



# *University of* **HUDDERSFIELD**

## **University of Huddersfield Repository**

Avis, James

Comfort radicalism and NEETs: a conservative praxis

### **Original Citation**

Avis, James (2014) Comfort radicalism and NEETs: a conservative praxis. *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 24 (3). pp. 272-289. ISSN 0962-0214

This version is available at <https://eprints.hud.ac.uk/id/eprint/21530/>

The University Repository is a digital collection of the research output of the University, available on Open Access. Copyright and Moral Rights for the items on this site are retained by the individual author and/or other copyright owners. Users may access full items free of charge; copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided:

- The authors, title and full bibliographic details is credited in any copy;
- A hyperlink and/or URL is included for the original metadata page; and
- The content is not changed in any way.

For more information, including our policy and submission procedure, please contact the Repository Team at: [E.mailbox@hud.ac.uk](mailto:E.mailbox@hud.ac.uk).

<http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/>

# **Comfort Radicalism and NEETs: A conservative praxis**

James Avis  
School of Education  
University of Huddersfield  
Email: [J.avis@hud.ac.uk](mailto:J.avis@hud.ac.uk)

## **Comfort Radicalism and NEETs: A conservative praxis**

### **Abstract**

Young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) are construed by policy makers as a pressing problem about which something should be done. Such young people's lack of employment is thought to pose difficulties for wider society in relation to social cohesion and inclusion and it is feared that they will become a 'lost generation'. This paper<sup>(1)</sup> draws upon English research, seeking to historicise the debate whilst acknowledging that these issues have a much wider purchase. The notion of NEETs rests alongside longstanding concerns of the English state and middle classes, addressing unruly male working class youth as well as the moral turpitude of working class girls. Waged labour and domesticity are seen as a means to integrate such groups into society thereby generating social cohesion. The paper places the debate within its socio-economic context and draws on theorisations of cognitive capitalism, Italian workerism, as well as emerging theories of antiwork to analyse these. It concludes by arguing that 'radical' approaches to NEETs that point towards inequities embedded in the social structure and call for social democratic solutions veer towards a form of comfort radicalism. Such approaches leave in place the dominance of capitalist relations as well as productivist orientations that celebrate waged labour.

## Comfort Radicalism and NEETs: A conservative praxis

For some time young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) have been construed by policy makers as a pressing problem about which something should be done. **This is notwithstanding the heterogeneity of the term. Furlong (2006) has usefully discussed the varied meanings attached to the notion of NEET, not only in terms of its age span but also to the categories addressed which can range from young people with disabilities through to those on gap years. This paper has a narrower focus on those who are placed in a precarious labour market position and who face in the current conjuncture problematic transitions to waged labour. The paper addresses the question of NEETs by setting this in a broader context of marginalised working class youth, that is to say, those who are located at the periphery of the labour market, who in Marxist terms are part of a superfluous working population (Marx, 1976, p781-802).**

The paper addresses several arguments. The first section briefly considers wagelessness referring to the work of Denning (2010), Marx (1976) and Wacquant (1999, 20). Implicitly it problematizes the notion of NEET and asks whether we can learn from those societies to which the term has been exported. The following two sections seek to place the current debate historically and contemporaneously. This is important for several reasons, firstly to trace historical continuities and secondly to relate current concerns with NEET to responses to youth unemployment in the 1970s and 80s, as well as finally to the shift from Fordism to post-Fordism. These changes are analysed further in the following section *Cognitive Capitalism and Workerism*. The argument here similarly problematises the notion of NEET but also raises important questions about the economy, productivism and the precariousness of labour. This is followed by a brief engagement with policy solutions that addresses the question of whether capitalism as it is currently configured can respond to the issues the paper raises.

### Wagelessness

There is a certain fluidity in the way in which NEET is defined, in as much as its age span can include 16 – 18s through to 29<sup>(2)</sup>, **and notably the category includes youths who are placed in qualitatively different positions.** There is an international concern with workless youth and the consequences this may portend for society (see for example, *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 2013), **and in particular for those outside the formal labour market as well as those failing to develop their 'employability'.** The notion of NEET has been exported to a number of societies for which it may not be best suited. Thus for example Kraak (2013) mobilises the term in the South African context and the African Economic Outlook suggests that "The NEET category is made up of three distinct states of employment: unemployment; discouragement; and inactivity, or having left the labour force" (2013, unnumbered). Whilst we could discuss, as Ainley (2013) does, the re-composition of class relations and with it a re-formed reserve army of labour, it might be more appropriate to reverse the logic. Rather than applying concepts developed in the West to postcolonial situations, we could consider what we could learn from such social formations. Davis (2006) for example has discussed the surpluses of labour found in the

megacities of the world which has resulted in the growth of the informal economy and often intense competition between workers, which has in turn led to further levels of 'immiseration'. **Davis' argument is salutary and echoes Marx's (1976, p781-802) discussion of the way in which capitalism systematically expels workers from the valorisation processes, thereby creating redundant labour surplus to the requirements of capital. In Marx's discussion this process was tied to the creation of the reserve army of labour and the lumpenproletariat. However, these processes have been exacerbated in the third world and emerging economies whereby substantial sections of the working class face permanent exclusion from the formal economy, thereby facing wagelessness.** Such processes have been exacerbated by the policies of the IMF and World Bank which are informed by the tenets of neoliberalism, structural adjustment policies and the like. We can discern the play of not dissimilar policies in Europe. We could consider Greece, Spain and Italy where cuts in public expenditure have resulted in increased levels of unemployment, partly a consequence of EU policies informed by the tenets of neoliberalism. **These conditions could be represented as a political economy of insecurity (Furlong, 2006, p567 and see Beck, 2000, chapter 1).** Beck writes:

