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Cultivating the self-reliant and responsible individual: the material culture of financial literacy

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the promotion of financial education by many national and international organisations around the world. Drawing on the material culture of financialisation, financial education policy is perceived as part of a broader neoliberal project to extend commodification and (re)construct social and economic reproduction in ways favourable to the financial sector. It argues that, while numerous contradictions inherent in financial education programmes jeopardise the goal of improving individual financial decisions through education, the ideological goal of these initiatives is not compromised. It is the neoliberal cultural project of cultivating self-reliance and individual responsibility at the expense of collective forms of provision across new areas of economic and social life.

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Financial literacy and the material culture of financialisation

Financial education has turned into a global policy agenda.[1] This agenda involves concerted action of major international organisations, such as the World Bank and the OECD, and the commitment by an ever-growing number of governments to implement so-called national strategies for financial education.[2] The spectacular and growing numbers of international and national agencies advancing financial education provide indisputable evidence for the magnitude of on-going material changes and their demand for corresponding profound cultural changes in how people both interact with, and perceive, various dimensions of financialisation.

This worldwide interest in individual and household financial knowledge and understanding is symptomatic of the financialised configurations of contemporary capitalist societies, that is, of financialisation,[3] which have increasingly integrated individuals and households into financial markets. The retrenchment of the welfare state is identified as a relevant factor explaining the penetration of finance into ever more areas of economic and social life as social reproduction has become more and more dependent on the financial sector (for example, Barba and Pivetti 2009, Montgomerie 2009, Froud et al. 2010). This has meant that individuals and households have become increasingly responsible for their future financial security through expanding demand for financial products and services that are to supplement or replace public provision, as in the area of pensions, and have increasingly relied upon credit to provide for housing, education, health or consumption in general. This growing involvement of individuals and households with the financial system has been accompanied by the extraordinary expansion and innovations of the financial sector, supplying a myriad of more complex and hard to understand financial products and services, demanding more financial knowledge and understanding on their part. But, more than the logical corollary of the growing demands on individual and household financial decision-making, the financial education

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agenda is part of a broader neoliberal project to extend (re)commodification and (re)construct social and economic reproduction in ways favourable to the financial sector.

Drawing on the material culture of financialisation, and associated 10Cs (Fine 2017), this paper argues that financial education aims at ensuring suitable *Conformity* of understandings and meanings (or *Construals*) of financialisation to the material processes, structures and relations that guarantee finance's continued expansion (or *Commodification*) and, in the aftermath of the crisis, the transfer of the costs of the problems finance itself created onto individuals and households. It aims, in particular, at the cultivation of 'a corresponding (neoliberal) culture of individual, or individualised, responsibility, at the expense of the collective across ever-expanding terrains of economic and social life' (Fine 2017). The paper shows that the numerous *Contradictions* informing financial education policy support the view that to improve individual and household financial well-being through better financial knowledge and understanding is not its sole goal. More relevant is the ideological goal of cultivating the values of self-reliance and willingness to bear risks in place of values such as the collective provision of certain human needs and the observation of substantive conceptions of equality. This is so because self-reliance and willingness to bear risks are perceived as critical to legitimise the expansion of the financial sector into domains of social life where collective forms of provision previously prevailed and potentially prevail. Finally, the absence of genuine *Contestation* by relevant *Collectives* is taken as a sign of the success of both material and cultural practices of the neoliberal project.

Financial education as a global policy agenda for financialised worlds

Already before the 2008–2009 international financial crisis, international and national agencies, such as the World Bank, the OECD, the European Commission, governments and financial regulators, were actively advancing national strategies for financial education. Even though these strategies were not framed in this way by their proponents, the increasingly financialised configurations of the economy and society, imposing added financial decisional burdens on individuals and households, are evoked to justify the need for promoting financial education at the national scale.[4] Pervasive in official documents are the challenges posed by on-going and necessary future reforms of the welfare states, implying the transfer of the responsibility and risk from the collective to the individual, and by the extraordinary expansion of the financial sector, supplying to individuals and households an ever wider range of complex financial products and services.

