

Liz Atkins, Paul Warmington and Vicky Duckworth - Book Symposium on James Avis (2015) *Social Justice, Transformation and Knowledge: policy, workplace learning and skills*. Abingdon/New York Routledge

Review 1

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Envisioning an alternative to neo-liberalism: social justice and a politics of hope

This book, which takes social justice as its analytic lens, makes an important contribution to analyses of the impact of economic and education policy in the neo-liberal context of the early 21st century. More than a simple critique of neo-liberalism, this book outlines the ways in which different ideological positions, whilst advocating different forms of localism, buy in to concepts of competitiveness, globalisation and the market, arguing that through this buy in, irrespective of their articulated ideological position, all political parties are responsible for the perpetuation of inequality, and all contribute to the (re)production of class and labour. In effect, there is little to choose between them, since all accept neo-liberal concepts as either taken-for-granted or articles of faith, and the end result of both is the same. Here, Avis makes the important point – which has echoes of Niemöller’s post WW2 statement ‘first they came for the socialists’ – that agreement with, or support for, neo-liberalism ‘is not necessary to condone it – all that is required is that we are unable to envision a ‘realistic’ alternative’ (p. 11). Thus, throughout the book, Avis grapples with the central question of ‘what lies beyond neo-liberalism’?

Encouragingly, as he points out (p.12), some tentative critiques of neo-liberalism did emerge following the 2008 financial crisis, although these were marginalised to the point of invisibility by the discourses of greed which developed associated with the banking crisis and the actions of those popularly perceived to have triggered it. Thus, the critique became largely limited to a *symptom* of neoliberalism, rather than neo-liberalism itself. Perhaps this is indicative of the fact that, having been immersed in an increasingly marketised, commodified and neo-liberal system for well over thirty years, most people – let alone policy makers – cannot conceive of anything different. And this is the real problematic in the alternative system that Avis call on us to envision. The folk memory of alternative conceptualisations and ways of doing things has largely been lost. In addition, a majority of contemporary policy makers will have been educated during or after the 1980s, and are thus themselves products of a self-perpetuating, neo-liberal, marketised education system emphasising profit and credential exchange value rather than democratic or transformative education. For these individuals the envisioning of alternatives to neo liberalism is akin to describing colour in the country of the blind (Wells, 1904). This absence of memory, or policy learning, goes some of the way to explaining some of the continuities and similarities between ONL, New Labour,

the Coalition and the recently elected Conservative administration highlighted by Avis. And their respective silences in terms of discussing approaches which sit outside the prevailing neo-liberal mind set, even where, at least in ideological terms, neo-liberalism is an alien concept to them.

So what is the alternative? Avis argues for a new kind of politics, grounded in social democracy and predicated on social justice, as a response to the failure of neo-liberalism and to address the issues of the ' . And yet, the policy makers themselves – irrespective of political ideology – all appropriate social justice as the rationale for their policies, particularly in respect of vocational education, commonly characterized as education for other people's children. Avis's analysis highlights the contradictions between the political rhetoric which claims greater equality within a more meritocratic society and the ongoing commodification and marketization of education, even amongst those of notionally similar ideology. In particular, he draws attention to tensions such as that between Fabianism (p.14) which locates educational and social reform in terms of economic efficiency, and ethical socialism which is primarily concerned with questions of social justice. It may be argued that, both in government and opposition, in a variety of incarnations, the labour party in the UK has failed to grapple with a series of fundamental questions about social justice and how it might be articulated in policy. What precisely do we mean by social justice? Does it encompass concepts of reciprocity? If so, how might that be defined? How do we define need without pathologising the receiver? Is the claim of socially just policy itself an oxymoron, when policy refers to the marginalised other? In this sense, do claims for social justice become part of the structures which perpetuate inequality?

These questions point to the key weakness in terms of arguments in favour of social justice. Despite an ancestry of thousands of years, in which the traditional Western view of justice as a 'common good' (e.g. see Aristotle Politics III, II. 1282b 15; Hume, 1740:318; MacIntyre, 1981:154/168; John Paul II's Catechism of the Catholic Church, undated: 421) emerging from the morality of the early Greek philosophers and ancient Judeo-Christian texts, has informed notions of social justice, it remains a fragmented and heavily debated concept. Whilst Avis acknowledges this, locating the term in contemporary academic understandings, as well as analysing its possible interpretations in the context of different ideological policy perspectives, it is significant that policy makers leave the term open to interpretation. Whilst this is convenient in terms of policy rhetoric, it does mean that no dialogic consensus has yet been achieved which could inform the politics Avis describe. This implies that for the time being at any rate, social justice remains a journey rather than a destination.

