conflicts and multiplicity of usages. However, taken together, these three constitute a significant narrative progression through which the author examines the genealogy and impact of examination in the shaping of modern society.



**Image Credit: (Conal Gallagher, CC 2.0)**

Since the nineteenth century there have been conflicting debates over the nature of schooling based on the 'specific needs' of the child. The claimed objectives of such schoolings were to make each child more 'productive' or 'useful', and hence an asset for society or the state; however, often obscured and unstated objectives have aimed at making the child more 'amenable to the government'. In this context, there are two systems of examinations: the first is seen as 'oppressive, impersonal and excessively mechanistic'; and the second is designed to be 'flexible and pay attention to the needs of the child' (25), hence it is more celebrated. However, as the author argues, both of these traditions, contrary to the rhetorical claims of emancipating children from 'moral' and physical degradation, make them docile and subject to governmental control. Therefore, choosing one system over the other achieves little in emancipating the child as governmental 'power is never in retreat. Violence continues without interruption' (9). In this sense, schools and prisons typically resemble each other in terms of their use of techniques and 'ritualistic' routines in making bodies docile.

The section on 'Populations' examines the momentous jump from disciplinary power to biopower and the internal dynamics between the government and population. In this regime of sovereign power, *'the population is both the object of government and the source of guidance as to how that government should operate'* (emphasis in original, 117). While criticising the liberal rhetoric of 'freedom' and 'rights' for its hollowness, the author makes interesting observations about the possibility of truth on the side of violence, disorder or war against the 'system' or 'order', which are usually seen as 'problems'. In his opinion, equal and critical intellectual engagements with these aspects of violence, disorder or war would enable the possibility of an equally violent response to systemic violence and brutalities; yet, they have been paid little attention to and have been largely silenced.

'Meritocracy', which claims to be based on the 'fair' formula of 'merit = ability + efforts' and is of recent origin, has performed an 'indestructible ideological function' in modern times by legitimising differential and unequal societies. It also promotes similar treatment for individuals on the basis of their individual 'efforts' and 'merit'. Besides analysing the changes and shifts in the very idea of 'merit', the author carefully examines and points out the darker sides of the growth of eugenic studies in Europe since the middle of the nineteenth century and particularly during the Nazi regime in the 1930s. He convincingly argues how its claims of assessing human worth and intelligence have helped in the exercise of power by making some bodies 'desirable' and hence deserving of careful nurture and nourishment, and others 'undesirable' and therefore to be 'left to die'. Meritocracy, in the words of the author, 'came

to occupy the individual's interiority, impacting on his or her self-understanding, self-appreciation, and practices of self-development' (182). This idea of meritocracy, then, in serving to 'structure and condition perception', helped in the exercise of governmental power and also made it less objectionable.

This book is an addition, and of course a valuable one, to Foucauldian studies. But it does not sufficiently engage with the question that if subjects are always already shaped and conditioned by the structure of disciplinary power or biopower, then how can one explain the major changes that the modern world has witnessed in the last two centuries? Of course, it is true that such changes have hardly altered basic structural injustices and, in fact, have reproduced them in various forms. However, modern education has not *just* helped in the exercise of power, but has also played significant roles in various emancipatory politics and struggles, for example in anti-colonial struggles in many Asian, African and Latin American countries.

The book, as claimed by the author, may upset many readers in challenging their views of the modern system of education. But it may hardly alter popular perceptions about the positive role of education, which, in the opinion of Allen, basically legitimises systemic violence and injustices. At times, *Benign Violence* appears to be too embedded in Foucauldian perspectives to provide fresh insights into the functioning or effects of education and examinations in producing modern subjectivities. However, the book certainly throws serious challenges before academics, policy makers, students, parents and teachers alike about the larger role that education and examinations have played in shaping us and our world. One may agree or disagree with the arguments of the book, but it does raise some critical questions about examinations and the education system as a whole in contemporary capitalist neo-liberal democracies.

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*Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.*

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