This overall background is very clearly presented in OECD official documents and publications, as one of the leading organisations in placing financial education on the political agenda, especially in the developed world.[5] The OECD project on financial education started in 2002, very revealingly, under the aegis of the Financial Markets and the Insurance and Private Pensions Committees (OECD 2005a). In 2008, it set up the International Network on Financial Education (INFE) to encourage and guide the launching of financial education programmes among its members. In 2015, more than 240 public institutions from more than 110 countries had already joined the network.[6] While their implementation began in the early 2000s (mostly in developed economies such as, the Netherlands, the UK and the USA), this policy gained momentum after the financial crisis of 2008–2009 (OECD/INFE 2009). In 2011, 26 countries had designed or implemented their strategies (Grifoni and Messy 2012), a number that rose to 45 in the following two years (OECD 2013a), and more countries are expected to launch their national programmes in the future.

The, ongoing and future, reform of welfare states is the point of departure for the financial education agenda (OECD 2005a: 28). The reform of pension systems, which is reducing state- and firm-supported pensions and introducing private pre-funded schemes, is a case in point. It implies that workers have increasingly the responsibility to save for their retirement, involving increased financial decision-making and the transfer of investment risks to individuals. Workers now need to make decisions about whether to contribute, how much to contribute, how to allocate contributions across investment options and be willing to accept that their retirement income is to be determined

by the saving and investment decisions made during their working lives. The relevance of financial education is further magnified by the increasing number and complexity of financial products provided by a growing number of heterogeneous financial institutions.

The financial crisis of 2008–2009 intensified these trends, as the resolution of the crisis through austerity has implied a generalised weakening of public support, turning financial literacy into 'an important individual life skill' (OECD/INFE 2012: 2–3). The crisis was thus used to consolidate the inevitability of reforms that imply a greater transfer of responsibility and risk to individuals, making financial literacy a more relevant and necessary life skill.

The role that subprime had in setting off the financial crisis was used to push further the financial education agenda, namely by exposing the consequences of 'uninformed' credit decisions, especially those relating to mortgage loans, which represent a significant individual or household financial commitment. The crisis was thus taken as a 'teachable moment' as 'its direct, stressful and potentially significant long lasting consequences on individuals' wealth and well-being have incited households to become more concerned and interested in financial issues' (OECD 2009: 7–8).

But financial education policy is not only targeted at the unsophisticated consumers. It is targeted equally at those on low incomes to 'avoid the [high] cost charged for financial transactions' and those with money to invest by supplying them with 'more specific information about the advantages and disadvantages of particular types of investments' (OECD 2005a: 13), and this irrespective of the stage one finds him/herself in life. In the words of the European Commission (EC 2007: 4):

> Financial education can help children to understand the value of money and teach them about budgeting and saving. It can give students and young people important skills for independent living, for example in managing and repaying student loans. It can assist adults in planning for major events like buying a home or becoming parents. It can help citizens make better financial provision for unforeseen situations, invest wisely and save for their retirement.

If doubts remain about the ambition of financial education programmes, the launch, in 2012, of the first large-scale international test to assess financial literacy among 15-year-olds (included in the OECD Programme for International Students Assessment, known as PISA), suffices to dispel them. The test's stated goal is to assess the extent to which young people are 'prepared for the new financial systems that are becoming more global and more complex', which are expected to be substantially different from those known by older generations. This anticipates greater exposure to global and complex financial markets as younger generations 'are more likely to have to bear more financial risks in adulthood than their parents', including 'more responsibility for the planning of their own retirement savings and investments, and the coverage of their healthcare needs'. The diagnosis is thus the need to educate younger generations about financial matters as early as possible because efforts to improve financial knowledge in adulthood 'can be severely limited by a lack of early exposure to financial education and by a lack of awareness of the benefits of continuing financial education'. In newly financialised worlds, where access to a wide range of goods and services requires financial decision-making, financial literacy becomes one condition for 'equality of opportunity', as with any other type of literacy, assigning to schools the responsibility for advancing 'financial literacy among all demographic groups and reduc[ing] financial literacy gaps and inequalities' (OECD 2013b: 142–3).

Notwithstanding the important role of the crisis in advancing the financial education agenda, the main targets are not those blamed for taking out loans they could not afford or signing contracts without fully understanding the terms (or those promoting and selling them). The targets are those that are to renew engagement with finance as borrowers, investors and insurers so as to provide responsibly for their present and future needs.