I turn now to Avis's discussion of vocational education. This argument draws on significant related issues such as the pathologising of working class culture – for example, through notions of the 'broken society', and of the working class themselves through questions about their 'educability', the tension between expansive notions of VET and traditional associations of VET, work and profitability, and intersectionality. His key point here is that intersectionality, in particular in vocational education- which may be seen as the home of

marginalised youth -needs to be considered in relational terms as, for example, the way in which structures of race, gender, and disability intersect with class, is reproduced and reconstituted through dynamic social practices, constantly reshaping and reforming – so the inequalities that are (re)produced are ever shifting and changing, demanding different responses and understandings. Avis also highlights ongoing arguments about the way in which neo –liberal conceptions of VET (p136) are associated with dispositions for certain types of work, these being working class occupations with limited opportunities for progression: suitable, possibly, for other people’s children, and certainly contributing to the perpetuation of in/equality. In this argument, he contests narrow, instrumental interpretations of VET in favour of more expansive forms of education, which could, he suggests, contribute to the formation of a more socially just politics of hope in ‘the ongoing struggle to create a fairer society in which we can freely express our species being’. This conclusion presents the reader with a challenge: to engage with the envisioning of alternatives to neo-liberalism, to create and identify spaces for activism, and avoid being counted amongst those who, by their inaction, condone the divided, divisive neo-liberal politics which currently frame our lives in differential and unequal ways.

Finally, we are left with two (largely) unanswered questions. Firstly, once we have established what lies beyond neo-liberalism – and we cannot know that it is the politics of hope Avis describes -we need to explore which practical actions we can take in the context of a different kind of politics in order to facilitate the greater activism and political engagement which is fundamental to generating a more socially just society. Secondly, before we do this, we need to have a clear and consensual vision of what a socially just society will actually look like, which means society and policy makers – particularly those on the left -addressing some of the difficult questions around social justice that I alluded to earlier. It is imperative that we take Avis’s work as a ‘call to arms’ and grapple with these issues, since, *as long as the process of accumulation for accumulation’s sake* (Marx, 1990: 742) continues to underpin our capitalist society, reflected in neo-liberal education and training systems which lead to class based differential opportunities in the labour market, and perpetuation of all forms of inequality - then the more socially just society Avis anticipates can only ever remain an illusion.

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Review 2

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Workplace Learning on the Terrain of Capitalism

Reflecting on modernism's apparent decline, social theorist Mark Fisher has contended that twenty-first century culture is afflicted by 'anachronism and inertia... buried behind a superficial frenzy of "newness", of perpetual movement' (Fisher, 2014: 6). His analysis is not born out of the familiar failure of old folks to grasp new social arrangements; on the contrary, it is symptomatic of frustration among those who still carry the hope of radical social transformation with 'the sheer persistence of recognisable forms' in politics and culture (Fisher, 2014: 7). Elsewhere Fisher (2009) has termed this mire 'capitalist realism', referring to capitalism's presentation of itself as the only realistically attainable mode of social organization, the only liveable terrain.

At the heart of James' Avis *Social Justice, Transformation and Knowledge: policy, workplace learning and skills* is a very similar frustration with persistent capitalist forms. In his follow-up to 2009's *Education Policy and Social Justice: learning and skills*, Avis examines workplace learning and skills policy (and related academic theory) over the past four decades. For Avis, workplace learning – particularly in the form of vocational education and training (VET) - is a site in which ostensibly progressive promises have concealed the penetration of education policy and theory by capitalist realism. The consequence has been a profound poverty of aspiration, wherein autonomy, creativity and expansiveness – the watch words of the putative knowledge society - are understood not as part of our species-being but as mere tools for effective performance. Even supposedly transformative practices are predicated upon reproducing capitalist relations of production, exchange and domination; knowledge and social justice are conflated with competence and efficiency.

In the book Avis begins by unpicking one of the clichés with which discussion of workplace learning has often been glossed. He reminds us that far from being a neglected 'Cinderella' sector, workplace learning has in recent decades been the object of intense political scrutiny. In the UK a supply-side logic has dominated: the logic being that if the education sector directs its energies to 'upskilling' learners then employers will avail themselves of this enhanced labour power. The compact between employers, educators, learners and technology will, we are told, promote a high skills economy and transformations in workplace practices. This logic pervaded the rhetoric of 'post-Fordism', with its mantra of high skills-high trust work, and has more recently shaped the rhetoric of the 'knowledge economy', with its emphasis on immaterial labour and the creation of a 'learning society'. What this rhetoric

obscures is that the compact is asymmetric; it is dominated by the creation of value, and sinewed by class, race and gender.