The unintended consequences of the neoliberal free market utopia is a Brazilianization of the West... Equally remarkable is the new similarity in how paid work is itself shaping up in the so-called first world and the so-called third world: the spread of temporary and insecure employment, discontinuity and loose informality into Western societies that have hitherto been the bastions of full employment. The social structure in the heartlands of the West is thus coming to resemble the patchwork quilt of the South, characterized by diversity, unclarity and insecurity in people's work and life. (2000, p1)

Although it might be an exaggeration to apply Beck's notion of Brazilianization straightforwardly to the UK, or indeed of those processes of immiseration that face surplus labour in megacities, it **usefully raises a number of questions. Beck (1992, p143) goes so far as to suggest that waged labour in the West has been irrevocably transformed. The Fordist expectation of lifetime employment allied to a sufficient wage has been significantly undermined. The consequence is that measures of employment and unemployment no longer carry the explanatory weight they once did. Labour markets are increasingly characterised by underemployment, precariousness and time served contracts.**

There is an echo, or at least a glimpse, of these processes at play in the UK, not least in young people's response to marginalisation and the difficult labour markets they face. The use of internships in the fashion industry (McRobbie, 1998) would be a case in point which can lead to high levels of exploitation, and much the same could be said about other 'creative' industries despite the 'hype' that surrounds them (Guile, 2010). Cohen, (1984) writing in the 1980s, commented on youth training schemes and the encouragement given to young people to develop conceptualisations of themselves as enterprising subjects who could develop their own businesses in or outside the formal economy (and see Cohen, 1997, chapter 9). **Young people were encouraged to develop appropriate dispositions and employability skills that were to prepare them for the putative labour market.** Cohen suggested:

This combination of romantic individualism and penny-capitalism has a potentially wide appeal to young people whose routes into waged labour have been blocked. In reality what is offered to them in the guise of 'alternatives' to the dole is decidedly less glamorous and lucrative. (Finn, 1984, p108)

And much the same could be said about the current conjuncture.

### Historical Antecedents

It is important to recognise the above concerns are by no means new and that historically young people have frequently been construed as a problematic category prone to disorder. Young people, particularly working class boys, have been the subject of numerous moral panics (Pearson, 1983). It is in this sense that NEET rests alongside longstanding concerns of the English state and middle and upper classes with social disorder - that is to say a concern with the practices of the working class family and the threat posed by unruly male working class youth as well as the moral turpitude of working class girls. The aim of schooling was to instil dispositions that young people required for the labour market as well as preparing young girls for domesticity. In this way such groups, it was hoped, would be integrated into wider society – the bourgeois order (Walkerdine and Lucy, 1989).

Whilst the anxiety with disorderly youth preceded industrial capitalism, these worries were exacerbated as a consequence of urbanisation and the concentration of sections of the working class in slums. Pearson (1975) in the *Deviant Imagination* points towards a set of terms that represented the anxieties of the 19<sup>th</sup> century middle class, bourgeoisie and the state towards the urban working class. Terms such as the 'dangerous class', the 'mob', as well as various faecal metaphors were used to describe this class. In the case of the metaphor of the sewer this served not only to represent the conditions in which people lived but also served to construct the morality of sections of the class. Such terms not only served a descriptive purpose but also reflected and constituted the fears of the bourgeoisie and middle class. Although Pearson is describing the advent of 19<sup>th</sup> century industrial capitalism such fears continue to resonate today - notions of white trash (Preston, 2003) the demonization of chavs (Jones, 2012) and the 'othering' of working class women (Skeggs, 1997, 2004) all represent a continuation of these process, whereby sections of the class are seen as 'worthless'.

From the onset of industrial capitalism the failings of the working class family and concerns with its educability has been a recurrent theme for social commentators. Johnson noted,

...the early Victorian obsession with the education of the poor is best understood as a concern about authority, about power, about the assertion (or the reassertion) of control... **[The aim being]** to raise a new race of working-class people - respectful cheerful, hardworking, loyal, pacific and religious. (1970, p119)

The processes that Johnson describes were necessarily gendered and are illustrated in Purvis' (1987) work. She cites S. Austin and Booth's (1987, p256) writing from the 1850's to illustrate bourgeois constructions of the 'good woman' and by default the inadequacies of the working class family.

We want good servants and good wives; women who know the value of a clean, well regulated Christian home: for such alone can make 'men' sensible of the real merits of a home, the inestimable blessing of a good wife and tidy obedient children (Austin, S. 1857, quoting a respondent, cited in Purvis. 1987, p256).

Similarly Purvis commented on 19<sup>th</sup> century bourgeois conceptions of the deficiencies of working class women and their 'slatternly habits' which were seen at the root of many social problems. This argument resonates with Skegg's (1997, 2004) much later work which noted not too dissimilar processes (and see Skeggs and Wood, 2012).

