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## “It’s all about work”: **New Times**, **Post-Fordism** and **Vocational Pedagogy**

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### **Introduction**

This chapter<sup>(1)</sup> brings together two sets of arguments. The first addresses constructions of western economies that suggest there is something potentially progressive in **knowledge based economies** (KBEs). The second related set of arguments considers the manner in which we make sense of vocational pedagogy. This may be understood in either an expansive or restrictive manner, which in turn articulates with conceptualisations of KBEs and the role of **vocational education and training (VET)** in developing a creative and innovative workforce. