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Post-Fordist Idylls: Whither Education?

James Avis

Criticisms of our education system

It is now commonplace to bemoan the inadequacies of the English education system. From both left and right critiques are offered that share a common analysis of the problems faced. The elements of this critique are well known:

- the inadequacy of vocational education and training (VET) to deliver appropriately skilled individuals to meet the skills gap
- the inbuilt distortion of the education system which is a result of the vocational/academic divide, leading to under-performance and loss of talent
- this vocational/academic divide results in low participation rates in post compulsory VET
- the failure to develop a lifelong commitment to education and training and to create a training culture amongst ordinary people

These inadequacies damage the competitive standing of the British economy. Behind this rhetoric we can discern the formation of a new educational settlement, one that can hold within its sway the TUC, CBI, Labour Party, Liberal Democrats and, of course, the Conservative Party (1). These constituencies lie at the basis of this emerging settlement and gain additional support from the educational establishment as represented by DES, HMI, FEU, as well as by groups such as the National Commission on Education, and teacher unions. Even 'progressive' or radical educationalists share this analysis (Brown and Lauder, 1992).

This is not the place to explore detailed proposals from these various constituencies for the reform of education. There are at least two reasons for not doing so. Firstly,

proposals for reform are amenable to all sorts of pragmatic pressures which compromise their delivery. Secondly, and far more importantly, despite obvious political differences these groups share a common analysis. This analysis sets the agenda for reform.

An Agenda for Reform

Centrally this focuses upon the skills gap and the failure of English education to deliver an appropriately skilled workforce. Different strategies may be proposed but each will be assessed on how well or badly they deal with this particular problem. Because the constituents share a common analysis, the way is opened for technicisation, that is to say interventions become reduced to technical efficiency (Mishra, 1977). This then serves to distance solutions from their political and philosophical roots and the questions becomes how well are they suited to meet the stated problem. This shared analysis is crucial, for it rests upon a set of assumptions about the British economy. What then is this perception of the economy?

Many commentators argue that the British economy, for a range of historical and cultural reasons, is characterised by a low skills equilibrium (Cassels, 1990). This is reflected in the low take-up of post-compulsory VET as well as by the low level of qualifications held by the workforce. Finegold (1991) argues that there are distinctive features in the British economy which act as disincentives to training. Key among these is the short-termism of many companies, which is compounded by the influence of the City, and militates against taking long-term training investment decisions.

Following from this analysis it is suggested that the British economy lies at a crossroads. A decision has to be made as to whether to remain locked within a low skills economy - the Fordist option, or to take steps to implement a high skills economy - Post-Fordism, by

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developing the educational system as well as by dismantling the low skills equilibrium. However, the weight of the argument suggests that there is no real option other than to develop the high skills route. The low skills route leads only to a declining economy with all the ensuing social and political difficulties.

Functionalist models

In both Fordism and Post-Fordism we are offered a view of the economy which is articulated to other sectors of the social formation in a systemic manner. We are provided with a systems theory, a functionalist model in which differing parts of the social formation are articulated on the basis of and determined by the economic system. Thus a low skills economy has particular consequences and ramifications for the wider society. For example, such an economy sits easily alongside an elitist education system which is predicated on mass failure and delivers workers for the low skill/low waged economy. Post-Fordism provides a mirror image, offering instead a high skills economy, a mass higher education system and all sorts of progressive possibilities. The latter argument is appealing and has found some support amongst radical educationalists (Brown and Lauder, 1992). It is this appropriation of the argument that I want to explore, for it carries a series of deeply conservative consequences.

Post-Fordism

The Post-Fordist argument suggests that there has been - or at least can be - a qualitative transformation of the economy. The Fordist economy with its mass production and deadening work for the majority can be usurped by the development of a high skill, high trust economy and society. In this vision of the future we are offered the possibility of job satisfaction for all. So what's new? We have heard similar arguments throughout the post war period, camouflaged within notions of the post industrial society, post capitalism, and in some of the more fanciful versions of embourgeoisement (Vaizey, 1971).