Interventions seeking to modify the family as well as educative processes were seen as solutions to the 'working class' problem. Bernstein's (1977) early work on language codes was frequently misrepresented as indicative of the linguistic deprivation of the working class. Such a misreading was placed alongside other notions suggesting inappropriate childrearing practices of the class (see for example J and E Newson, 1976; Tizzard and Hughes, 1984). Compensatory education, as well as other mainstream educational interventions were called for to interrupt such processes. **The Education Group (1981) commenting on sociological arguments from the 1960's which associated delinquency with educational failure as well as the working class family and its culture. The Educational Group cited Vaizey who suggested that improving the schooling of the working class child would overcome such problems by,**

***[Integrating] the unskilled and semi skilled working class into a society which is becoming predominantly governed by the values and standards of the professional middle class.*** [My emboldening] (Education Group CCCS, 1981, p 78-9, citing Vaizey, 1962, p24)

Similar themes continue to be expressed to this day. The Cabinet Office's Social Exclusion Unit (1999, p48) made a link between non-participation in work or learning and poor or unemployed parents. The Fryer report (1999, p8) and *The Learning Age* (DfEE 1998, p10-11), called for the interruption of those cultures antithetical to learning (and see DIUS, 2007, p6), that is to say by default those of the working class. Conservative rhetoric of the 'broken society' points towards the same theme of working class cultural and social pathology (Finlayson, 2010). The point is that the discourses surrounding NEET are not new and have been consistently mobilised at times of economic crisis or when panics have arisen about the morality of the working class (Cohen, 1997).

### **Current Conditions**

Whilst there are clear continuities in the economic conditions faced by young people following the secular decline of the youth labour market in the 1970s, these tendencies have been aggravated in recent times. What may be new is the extended period of dependency and infantilisation faced by the young, and indeed not so young, as Fumagalli and Morini point out, this can continue into the late twenties and beyond (and see, Education Group II; Willis, 1985). **This can be allied to the growth of precariousness and changes in the economy. Thus,** for Western states the concern over NEET has been exacerbated following,

the end of the long economic boom [which] started to take effect in New Zealand in the 1970s, government policy has become increasingly focused on developing new systems of engaging youth in activities conducive to capitalist accumulation. (Strathdee, 2013, p42)

Whilst Strathdee is referring to New Zealand, much the same point could be made about other Western economies. There are two additional points worth noting. The first concerns secular changes in the economy that gained visibility in the early 1970s which featured the collapse of the youth labour market and purportedly the shift towards a post-Fordist economy. In the UK these changes were accompanied by processes of de-industrialisation - the decline of the manufacturing sector and the concurrent decline in the demand for labour, intensified by the use of technology to reduce the labour required in manufacturing (Brynolfsson and McAfee, 2012; Gorz, 2010). Discussions of de-industrialisation were accompanied by a rhetorical concern with the knowledge/information society and related themes, with some suggesting there would be a move towards a service economy (see discussion in Brown and Lauder, 1992). Whilst much has been made of the shift towards such an economy as well as the increased salience attached to 'knowledge', it is important to note there are processes of uneven development. Despite the contraction of manufacturing in the UK it nevertheless continues to be an important sector. Of greater significance has been the altered relationship between capital and labour following the move away from Fordism. The recessions of the 1970's, 80's and beyond, together with the restructuring of work, has served to undermine the collective working class cultures of work that Willis (1977) and others explored. This has resulted in the increasing 'flexibilisation' of waged labour and the growth of individualisation with 'flexibility being demanded everywhere' (Beck, 1999, p12). Callinicos, citing Bourdieu suggests:

this is part of 'a mode of domination of a new type, based on the institution of a generalised and permanent condition of insecurity aiming to compel the workers to submission, to the acceptance of exploitation. (Callinicos, 1999, p89; and see Bourdieu, 1998a, 1998b)

The conditions in which people currently labour are characterised by 'a mode of domination' set within the hegemony of neoliberalism and the increased precariousness of waged labour (Standing, 2011). Consequently,

Self-exploitation has become a defining motif of working today. Indeed the reason why so little is invested by large companies into training is because they have realized that workers train themselves, both on the job, using their life skills and social intelligence, and away from the job, on their own time. (Cederström and Fleming, 2012, p8)

This is a context in which risk is devolved to the individual and we are encouraged to accept exploitation and the intensification of labour. Young people are enjoined to invest in themselves, to enhance their employability, with education seeking to contribute to this goal. The rhetoric of the knowledge economy and the increased significance attached to the creative industries can only go so far in providing opportunities for young people. More often than not it leads to short term exploitative labour as characterised by internships. Brown *et al* (2011) remind us that much of the rhetoric surrounding post-Fordism, up-skilling and the like is set within an increasingly polarised economy in which,



as a result of digital technologies, formerly skilled jobs have become standardised and de-skilled. Brynjolfsson and McAfee (2012) in a somewhat technologically determinist argument address the relationship between digital technologies and job losses. The point, put simplistically, the promise of waged labour for individual and collective fulfilment is exaggerated in the rhetoric of the knowledge economy. **Allen and Ainley (2014) draw our attention not only to a polarised and pear shaped class structure but also to a labour market that is characterised by over-qualification, under-employment and marginalisation. There are two key points to be made. Firstly, this section raises questions about the notion of NEET, placing it in a more generalised context of precariousness in which insecurity becomes a significant feature of working lives, reflected in Allen and Ainley's conceptualisation of the insecure working/middle class. The second point relates to economic shifts and the increased salience of post-Fordist work relations, reflected in the growth of insecurity and the decline of the Fordist model of 'jobs for life'. The political economy of insecurity and the growth in precariousness for members of the insecure working/middle class has resulted in work extending into 'free-time'.**

### **Cognitive Capitalism and Workerism**

A new political landscape has crystallized transforming the old tension between capital and labour into one between capital and life. Its manifesto is defined not by the demand for more, less or fairer work, but the end of work. (Fleming, 2012, p205)

For Marx labour is central to our 'species being'. Capitalism distorts this relationship leading to alienation and the appropriation by capital of the surpluses produced by labour. Whilst researchers of NEETs may not make an explicit connection with Marxism there is nevertheless an implicit link, whereby work and waged labour is thought to be pivotal to wellbeing and human fulfilment. Exclusion from waged labour is seen to carry a raft of negative social consequences that are harmful for both the individual and society (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010). However, writings connected to Italian workerism, cognitive capitalism and antiwork (**Weeks, 2011**) offer a rather different view of waged labour. These analyses question the productivist assumptions that underpin much of the NEET debate and are particularly salient in the current conjunctural conditions faced by western economies.