Although there has been a proliferation of new ‘technical solutions ...to address the shortfalls of the public sector and state education’ (44), the prior ideology shaping workplace learning retains its basic character. In the UK this has been apparent in the shape of the 14-19 curriculum, post-16 provision, further education and in-work training. The ingredients, as Avis reminds us, are an untested faith in education as the key driver of economic fortitude and a win-win insistence that there is no contradiction between economic and social justice imperatives in education and social policy. Above all, as Gleeson (1996: 83) pointed out long ago, there is an ‘abandonment of pretense that education and training is anything more than the servant of industrial, business and economic interests.’ In work-based learning the hidden curriculum is not even hidden.

Moreover, as Avis rightly argues, even in its own terms workplace learning under capitalism falls short, not least because upskilling as an economic solution – what we might term the employers’ needs model - fails to recognised that the ‘polarised skills structure’ (41) of post-industrial economies means that there is no ‘straightforward logic of upskilling’ (41). The so-called knowledge economy has failed to equip us all with jetpacks and lazer beams; ‘rotten jobs’ (42) are still a growth area and as Blacker (2013) has emphasised, the fate of a growing global underclass falls even below the level of rotten jobs. Millions are now excluded from the normal economy and its education systems.

Avis argues that to understand fully the distorted promise of what the Fryer Report (1997) once termed *Learning for the Twenty-First Century*, it is essential to return to Marxist definitions of transformation. In Marxism transformation carries two very different meanings: one refers to ‘the dynamic and “revolutionary” aspects of capitalism’ (73) (what Schumpeter to as *creative destruction*); the other, Avis reminds us, refers ‘fundamental changes to society’ (73). However, in the world of capitalist realism fundamental social change is discounted as a possibility; consequently, claims to radical change in workplace policy and theory have become limited to change in local practice, not transformations in the social relations of the workplace.

The persistence of capitalist realism accounts for continuities in policy across party political divides and across different policy periods. Despite the fascination with change, learning policy in the UK and similar economies remains situated ‘on the terrain of capitalism’ (30). For Avis, this fixity also extends to many of those who seek to stretch the logic of workplace learning. Because, argues Avis, socio-cultural theorists emphasise learning and knowledge creation that takes place at work, rather than the wider socio-economic context of workplace learning, their notions of creativity and expansiveness remain ‘set ...within a capitalist logic. To the extent that they are concerned with transformation this is located within capitalist relations and thus their radicalism is limited’ (73).

This limited radicalism also has implications for claims to promote social justice. In contemporary policy social justice tends to be defined in terms of possessive individualism, social mobility in terms of individual competition and positioning. Thus in the UK, in particular, we are burdened by timeworn calls not for socio-educational relationships to be fundamentally transformed but merely for VET to be accorded parity with *academic* pathways that are themselves stratified by class, race, (dis)ability and gender). In such frameworks aspirations to transform social relations are:

...at best marginalised and at worst ignored. This is because its progressivism is rooted in notions of access, the provision of opportunity and a desire to dignify labour. Whilst offering glimpses of a radical critique, it more readily folds over into a stance that accepts capitalist relations. (74)

However, for Avis, sober analysis of workplace learning under capitalism need not lead to hopelessness or paralysis. By his own admission, he continues to seek progressive possibilities in workplace learning, envisaging a form of learning consciously located:

...within a political economy of waged labour that places at its heart social antagonism. In this instance workplace learning would relate to the lived experience of waged labour and set this within the wider context of capitalist relations.’(74)

In my recent reflections on the writing of American neo-Marxists David Blacker, John Marsh and Pauline Lipman, I commented that their new work suggests that ‘correspondence, determinism, and pessimism may again need to enter our theoretical world views’ (Warmington, 2015: 266). In several senses Avis shares their outlooks. However, it is also true that pessimism need not be an eternal diagnosis; recognising capitalism’s blind alleyways can serve to redirect us in struggling for fundamental socio-educational change. Avis’ book is a reminder that we need not persist with capitalism’s definitions of learning, work or workers.

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Review 3

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Social Justice, Transformation and Knowledge: Policy, Workplace Learning and Skills

I did not arrive at this review blind to the work of Professor James Avis, indeed when I was a teaching in a Further Education College in the North West of England, I found his research on professional identity liberating. In addition - his writing on the politics of care - offered a deep understanding and language that unlocked how many people in the sector felt. It created a critical discourse that recognised the struggles in the sector. In an environment which was increasingly eroding the teachers' autonomy, I connected with Avis research emotionally and pragmatically; I drew on it as a source of empowerment and resistance. I took motivation from his commitment and challenge to reductive and damaging ideologies that silenced the teacher and drew inspiration from it for my own research (Duckworth, 2013).