Financial education and the construction of market society

Financial education is praised for its contribution to the improvement of the functioning of financial markets and the economy more generally. By demanding products more responsive to their needs, financially literate consumers, it is argued, encourage providers to develop new products and services, increasing competition, innovation and quality in financial markets. This is taken to have a positive impact on the economy by increasing overall savings and the efficient allocation of resources and thereby investment and economic growth.

This emphasis on the role of financial education in the workings of financial markets and the economy has been explicitly and repeatedly underlined by various agencies, denoting the hegemony of neoliberal ideology favourable to market expansion through de-regulation. The OECD (2005a: 35) envisaged already at the outset that by being 'in a better position to protect themselves on their own and to report possible misconducts by financial intermediaries to the authorities', financially educated consumers 'facilitate supervisory activity', which 'might in principle allow for lower levels of regulatory intervention', reducing the 'regulatory burden on firms' and allowing governments 'to spend fewer resources on enforcement of regulations and on the investigation and prosecution of fraud'. In the UK, the National Strategy for Financial Capability too, under the aegis of the Financial Services Authority (FSA), was grounded on the presumption that 'better informed, educated and more confident citizens, [are] able to take greater responsibility for their financial affairs and play a more active role in the market for financial services'. They will then become more 'active consumers', fostering competition and 'helping UK financial services firms to become more efficient, innovative and globally competitive'. The expectation is that 'in time, higher levels of financial capability could mean lower business acquisition costs for firms, greater persistency and less need for regulatory intervention' (HM Treasury 2007: 7). Along the same line, the Swedish Minister for Financial Markets, Mats Odell, underlined the imperative of 'households' ability to manage their personal finances' to the good of the financial sector since '[o]nly then will we get the savvy consumers the Swedish financial sector deserves and need to face tougher competition' (Odell, cited by Bay et al. 2014: 39). Explicitly referring to OECD's Recommendations (2005b), and with the hindsight of the financial and economic crises, in 2011, the Portuguese National Council of Financial Supervisors (CNSF 2011: 5–6) underlines also the role of financial education in ensuring financial stability insofar as 'well informed citizens, through the choice of financial products suited to their risk profile and needs, help to monitor the markets, thus contributing to the greater stability of the financial system'.

The empowerment discourse of financial education is therefore of a radically different nature from that of traditional consumer policy. A new regulatory project is in the making in which the emphasis is on protecting financial markets and institutions from households (Williams 2007). Regulators thus 'appear to reverse the idea of market failure posing a risk to consumer welfare, focusing instead on the risk of consumer "failure" jeopardizing the health of financial markets' (243). The financial education agenda thus launches a new regulatory project whereby the literate or capable financial consumer becomes a 'regulatory subject', who is responsibilised for the good functioning of financial markets through 'managing her present consumption to provide for future needs' (248). That is, rather than focusing on problems that asymmetric information poses to consumers' welfare, within the neoclassical economics framework of 'market failures', financial education policy focuses instead on the problems deficient decision-making poses to well-functioning markets.

While apparently akin to traditional consumer protection policy, potentially contributing to consumer empowerment through helping individuals understand financial risks and make decisions better adapted to their personal circumstances, the financial education policy agenda is substantially distinct: where 'consumer protection puts the burden on the financial institutions and the legal system', with 'financial education the burden is on the individual' (OECD 2005a: 21); and where 'consumer protection emphasises legislation and regulation designed to enforce minimum standards, require financial institutions to provide clients with appropriate information, strengthen the legal protection of consumers when something goes wrong, and provide for systems of redress', financial

education provides instead 'information, instruction and/or advice' to help the individual 'to make informed choices, to know where to go for help, and to take other effective actions to improve their financial well-being and protection' (OECD 2005a: 26).

In reducing the problems to be tackled to deficient financial literacy, financial education policy essentially assumes the good workings of financial markets as it passes on the idea that consumers need only be financially literate to make welfare-improving decisions. This inversion of the terms of discussion is instrumental in advancing market solutions to pressing societal problems, especially those stemming from the alleged unsustainability of the welfare states rationalising greater demand for financial products and services. This confidence in 'the market', which is not discussed, and in the capacity of individual decision-making, if properly instructed, serves to reduce the issues at stake to a technical and de-politicised discussion, and to reduce the terms of these in turn to responsible individuals. Financial literacy can then be unquestionably acknowledged as 'an essential life skill for individuals' and financial education as a policy that contributes to both financial stability and individuals' financial well-being (OECD 2013a: 16). In so doing, the financial education agenda obfuscates the role of socioeconomic structures, especially financial ones, that both embed individual and household decisions and how they are to translate into individual and aggregate outcomes.