Italian workerism or *operaismo* of the 1960's and 70's is important in the ensuing discussion. It was rooted in Fordism and what could be described as the apogee of industrial capitalism that gave rise to various forms of resistance. Berardi notes,

In the car production cycle, labor had a mass depersonalized character: it is in these sectors that the refusal of work exploded... In the 1970's the entire European car production cycle was stormed by waves of workers' fights, sabotage and absenteeism. (Berardi, 2009, p28)

Key to workerist analysis is the argument that subsequent capitalist development was a response to "workers' fights, sabotage and absenteeism" and was an attempt to overcome such resistance – the refusal of work. Lotringer writes. "It was Italian workers' stubborn

resistance to the Fordist rationalization of work... that forced capital to make a leap into the post-Fordist era of immaterial work" (2004, p11). It was claimed that worker resistance and allied struggles paved the way for subsequent capitalist development. In other words workers' struggle prompted changes in the mode of production and the shift away from Fordism towards post-Fordism – immaterial labour and cognitive capitalism. Importantly these developments could be seen as attempts to circumvent the refusal of work and undermine the solidarity of the working class. The significance of these ideas for a discussion of NEETs is that they serve to problematise waged labour. Worker resistance to the oppressions and exploitation surrounding Fordism called forth a response by capital that sought to 're-integrate' workers into the capitalist system. If this line of argument were accepted NEETs concern with the transition to work, rather than representing a radical stance becomes merely a concern with ensuring the integration of young people into the capitalist economy, in much the same way as the youth training schemes of the 70s and 80s (Bates et al, 1984; Moos, 1979). This is despite a concern to reject the pathologisation of NEETs (Simmons, et al, 2013; and see MacDonald, 1997; Shildrick, et al, 2012). Whilst the commitment of these young people to work is seen as commendable, at the same time it serves to tie NEETs into capitalist relations. Here lies a paradox, in the rare cases where there is a refusal of work this can readily fold into notions of pathology. The refusal of work comes to be seen, not as an act of resistance, but rather becomes de-politicised and domesticated.

Theorisations of cognitive capitalism, as with workerism, suggest that capitalism has entered a new stage of development. The shift from Fordism to Post-Fordism and the decline of industrial capitalism in the West, together with the development of digital technologies and the increasing emphasis upon knowledge, innovation and creativity illustrates this. It is important to acknowledge that this is not **strictly** based on an empiricist argument but rather upon developments at the leading edge of the economy and represent a new social imaginary, emergent hegemonic notions, or what might be described as 'trajectories of evolution' (Boutang, 2011, p 60). Boutang (2011, p60) points out that Marx did not study the largest working population in England that comprised domestic servants, but rather focused upon a much smaller group of factory workers, which anticipated the emergent hegemony of industrial capitalism (and see Baudrillard, 1975). For Vercellone cognitive capitalism,

refer[s] to a system of accumulation in which the productive value of professional and scientific work becomes dominant and the central stakes in the valorization of capital relate directly to the control and transformation of knowledge into fictitious goods. (2009, p119)

Or as Fumagalli (2010, p62) suggests there are three pillars upon which cognitive capitalism is built: the role of financial markets as motors of accumulation; the generation and diffusion of network knowledge as the main source of capitalist valorisation that redefines

the relationship between living and 'dead' labour; and finally, the decomposition of the workforce leading to precariousness.

These arguments align with those addressing financialisation, which suggest that the manner in which surplus value is produced has been transformed (Marazzi, 2011). That is to say, the 'knowledge economy' is qualitatively different to industrial capitalism, representing a new stage of development in which surplus value is appropriated in a fundamentally different way. This argument prioritises the development of knowledge viewing it as a collective and implicitly democratic accomplishment that occurs outside the direct control of capital. Thus theorisations of cognitive capitalism emphasise the role of 'common' collectively formed knowledge developed outside the labour process which is then appropriated by capital in the pursuit of surplus value. Gorz points out that cognitive capitalism operates in a different manner to industrial capitalism in that its,

main productive force, knowledge, is a product that is in large part, the outcome of an unpaid collective activity, of a 'self production' or 'production of subjectivity'. It is to a large extent, 'general intelligence', shared culture, living and lived practical knowledge' (Gorz, 2010, p52)

Cederström and Fleming (2012) comment on the way in which waged labour has colonised our lives. This is in contrast to the Fordism of industrial capitalism which was marked by specific working times. They write,

Today, however, capital seeks to exploit our sociality in *all* spheres of life. When we all become 'human capital' we not only have a job, or perform a job. We *are* the job. (Cederström and Fleming, 2012, p7)

**It is through the exploitation of our sociality that capital appropriates surplus value. This rests with the paradox of under-employment and precariousness whereby waged labour colonises our lives so that 'we are the job'.** Berardi suggests "in reality technological development tends to make manual labor useless and its evaluation in terms of wages impossible" (2009, p66).

For Vercellone (2009) the welfare state and universal education contributes towards a "mass intellectuality" that provides the bedrock for the knowledge economy. Vercellone (2008) refers to "the constitution of a diffuse intellectuality generated by the development of mass education" (unnumbered) allied to increasing levels of training. He argues the social struggles that secured "the spread of social income and welfare services" (unnumbered) resulted in conditions favourable to the development of a knowledge based economy. Historically capitalism increased the productive capacity of the social formation through its control and direction of production. In cognitive capitalism this is no longer the case with the appropriation of surplus value increasingly taking place outside the confines of the capitalist organisation.

What then does this excursion into cognitive capitalism and workerism have to contribute to discussions of NEETs? There are **several** points to make. Unsurprisingly the concern to integrate NEETs into the economy and wider society is both deeply ideological and sits firmly within the reproduction of capitalist relations. Secondly, the significance and necessity for waged labour is exaggerated in many of the arguments. Thirdly, these debates call for the development of a different economic and social system that moves beyond productivism. This, rather than being simply an ideological claim, is supported materially. That is to say developments in the forces of production are at a stage which could facilitate the transformation of capitalist relations.

**This section has sought to locate NEET within a wider and changing political economy. It problematises the notion of NEET but also points towards another paradox. Berardi's suggestion that technical developments have rendered much manual labour unnecessary, sits alongside Brynjolfsson and McAfee (2012) analysis which in turn echoes Marx's (1976) discussion of surplus labour and notions of wagelessness. Alongside those practices that expel labour from the workforce there are also other processes that create surplus value. This arises through non-work activities, the development of the 'general intellect' (Marx, 1973, p704-711), and by the colonisation of our lives by 'the job'. A banal example of the former would be buying a railway ticket on-line and of the latter, the way in which work infiltrates all aspects of our lives. For Marx labour expresses our species being, an argument that is in part echoed in discussions of NEETs as well as those facing the precariousness of work and who move in and out of paid labour, experiencing under- and unemployment. The commitment of such workers to waged labour is often seen, not only as commendable but also as a way to debunk those who seek to pathologise them. Workerism has a rather different understanding, viewing this through the lense of reproduction, construing over and underemployment as systemic features intensified by the development of cognitive capitalism. Such an analysis questions whether capitalism can overcome these systemic features.**

#### **Policy solutions – more of the same**

At the time of writing the UK Labour party has called for a transformed economic and social system able to address the problems facing the economy. In much the same way, researchers addressing the issue of NEETs point to the need to transcend neoliberalism and its economic model (Allen and Ainley, 2007, 2013; Simmons and Thompson, 2011). **Indeed this is becoming a common theme espoused by Christine Lagard (2014) of the IMF and Mark Carney (2014) of the Bank of England in their contribution to the Conference on Inclusive Capitalism<sup>(3)</sup>.**

Eurofound (2012) has examined the literature on NEETs drawing out the policy interventions that have been designed to address this. These come close to accepting and pose no challenged to the status quo of capitalist relations.

- Preventing early school-leaving (p110)
- Reintegrating early school-leavers (p116)

- Supporting school-to-work transitions (p120)
  - Fostering employability of young people (p128)
  - Removing barriers and offering employer incentives (p134)
- (Source: Eurofound, 2012)

More radical approaches draw our attention to the structural impediments that inhibit solutions to NEETs. These impediments derive from a neoliberal economy and social formation that is predicated on market and competitive relations, individualism, competition, educational failure and social exclusion. This work seeks to make a connection between ‘personal troubles’ and ‘public issues’ and in this way raises structural questions whilst at the same time refusing the pathologisation of young people. There is more than an echo here of Wright Mills’ argument that,

When in a city of 100,000, only one man is unemployed, that is his personal trouble... But when in a nation of 50 million employees, 15 million men are unemployed, that is an issue, and we may not hope to find its solution within the range of opportunities open to any one individual. The very structure of the problem and the range of possible solutions requires us to consider the economic and political institutions of the society. (Wright Mills, 1973, p15)

If we are seriously concerned with addressing the issue of NEETs we need to interrogate the “economic and political institutions of the society”. In this way we would avoid creating a ‘lost generation’, **that is to say one worse off than their parents who face declining life chances** and aim to produce a fairer and more equitable society. Ed Miliband, the current leader of the Labour party commented,

We need to build a different sort of economy if we are to get the next generation better chances than the last...

So what needs to change is a politics that genuinely puts priority on the long-term, an economy that works for all not just a few, and a sense of priorities which goes beyond just financial reward. (2011, no page number)

This is an increasingly familiar theme **as witnessed by the Conference on Inclusive Capitalism**, and is a leitmotif of the Labour party’s policy review, being set against the divisiveness of neoliberalism and Coalition policies.

In some respects these interventions, set in conditions of austerity, seek to re-work social democracy. There is an affinity between analyses of the Labour Party and the assumed radicalism of approaches that address NEETs. Both call for changes in the underlying structure of the economy, both seek to address worklessness and both aim to work towards a fairer and more equal society. **They seek to transform a labour market that is not meeting the needs of large numbers of young and indeed older workers, in order to move beyond neoliberal capitalism towards a more inclusive and progressive form.** Furlong in a comment on young people but one that could be more widely applied states,

**vulnerability is not simply a consequence of personal deficits and an appreciation of the extent to which patterns of labour demand in the new economy are failing to**

provide the opportunities for long-term security for large numbers of young people. (2006, p567)

There is a growing constituency encompassing a range of stakeholders who would argue that neoliberalism has reached its limits and needs to be replaced by what could be described as a form of social democracy suited to austere times. We encounter calls for an industrial policy and a rebalancing of the economy to reinvigorate manufacturing. This sits alongside a concern to reduce disparities of income and wealth with state interventions to secure these outcomes with the involvement of trade unions. Through such practices an economic policy could be developed that created a greater demand for labour. Such a policy would give those who are marginal to the work force an experience of waged labour. This would acknowledge and address the question of relative surplus labour and would call for the re-institution of the social state. Such an argument could sit alongside the analyses of Wacquant (1999, 2010) Beck (2000) and Gorz (2010) and their stance towards a social wage. Although their arguments are derived from different theoretical traditions, they are all set within current conditions, the decline of Fordist waged labour and the growth of precariousness in relation to work. Wacquant (2010) calls for the institution of a basic income – the citizen wage, which he considers to be the only viable solutions (p279) to advanced marginalisation. Beck (2000) in turn argues for civil labour. These arguments are similar to Gorz's (2010, p28, p129-136) discussion of a guaranteed social income and Wacquant's call for social rights that sever subsistence from performance in the labour market.

There are several issues with respect to the above. One concerns the role and autonomy of the national state within the current stage of capitalist development. A sustainable, guaranteed social income is predicated on the state being able to deliver this, thereby re-introducing a type of social democracy. It is important to acknowledge that post-war social democracy and the development of the social state was won as the result of struggle, set within very particular conditions which may not be replicable. The post war social state arose as a consequence of the shifting balance of power between labour and capital, in favour of the former. The subsequent move towards neoliberalism represented the re-appropriation of power by capital. If accepted this argument suggests that inclusive or progressive varieties of capital may only temporarily ameliorate the excesses of capitalism. This is because such change is the outcome of struggle and the changing balance of power and therefore will be temporary despite assertions to the contrary. We need only consider the recent history of the social state - after all, Fordism was set in exceptional circumstances. A guaranteed social income would necessitate transcending capitalist relations, and in current conditions this would be at best a form of revolutionary reformism, prefiguring a fundamental transformation of economic relations.

A less radical approach, but one that faces similar contradictions, calls for a change in the underlying economic structure. This is reflected in scholarly discussions of NEETs and worklessness as well as in the British Labour party's stance. These interventions aim to work towards a fairer and more equal society, seeking to transform a labour market that is not meeting the needs of young or indeed older workers. The concern is to move beyond neoliberal capitalism towards a more inclusive form. However, by centring productivism - the salience of waged labour and work - the radicalism of these positions is

undermined. The danger is that such analyses can readily sit alongside a modernised social democratic variant of capitalism, becoming in effect a species of comfort radicalism (Hayes, 2003, p38), that leaves in place the dominance of capitalist relations.

### **Towards a conclusion**

The paper has addressed a number of overlapping debates. It has sought to problematise the notion of NEET, suggesting that rather than exporting the term to postcolonial societies we could learn much from them. This is particularly the case in relation to wagelessness and the exclusion of workers from waged labour. The paper illustrates the historical continuities in the concern with working class youth and NEET whilst simultaneously addressing the particular socio-economic context of the West. The collapse of Fordist models of industrial capitalism, the precariousness of work, digital Taylorism and a polarised labour market has meant that issues facing youth have been extended to the insecure working/middle class. A key argument of the paper is that a radical engagement with NEET needs to go beyond the current debate, located as it is within a productivism that celebrates waged labour. We need to re-evaluate the centrality of 'work' in these analyses. This is why the debate surrounding workerism and cognitive capitalism is a major contribution being one that goes beyond the work of Beck and the statist inclinations of Wacquant. Such an approach rooted in cognitive capitalism would question the social democratic leanings of the debate surrounding NEET and its ideological role in 'reproducing' capitalist relations. In addition the paper locates NEET within a wider political economy that questions the very categorisation of the term. Paradoxically even leftist analyses that anticipate post-capitalist futures are predicated upon productivism. Rustin (2013), for example, calls for a different economic and institutional architecture that would priorities the cultivation of human needs and capacities which would lead us to re-evaluate the way in which we understand economic growth. Yet Rustin nevertheless appear to prioritise work,

There is no conceivable material or technological excuse for unemployment, when there is abundant work which could and should be done, in nurturing, developing and expressing human capabilities. (Rustin, 2013, no page number)

Such an argument faces in several directions at once. It could align itself with Marxist conceptualisation of species being and unalienated labour. Alternatively. it could sit alongside an inclusive capitalism with all the difficulties that portends. The danger is that leftist strategies could easily fold over into a form of capitalist reformism with all the problems that poses, rather than one committed to revolutionary reformism that is predicated upon an anti-capitalist stance.

### **Notes:**

1. The paper engages with and develops some of the argument in Author, 2013, 2014.

2. In the UK NEET initially referred to those not in education or employment between the ages of 16-18, in Eurostat statistics the age range extends to 24, and Fumagalli and Morini (undated) considering it to be prevalent amongst Italian 25-29 year olds (Eurofound, 2012; Furlong, 2007).

**3. The Conference on Inclusive Capitalism: Building Value, Renewing Trust** was held at the Mansion House and Guildhall in London 27 May 2014, hosted by the Lord Mayor of the City of London and E.L. Rothschild and organised by The Inclusive Capitalism Initiative and the Financial Times.

#### References:

African Economic Outlook (2013), *Who are the Unemployed, Discouraged & Inactive Youth in Africa?* [http://www.africaneconomicoutlook.org/en/in-depth/youth\\_employment/youth-in-african-labour-markets/who-are-the-unemployed-discouraged-inactive-youth-in-africa/](http://www.africaneconomicoutlook.org/en/in-depth/youth_employment/youth-in-african-labour-markets/who-are-the-unemployed-discouraged-inactive-youth-in-africa/) accessed 26 August 2013

Ainley, P. (2013) Education and the reconstitution of social class in England, *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 18(1-2), p46-60

Allen, M., Ainley, P. (2007) *Education make you fick, innit? What's gone wrong in England's schools, colleges and universities and how to start putting it right*, London, Tuffnell press

**Allen, M., Ainley, P. (2010) Lost Generation, London Continuum**

Allen, M., Ainley, P. (2013) *The great reversal*, London, Radicaled

**Allen, M., Ainley, P. (2014) A New Direction for Vocational Learning or A Great Training Robbery? Initial Research into and Analysis of The Reinvention of Apprenticeships at The Start of the 21st Century**, paper presented HIVE ESRC Seminar 28 February at the University of Greenwich

Avis, J. (2013) *The politics of cognitive capitalism - beyond workplace learning?* Paper presented RWL8 – 8<sup>th</sup> International Conference on researching Work and Learning University of Stirling 19-21 June (unpublished paper)

Avis, J. (2014) Beyond NEET: Precariousness, ideology and social justice - the 99%, *Power and Education*, in press

Bates, I., Clarke, J., Cohen, P., Finn, D., Moore, R., Willis, P. (eds) (1984) *Schooling for the Dole*, London, MacMillan

Baudrillard, J. (1975) *The mirror of production*, St Louis, Telos

Beck, U. (1992) *The Risk society* Oxford, Polity

Beck, U. (1999) *World risk society*, Oxford, Polity



- Beck, U. (2000) *The brave new world of work*, Cambridge, Polity
- Berardi, F. "Bifo" (2009) *The soul at work*, Los Angeles, Semiotext(e)
- Bernstein, B. (1977) *Class codes and control Vol 1*, London, Routledge, Kegan and Paul
- Bourdieu, P. (1998a) *Acts of Resistance: Against the new Myths of our time*, Oxford, Polity,
- Bourdieu, P (1998b) *Contre-feux*, Editions Liber-Raisons d'Agir
- Boutang, Y. M., (2011) *Cognitive Capitalism*, Cambridge, Polity
- Brown, P. Lauder, H. (eds) (1992) *Education for Economic Survival: from Fordism to Post-Fordism*, London Routledge
- Brown, P., Lauder., Ashton, D. (2011) *The global auction*, Oxford, Oxford University press
- Brynjolfsson, E., McAfee, A. (2012) *Race Against the Machine: How the Digital Revolution is Accelerating Innovation, Driving Productivity, and Irreversibly Transforming Employment and the Economy*, Digital Frontier Press
- Callinicos, A. (1999) Social Theory put to the test of politics Pierre Bourdieu and Anthony Giddens, *New Left Review*, No 236 p77-102
- Carney, M. (2014) Inclusive capitalism: creating a sense of the systemic, speech at the Conference on Inclusive Capitalism, London, 27 May, <http://www.bankofengland.co.uk/publications/Documents/speeches/2014/speech731.pdf> accessed 29 May 2014**
- Cederström, C., Fleming, P. (2012) *Dead man working*, Alresford, Zero books
- Cohen, P. (1984) Against the New Vocationalism, in Bates, I., Clarke, J., Cohen, P., Finn, D., Moore, R., Willis, P. (eds) *Schooling for the Dole*, London, MacMillan
- Cohen, P. (1997) *Rethinking the youth question*, Houndsmill, Macmillan
- Cohen, S. (1973) *Folk devils and moral panics*, St Albans, Paladin
- Davis, M. (2006) *Planet of Slums*, London, Verso
- Denning, M., (2010) Wageless Life, *New Left Review*, 66 p79-97**
- DfEE (1998) *The learning Age: a renaissance for a new Britain*, London, The Stationery Office, Cm 3790
- DIUS (2007) *World class skills: implementing the Leitch review of skills in England*, Norwich, The Stationery Office, Cm 7181

Education Group (1981) Unpopular Education Schooling and social democracy in England since 1944 London, Hutchinson

Education group II (Eds) (1991) *Education Limited*, London, Unwin Hyman.

Eurofound (2012), *NEETs – Young people not in employment, education or training: Characteristics, costs and policy responses in Europe*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg

Finlayson, A. (2010) The broken society versus the social recession, *Soundings*, No 44, p22-34

Fleming, P. (2012) The Birth of Biocracy and its discontents at work, in Diefenbach, T., Todnem, R. (eds) *Reinventing Hierarchy and Bureaucracy - from the Bureau to Network Organisations*, (Research in the Sociology of Organizations, volume 35), Bingley, Emerald p205-227

Fryer Report (1999) *Second Report of the National Advisory Group for Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning Creating Learning Cultures: Next steps in Achieving the learning Age*, London, NAGCELL

Fumagalli, A. (2010) The Global economic crisis and socioeconomic governance, Fumagalli, A., Mazzadra, S. (Eds) *Crisis in the global economy*, Los Angeles, Semiotext(e), p61-83

Fumagalli, A., Morini, C. (undated) *The Precarity-Trap and Basic Income: the Labour Market in Cognitive Bio-capitalism. The Italian Case*, Unpublished paper, <http://www.bin-italia.org/pdf/Paper%20Fuma-Morini%20-%20eng%202.pdf> accessed 4 January 2013

**Furlong, A. (2006) Not a very NEET solution: representing problematic Labour Market Transitions among Early School Leavers, *Work, Employment and Society*, 20(3) p553-569**

Furlong, A. (2007) The zone of precarity and discourses of vulnerability: NEET in the UK, *Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, No. 381, pp. 101–121.