A decade has passed since my first reading of Avis work and I was apprehensive that his latest publication might not meet my high expectations. I needn't have worried. With a skilful and scholarly style of writing, this accessible and never patronising book, unpicks, probes and sheds a sharp light on the policy contexts in which lifelong learning, vocational education and training and skill development are set. Throughout the pages, framed by key references to contemporary and historical scholars across disciplines, Avis draws on his extensive knowledge and experience to provide insightful critical perspectives that enrich the reader and the field of adult Education.

In many ways vocational education has become much less respected as a route in British education. This is summed up in a pertinent phrase by Professor Wolf, when she suggested that vocational qualifications were 'a great idea for other people's children'. Clearly, the political class see the vocational route as something they would not want for their kids, and as a result, it does not receive much mainstream political attention, it's way down the pecking order. Avis puts vocational education back on the table where it belongs. The eight chapters offer a timely detailed discussions of the nature of vocational education within UK, European and global contexts. The scope includes a razor sharp critique of neo-liberalism and its impact on vocational education and training and lifelong learning.

Against a political backdrop of an education system that undermines vocational education and one that is in constant flux – Avis offers a deep and daring analysis of the value of vocational education and workplace learning and in doing so offers progressive possibilities that challenge a reductive ideological lens. In chapter four we are taken on an examination of the different ways in which knowledge is conceptualised within these debates; Avis arguing

that transformation is frequently set on a capitalist landscape rather than being tied to a radical or progressive political project. He asserts that these concerns facilitate an exploration of the social justice implications. In doing so he draws on social and situated practice as an avenue to explore meaningful models of social justice, arguing that they have increasingly been linked to a radical stance. The socially situated practice/ knowledge challenges dominant models of education, it recognises that practices are formed in a number of contexts and domains, for example the private domain of home and the public domain of schooling. This discussion really resonated with me both as a teacher and researcher, for example, it brought to mind how recognising the socially situated literacies which learners bring into the classroom (see Duckworth 2013; Ade-Ojo and Duckworth 2015) is important in challenging inequality. It offers a critical space for learners who do not fit with dominant ideologies (the school's invisible curriculum and Conservatives individualism), a voice and validates their practices, leading to the development of more meaningful knowledge. Avis successfully draws on this approach in offering pedagogical alternatives which value learners and address historical and contemporary disparities that exist in the structural inequalities between the learners and their lives e.g. class, gender and ethnicity. The implications of this are that the meaningful practices that a community of learners bring with them, which are historically and socially constituted based on their backgrounds and experiences, can be given value in the classroom.

In his cutting challenge to the current policy discourse, Avis argues that to achieve a socially just system of education, It follows that we need to interrupt the reproduction of inequality struggles and that this should extend beyond education to a much wider societal politics. Such a stance, he continues, can be seen in analyses that explain inequality as a consequence of the social structure, viewing it as arising systemically from societal organisation. Subsequently, he argues, that we need to reform the social structure in the direction of social democracy – a reformist strategy. It is this vision that ignites and permeates the chapters.

Another essential component of education is expounded in chapter 7, namely the issue of curriculum, knowledge and skill. Avis draws on the power of Critical pedagogy to be transformative in offering a space where learners acquire a voice and can formulate a politicised understanding of wider society. Conversely, Avis also poses the danger that a critical pedagogical stance may fail to move learners beyond vernacular knowledge and this may deny them any emancipatory elements in disciplinary knowledge. His deep analysis drove me to the conclusion that it is through the exploration of ontological and epistemological assumptions, values and beliefs, context and experience, and competing worldviews, transformation is possible. The ideal being that the education system recognises and offers high quality vocational and work-based options for people from all backgrounds.

As he weaves social justice and knowledge together, the current conditions of austerity colour Avis' narrative in which education and social policy are also pinned to the discussion in a comprehensive and extremely engaging way. Claims are made regarding class as a structural feature of the social formation that has been obscured as a result of individualisation, policy conceptualisations and connected theorisations; these vital discussions prompted me into a

deeper reflection of concepts surrounding equity in education. Indeed, the range of critical perspectives make a stimulating read for anyone interested in adult and vocational education, educational policy and social justice.

Avis no doubt *cares deeply* for the Lifelong learning sector and Education as whole; he continues to recognise and place the teacher at the heart of his critical analysis:

Neo-liberalism stands in the way of these aspirations and to the extent that these are addressed, it is in spite of its performative regime and dependent upon the commitment of teachers. That is to say, neo-liberalism fails in its own terms and is supplemented by the free labour and goodwill of its workers (pp 105)

James Avis' book makes an important contribution to the field of Lifelong Learning, vocational education and social justice.

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