This conforms to the neoliberal view of market society as a 'natural' and inexorable state, and of the market as solution to all sorts of problems, including those they themselves create, which exempt financial institutions from responsibility for economic and social problems while transferring it to the individual (Fine 2009, 2011, Mirowski 2009, 2013). It also conforms to the neoliberal conception of individual freedom, understood in the negative sense as the absence of coercion. Financial education is simply to help the consumer make more adequate choices based on her preferences and personal circumstances. They assist the consumer to choose for herself, avoiding other forms of intervention that would limit the range of options available, say through prohibition of extremely risky financial products. These are deemed intrusive obstructions as they would reduce the choice available to the rational decision makers who could benefit from them, impairing the efficient outcomes of free functioning of markets.

However, the faith in both the 'free' market and individual 'rational' decision-making stands in sharp contrast to the concerted action of international organisations and hundreds of public institutions around the globe that underlie the large-scale and synchronic design and implementation of national strategies of financial education. Interventions to 'educate' both belie faith in all-powerful, self-serving individuals and serve to constitute them as financialised subjects to prepare them for the new financialised worlds in the making.

Construing suitably *conforming* financialised subjects

Financial education policy must be put in the context of contemporary capitalist societies that are engendering a transformation of citizens into consumers where collectively earned individual rights are being replaced by increased access to a wider panoply of commodified products and services. It must be perceived, in particular, as part of a broader strategy that aims at promoting the expansion of financial markets at the expense of collective forms of provision, based on intensifying household relations with financial markets as borrowers, investors and insurers.

Financial education contributes to this endeavour by intervening, and responding to, the formation of the material cultures of financialisation (Fine 2017). It does so by ensuring suitable *Conformity* of understandings and meanings (or *Construals*) of financialisation to the material processes that guarantee finance's continued expansion and, in the aftermath of the crisis, subtly rationalises the transfer of the costs of the problems finance itself created onto individuals and households. This implies the neoliberal cultural project of moulding individual and collective values in the direction of greater individual responsibility.

Financialisation is at the heart of three decades of neoliberalism being a key defining characteristic of the world economy, deploying 'the ideology of non-intervention and efficacy of market forces as a

rationale for considerable intervention by the state, especially to promote the interests of private capital in general and of finance (and financialisation) in particular' (Fine 2011: 9). Financial literacy is part of this neoliberal strategy, belonging to a second phase where state intervention is not so much concerned with the release of the role of financial markets through privatisation and deregulation but with the management of prior interventions with 'the imperative of sustaining and not just ameliorating the process of financialisation' (Fine 2009: 8). In the aftermath of the crisis, this phase 'has been more overtly extensively interventionist in order to sustain the process of financialisation both, and primarily, on its own terms and through soliciting a modicum of acceptability given the extreme inequalities and iniquities to which it has given rise' (ibid). The most striking difference between the two phases is thus that 'rather than the state withdrawing to allow for the expansion of private capital, it was increasingly required to intervene to promote private capital', diverting discourse from the old dichotomy between the state and market towards 'the state making the market and globalisation work' (Fine 2011: 9).

In present neoliberal financialised times, state intervention implies, in particular, 'extending deeper into individual life'. As Finlayson (2009: 407) aptly summarises the process in the UK context:

> Liability is transferred from the collective via the state to individuals and as responsibilities that once fell primarily on the state are shifted to individuals the state takes up the task of ensuring that those individuals will be capable of carrying out their responsibilities. Just as the state seems to withdraw from one area of social life it extends deeper into individual life seeking to engender within people what are believed to be the appropriate aspirations. In this sense the interventionist welfare state, having been delegitimated and 'rolled back', finds a way to reinvent itself, intervening into and acting upon new objects in new domains.

Neoliberals acknowledge that market society requires state intervention to ensure neoliberal legitimacy, requiring continual attention to the interaction between market and non-market institutions and the values they nurture, specifically for their impact on the designs and design of market society. This is so because market society draws upon and induces a set of motivational and moral background conditions. These include the values of self-reliance and the willingness to bear risks, considered integral to the more or less tacit acceptance by individuals of the rules that frame markets and its underlying 'discipline' containing and veiling the role of the state (Mirowski 2009, 2013, Amable 2011, Rodrigues 2012, 2013).

A pessimistic intuition endangers neoliberal legitimacy: the potential popular rejection of the projected neoliberal version of the state. This renders imperative 'conscious intervention to change a culture in a direction more favourable to the neoliberals', constituting a fundamental tension in neoliberal thought (Mirowski 2013: 57). For the pretence of freedom as the absence of coercion ultimately must come to terms with the likely democratic rejection of neoliberal society. This partly explains why, as Mirowski (2013: 58) suggests, '[n]eo-liberals seek to transcend the intolerable contradiction of democratic rejection of the neo-liberal state by treating politics as if it were a market, and promoting an economic theory of democracy'. On Mirowski's view, this conflation of politics and economics finds its most clear expression precisely in the replacement of the notion of citizen by that of consumer of state services. This neoliberal angst offers an additional vantage point from which to assess financial education, one that envisages strong resistance to the withdrawal of collective forms of provision, which may lead to the re-emergence of deliberate efforts to reorganise the provisioning process in non-commodified ways, and based on a different range of principles, such as the satisfaction of certain human needs and the observation of substantive conceptions of equality.

The challenge for the neoliberal project is then to conceive social policy so that it cultivates the required values for the sustenance of the neoliberal market society, namely the values of self-reliance and the willingness to bear risks, considered integral to the more or less tacit acceptance by individuals of the rules that frame markets and underlying 'discipline'. As Amable (2011: 6) puts it:

> Public intervention is far from being prohibited [by neoliberals] but must be justified by reference to the promotion of individual competition … As a consequence, redistribution, that is *ex post* change in income distribution, or social protection, that is an attempt to limit the rigour of competition, is considered illegitimate.

> The individual is left exposed to economic risks and should not expect any guarantee of unconditional support, nor, of course, be granted any collective rights, because this would be morally reprehensible, provided that public intervention ensures that competition is fair, which means that every individual is exposed to it and no protection against competition is granted by the state.

This is exactly the logic behind financial literacy: to favour a culture where individual exposure to risk is acceptable and collective protection against it is undermined. Financial literacy programmes are well-placed to accomplish this since taking responsibility for the self can be realised through the intermediation of the financial sector. Individuals and households are precisely invited to engage responsibly and autonomously with finance to provide for housing, education, healthcare and income after retirement. And, as many have already noted, drawing on Foucauldian accounts of governmentality (such as Langley 2008), embroilment with finance involves the cultural embrace rather than fear of financial risks and rewards through entrepreneurial borrowing and investment for those with the right calculative skills and attitudes towards risk. Financial markets thereby become more and more prevalent in social and economic reproduction, further facilitating the take-up of associated risks.

The *contradictions* of financial education policy

The numerous *Contradictions* informing the financial education agenda support the view that to improve individual and household financial well-being through better financial knowledge and understanding is not its sole goal and role. It is also the ideological objective of cultivating the values of self-reliance and willingness to bear risks required for the extension of neoliberal financialised market society.

First, this policy aims at further entangling individuals and households into financial markets, as added responsibility for present and future well-being implies rising financial participation as borrowers, investors and insurers. Were improved decision-making and individual welfare the main objectives, financial education policy would need to consider alternatives to finance, or at least admit the possibility that abstaining from financial participation and financialised forms of provision could be preferable. But rather than (collective) financial disengagement, the focus, especially after the crisis, is on managing financial risks through further (individual) participation, often state organised or supported (most notably, for example, in subsidies to financialised forms of provision in support of health, education, pensions and so on). While the putative objective is to ensure that households are financially safe, safety is acquired 'not by withdrawing from financial contracts, but by trading actively' (Beggs et al. 2014: 984).

Second, the rationale for the financial education policy agenda is not empirically grounded, in the sense of demonstrating that it achieves its objectives. Granted that this may partly be due to the still incipient state of research on evaluating financial education policies, 'the overall picture, confirmed by other commentators', as O'Connell (2008: 17–18), an OECD consultant, summarises 'is that the evaluations so far have shown mixed and inconclusive results'. As a result, '[a] positive impact from financial education has not been unambiguously proven in all cases; nor has a clear picture emerged of what works best and why'. However, the prospects are not necessarily optimistic as the evaluation of these programmes is riddled with methodological difficulties pertaining to the establishment of clear-cut causal relations between financial education and financial behaviour due to the multidimensional and systemic natures of both personal finances and financial outcomes (see also Willis 2008b).

Third, and unsurprisingly, the effectiveness of financial education policies is now questioned by the very same sources that inspired it, through bandwagoning upon increasingly influential, and opportunistically appropriated behavioural economics research programmes, with the World Bank and the OECD in the lead (Fine et al. 2016). For example, a study commissioned by the British FSA to investigate the application of behavioural economics research to financial education has challenged the view that people may effectively improve their financial decision-making by learning

how to do it. It identified many, varied, reasons for people making poor choices other than their lack of knowledge and understanding of financial concepts and terms, suggesting that 'low financial capability is more to do with psychology than with knowledge' (de Meza et al. 2008: 4). The compilation of these psychological traits by behavioural researchers has inspired the 'nudge' approach to policy making, through which the design of 'choice architectures' allows the neoliberal policy-maker to choose for the individual (Thaler and Sunstein 2008), whilst apparently respecting freedom of choice.

Save More Tomorrow is one of the most celebrated policies, which aimed at increasing the American 401(k) employee saving plans (Benartzi and Thaler 2007). It was set out to promote the automatic escalation of employees' contributions, by synchronising the upward adjustment of employees' savings rates to pay rises, circumventing the psychological traits of aversion to income reduction and inertia. Thus, rather than providing information and training and letting people choose for themselves, a default option was designed to be selected in case employees failed to make a choice. This was deemed to respect individual choice, as employees had the option to opt out of the scheme. The programme was successful to the extent that it led to higher saving rates, under the assumption that people were under-saving.

This is not to say that behavioural economics is antagonistic to the neoliberal programme (Santos and Rodrigues 2014). Nudge policies may offer effective ways of engaging households with finance by dispensing with the need of persuading political actors to set up and implement the required institutions to produce the behaviourally desired transformations. Gabor and Brooks (2017) offer another eloquent illustration of such policies, now targeted at the inclusion of the financially excluded in developing contexts. With the aid of digital technology, financial inclusion is to be pursued through the mapping of the behavioural profile of costumers to tailor-deliver them the most adequate financial products.

Fourth, and perhaps more revealingly, the financial literacy agenda is challenged by literacy research more generally, accusing it of being erroneously based on the assumption that financial literacy is a 'singular capability that, when gained, automatically affects people's financial practices'. Indeed, it is as if such literacy is akin to the learning of a foreign language that capacitates the individual for its various uses. Financial literacy, however, much more fundamentally 'needs to be [socially] situated and studied in practice because the characteristics that constitute financial literacy, or those that apply to it, vary with time and place' (Bay et al. 2014: 37).

Fifth, some commentators have gone as far as to claim that financial education is actually an impossible project due to 'the velocity of change in the financial marketplace', which creates an insurmountable 'gulf between current consumer skills and those needed to understand today's complex non-standardised financial products' (Willis 2008a: 197). Moreover, financial institutions, which may gain from people's mistakes, can always be 'at least one step ahead of even cutting-edge personal-finance programs', meaning that 'financial-literacy education is chasing a moving target it will never reach' (Willis 2008b: 219). The generally low levels of financial literacy, the complexity of financial products, the specific circumstances and needs of consumers, and the speed of change in financial markets, together imply that 'effective financial education would need to be extensive, frequent, and personalized for each consumer', which would 'outstrip any public education campaign ever attempted' (Willis 2011: 5–6).

Sixth, and not least, the uncertainty intrinsic to financial decisions comprises another set of insurmountable difficulties that makes it virtually impossible to calculate the risks involved in financial decision-making, which are fundamentally unknowable (for example, Erturk et al. 2007 and Fine 2017). This has to do with the inter-temporal dimension of household financial decisions which are about managing income and expenditure through time, requiring taking into account: the evolution of employment and wage income; the likelihood of personal and social contingencies such as sickness, unemployment, family breakdown; the evolution of house prices; changes in public provision and events such as the crisis itself.