Gorz, A. (2010) *The Immaterial*, London, Seagull

Guile, D. (2010) *Learning Challenge of the knowledge Economy*, Rotterdam, Sense Publishers

Hayes, D. (2003) New Labour, New Professionalism, Satterthwaite, J., Atkinson, E., Gale, K. (Eds) *Discourse, Power, resistance: challenging the rhetoric of contemporary education*, Stoke on Trent, Trentham p27-42

Johnson, R. (1970) Educational Policy and Social Control in Early Victorian England, Past and Present, 49 p96-119

Jones, O. (2012) *CHAVS: the demonization of the working class*, London, Verso (Updated Edition)

Kraak, A. (2013) State failure in dealing with the NEET problem in South Africa, *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 18(1-2), p77-97

**Lagarde, C. (2014) Economic Inclusion and Financial Integrity—an Address to the Conference on Inclusive Capitalism, London, May 27, <http://www.imf.org/external/np/speeches/2014/052714.htm>, accessed 29 May**

Lotringer, S. (2004) foreword, in Virno, P. *A Grammar of the Multitude*, Los Angeles, Semiotext(e)

MacDonald, R. (ed) (1997) *Youth, the 'underclass and social exclusion*, London, Routledge

Marazzi, C. (2011) *The violence of financial capitalism*, Los Angeles, Semiotext(e)

**Marx, K. (1973) [1857-8] *Grundrisse*, Harmondsworth, Penguin**

**Marx, K. (1976) [1867] *Capital Volume 1*, Harmondsworth, Penguin**

McRobbie, A. (1998) *British fashion design*, London, Routledge

Miliband (2011) *Warns British Promise Being Broken*  
<http://www.labour.org.uk/ed-miliband-warns-british-promise-being-broken>  
Accessed 4 Feb 2011

Moos, M. (1979) Government Youth training policy and its impact on further education, Occasional Stencilled paper, CCCS, university of Birmingham

Newson, J., and Newson, E. (1976) *Patterns of infant care in an urban community*, Houndsmill, Pelican

Pearson, G. (1975) *The Deviant Imagination*, London, Macmillan

Pearson, G. (1983) *Hooligan: a History of Respectable fears*, London, Macmillan

Preston, J. (2003) White trash vocationalism? Formations of class and Race in an Essex further education college, *Widening participation and lifelong learning*, Vol 5, No 2, p6-17

Purvis, J. (1987) 'Social class, education and ideals of femininity' in Arnot, M., and Weiner, G. (eds) *Gender and the Politics of Schooling* Open University Press. P253-275

Research in Post-Compulsory Education (2013) *Special Issue: Reclaiming the Disengaged: Critical Perspectives on Young People Not in Education, Employment or Training*, 18(1-2)

- Rustin, M. (2013) *A relational society*, in Hall, S., Massey, D., Rustin, M. (eds) **After neoliberalism? The Kilburn manifesto**  
[http://lwbooks.co.uk/journals/soundings/pdfs/Soundings%20Manifesto\\_Rustin.pdf](http://lwbooks.co.uk/journals/soundings/pdfs/Soundings%20Manifesto_Rustin.pdf)  
 accessed 7 August 2013
- Shildrick, T., MacDonald, R., Webster, C., Garthwaite, K. (2012) *Poverty and Insecurity: Life in low-pay, No-pay Britain*, Bristol, Policy Press
- Simmons, R., Russell, L. and Thompson, R. (2013) NEET young people and the Labour Market: voices from the margins, *Discourse Power and Resistance Conference*, 9th - 11th April 2013, London
- Simmons, R., Thompson, R. (2011) *NEET Young People and Training for Work: Learning on the Margins*, London, Trentham
- Skeggs, B. (1997) *Formation of class and gender*, London, Sage
- Skeggs, B. (2004) *Class, Self, Culture*, London, Routledge
- Skeggs, B., Wood, H. (2012) *Reacting to Reality Television: Performance, Audience and Value*, London Routledge
- Social Exclusion Unit (1999) *Bridging the gap: New opportunities for 16–18 year-olds not in education, employment or training*, London, Stationery Office
- Standing, G. (2011) *The Precariat: the new dangerous class*, London, Bloomsbury
- Strathdee, R. (2013) Reclaiming the Disengaged: reform of new Zealand's vocational education and training and social welfare systems, *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 18(1-2) p29-45
- Tizzard, B., Hughes, M. (1984) *Young children learning*, London, Fontana
- Vaizey, J. (1962) *Education for Tomorrow*, Harmondsworth, Penguin
- Vercellone, C. (2008) **The new articulation of wages, rent and profit in cognitive capitalism**, in Queen Mary University school of Business and Management, *The art of rent*, London, <http://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-00265584/> accessed 29 February 2012
- Vercellone, C. (2009) **Cognitive capitalism and models for the regulation of wage relations**, The edu-factory collective (eds) *Towards a Global Autonomous University*, New York, Autonomedia
- Wacquant, L. (1999) **Urban Marginality in the coming millennium**, *Urban Studies*, 36(10) p1639-1647

Wacquant, L. (2010) *Urban Outcasts: A comparative Sociology of Advance marginality*, Cambridge, Polity

Walkerdine, V. and Lucey, H., 1989. *Democracy in the Kitchen*. London: Virago

Weeks, K. (2011) *The problem with work*, Durham, Duke University Press

Wilkinson, R., Pickett, K. (2010) *The Spirit Level: Why Equality is Better for Everyone*, Harmondsworth, Penguin

Willis, P. (1977) *Learning to Labour: how working class kids get working class jobs*, Farnborough, Saxon House

Willis, P. (1986) Unemployment: the final inequality, *British journal of Sociology of Education*, 7(2) p155-169

Wright Mills, C. (1973) *The Sociological Imagination* Harmondsworth, Pelican