What sets the current discourse apart? Firstly, the conditions developed from Thatcherism have set a new terrain for political intervention which has led to the

'New Realism' of the Labour Party, and secondly, the collapse of really existing socialism in Eastern Europe has problematised the political project of the Left.

For those involved with the sociology of education these conditions connect with more localised concerns. The deep pessimism of theories of reproduction of both simple and contested kinds has led to a growing interest to re-occupy policy and practical issues (Apple, 1984; Whitty, 1985). Debates within social theory are also important; the fracturing of the categories of class, race and gender, the collapse of the grand narrative and of identity politics has had its effect (Spelman, 1988). What now do we mean by socialism, what sort of society do we want to develop, and what part should education play? These doubts and uncertainties can be set against the certainties of Post-Fordism.

If the Post-Fordist strategy is adopted, the potential to grow and develop is offered to a much wider group of people, and such an economy would not countenance wasted talent. Thus the abilities and potential of those who are normally excluded from education would be developed; women, black people, the disabled, and older people. Notions of meritocracy and equal opportunity cover this and set it on the terrain of social democracy (Education Group, 1981).

However, in the arguments of lauder and brown (1991, 1992) there is the suggestion that these changes can be taken much further. They use Lacey's (1988) notion of collective intelligence. They suggest that the labour process characteristic of Post-Fordism requires teamwork, creativity, control and commitment. Each of these carries a democratising thrust. If firms are to compete effectively they will have to develop work relations such as these, which will themselves undermine hierarchy and existing patterns of authority. Work will be a decidedly social and collective enterprise. It is here that the progressive and radical nature of Post-Fordism is said to lie.

Serious problems

However, there are serious problems. Such an analysis marginalises the uneven development of the economy. Are we merely talking about a small primary labour market surrounded by a larger secondary and hidden

economy? Capitalist social relations are evacuated from the discussion, being at the same time silenced and normalised. These are rendered more palatable and we are offered not the possibility of transformation but a new stage in capitalist development predicated on a direct relation between individual creativity, collective work and a successful economy.

This vision ignores the presence of a variety of economic formations within a Post-Fordist economy. The patterning of social relations along class, race and gender lines is also marginalised. The systemic nature of social antagonism and exploitation revolving around these is apparently transformed by Post-Fordist practices. These practices require the greater participation and creativity of the workforce and will serve to even out hierarchy and carry a democratising impulse. By stealth, as it were, capitalist social relations will be undermined by the logic of an economic imperative which creates the conditions for the development of a fairer and juster society.

Appropriation of ideas

What is worrying is the manner in which these ideas can be appropriated and presented by educationalists in progressive ways. These ideas remain embedded in a framework dictated by capitalist social relations. How then can we intervene effectively without facing co-option? One strategy is located institutionally and means simply struggling for the most progressive practices available.

There is a danger here. Much of the thinking of curriculum modernisers of both right and left talks the language of group work, interdisciplinarity and problem solving (Jones, 1988; IPPR 1988). The desire to deliver a valid educational experience can lead us to take on board this framework and to contrast it positively with the allegedly deadening effect of traditional academic education. However, this curricular framework is set within a capitalist logic. It works essentially with a notion of the atomistic individual and more importantly fails to address the cultural knowledge that subordinate groups bring to education (Willis 1988). This is because problem solving education operates on the present, lacks a language of possibility and is prone to technicisation (Aronowitz and Giroux, 1988). Here we need to consider

the classed, raced and gendered bases of models of rationality that are taken on board unproblematically by technicist models of decision making (Walkerdine, 1990). On a larger canvas we need to hang onto notions of antagonism and exploitation and to the complexities of social relations. We need to develop a revolutionary reformism, one that intervenes in a reformist vein yet hangs onto a notion of structural relations and antagonism and by doing so retains transformative possibilities (Miliband, 1991; Mathiesen, 1974).

Notes & References

1 See TUC, 1988; CBI, 1990; Labour Party, 1991; Social and Liberal Democrats, 1988; DES, DoE, 1988.

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