Finally, and summing up, financial literacy is doomed to failure due to the unbridgeable gulf between what it can deliver and the rational and moral demands on the neoliberal subject, and also the material and moral conditions of neoliberal market society. If, on the one hand, financial literacy can never promise knowledge of the unknowable, or attribute the individual responsibility for the systemic; on the other, financial markets can never promise individual and collective security. The recent incursions of resilience metaphors into financial literacy campaigns further expose this gulf by shifting the focus from predicting the future to the unavoidable need to absorb and accommodate its unexpected effects. In so doing, as Clarke (2015: 270) underlines, 'the resilience doctrine foreshadows the inevitable failure of successfully learning the content of FLE [financial literacy education] because people will always face crises of economic security and well-being'.

The non-*contested* nature of financialisation

The recent promotion of financial education for wide segments of the population is symptomatic of the dominance of neoliberal policies that involve new forms of state intervention, promoting the expansion of finance within both the market economy and systems of social provision (Bayliss et al. 2013). The greater individual and household involvement with the financial sector not only means that individual and social welfare depends more and more on financial decisions (for example, credit to buy a house, saving for retirement), it also means that more aspects of individual and household lives have become prone to volatility from financial instability (for example, evolution of interest rates, housing prices, profitability of pension funds, let alone wages and working conditions, and so on).

The financial crisis has revealed how dramatic these effects can be on households, ranging from insolvency problems, due to the combination of rising interest rates and falling housing prices, to the loss of a lifetime's savings due to stock markets crashes or even fraudulent practices on the part of financial institutions. Governments have then been called upon to deal with social problems generated by the disproportionate growth of finance. Surprisingly, what we have been witnessing is the public shaming of consumers for not having sufficient financial knowledge to provide security for themselves and their families. The speech of President Obama in launching the 2010 National Financial Literacy month exemplifies what has been a globalised trend:

> In recent years, our Nation's financial system has grown increasingly complex … many Americans took out loans they could not afford or signed contracts without fully understanding the terms … While our government has a critical role to play in protecting consumers and promoting financial literacy, we are each responsible for understanding basic concepts: how to balance a checkbook, save for a child's education, steer clear of deceptive financial products and practices, plan for retirement, and avoid accumulating excessive debts … Our Nation's future prosperity depends on the financial security of all Americans … Together, we can prevent another crisis and rebuild our economy on a stronger, more balanced foundation (Obama 2010: 1–2).

In 2016, eight years after the global financial crisis and ensuing institution of austerity as a permanent condition, the culture of individual responsibility thrives. Based on the UK, Montgomerie and Tepe-Belfrage (2016) show that financial (and non-financial) literacy programmes applied to the most destitute likewise cast 'poor families as lacking of essential skills to live in the world' (12), and thus propose tackling poverty by teaching indebted poor households 'to exercise prudence and temperance', and 'troubled families' to 'turn their lives around' (2). They underline the moral impacts of such literacy campaigns, which further marginalise the vulnerable by attributing their condition to bad decisions and morally deviant behaviours, and specifically their gendered effects as these policies tend to target poor women and thereby convey the idea that 'women's morality is what ultimately needs reforming' (3).

The gap between financial literacy discourses, responsibilising the individual for her financial vulnerability and for the financial crisis itself, sidelining socio-economic causes and the systemic factors that underpin financial market instability, raises the question of why the shift of responsibility, that once fell primarily on the state, to the individual is not being seriously *Contested*; especially as it

occurs in tandem with degrading levels of social protection, resulting in a deterioration of living conditions with the rise of unemployment, the deterioration of labour protection laws, stagnating income and growing inequality. While many resistance points have emerged, the fact of the matter is that finance continues expanding and individual and household financial engagements already show signs of recovering to pre-crisis levels.[7]

The absence of genuine *Contestation* by relevant *Collectives* might in itself be the result of the material and cultural transformations produced by three decades of neoliberalism. It is partly the result of the discourse of the financial education agenda that reduces citizenship to financialised consumerism, depoliticising and disempowering citizens as they become more and more responsibilised as consumers. Indeed, as citizens qua consumers are blamed for the dire circumstances in which they find themselves, financial hardship is increasingly perceived as one's own responsibility, irrespective of the reasons that led to reduced income, unsustainable indebtedness, insufficient saving for a child's education or for retirement. In addition, financial education agenda articulates with other narratives disseminated by other agents and through other means, which sideline alternative understandings and solutions to economic problems from public debate, precluding much of the potential for effective resistance to the interests of finance (See Stanley 2014, Happer 2017).

More fundamentally, and as mentioned, financialisation processes themselves, by replacing collective forms of provisions by individualised ways of securing basic household needs, render finance an ever more integral part of everyday life and its pervasiveness becomes increasingly naturalised. This means not only that those hindered by financialisation are increasingly perceived and publicly shamed for failing to provide for themselves and their families; but also that those who have succeeded through increased engagement with finance are perceived as financially educated and skilled, as well as responsible citizens, constituting new role models, that of the financialised subjects as specific examples of the neoliberal entrepreneur.

Finally, and relatedly, the fragmented nature of household engagements with finance may also help explain the lack of effective resistance to the interests of finance as 'contestation is inevitably *Collective*, especially if it is to be successful' (Fine 2017). In addition to unbalanced power relations in favour of the newly emerged and/or strengthened financial elites, fragmentation is occurring at the level of the working and middle-class households, most visible in the evolution of homeownership. As is now clear, including in countries other than the Anglo-Saxon world, financialisation has been a means through which particular groups have benefited from the accumulation and use of housing wealth, even if subject to temporal, spatial and social contingencies (Montgomerie and Büdenbender 2015). This has meant that some social groups have strengthened their relative advantage, reproducing and consolidating corresponding inequalities, producing 'a growing divide between the "haves" (on the housing ladder; higher income; older households) and "have nots" (not on the housing ladder; lower income; younger households)' (Robertson 2014: 7). That is, by (re)producing inequalities, benefiting one segment of the population more than others, financialisation has promoted and reinforced private, commodified, individualised forms of provision that are increasingly detrimental to the most vulnerable with ever feebler conditions to exercise successful contestation.

Notes

1. Many definitions of financial literacy and associated notions of financial education coexist in the literature (see Remund 2010). We will follow here the OECD's definition of financial education targeted to the retail consumer/investor, understood as 'the process by which financial consumers/investors improve their understanding of financial products and concepts and, through information, instruction and/or objective advice develop skills and confidence to become more aware of financial risks and opportunities, to make informed choices, to know where to go for help, and to take other effective actions to improve their financial well-being and protection' (OECD 2005a: 26).
2. The OECD defines a national strategy for financial education as 'a nationally co-ordinated approach to financial education' which: 'recognises the importance of financial education – including possibly through legislation – and

defines its meaning and scope at the national level in relation to identified national needs and gaps; involves the co-operation of different stakeholders as well as the identification of a national leader or co-ordinating body/council; establishes a roadmap to achieve specific and predetermined objectives within a set period of time; and provides guidance to be applied by individual programmes in order to efficiently and appropriately contribute to the national strategy' (OECD/INFE 2012: 7).
3. One of the most popular and all-encompassing definitions of financialisation is that offered by Epstein (2005: 3) referring to the 'increasing importance of financial markets, financial motives, financial institutions, and financial elites in the operations of the economy and its governing institutions, both at the national and international levels'.
4. That the term 'financialisation', however defined, is not used is not at all surprising as it has been developed and adopted by critical perspectives on the financialisation of contemporary capitalist economies. See Fine (2011).
5. The World Bank is instead more active promoting financial education in developing countries (see, for example, Rutledge, 2010, and Gabor and Brooks 2017).
6. http://www.financial-education.org/join_INFE.html (consulted on 28 May 2015).
7. The 'occupy' and the 'indignants' movements have certainly caught the public's eye and imagination worldwide, campaigning against the power of finance and austerity's regressive policies. And, while the prospects for important segments of the population continue gloomy, including those for the younger generations who cannot aspire to the living standards of their parents and even less so to climb on to the property ladder, mortgage lending, for example, already shows signs of recovery in many places. See, for example, http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/8cfddb46-c66f-11e4-add0-00144feab7de.html#axzz3hNx4Ho4s, and http://www.theguardian.com/money/2015/jul/24/mortgage-lending-shows-uk-housing-market-hotting-up, consulted on 29 July 2015.

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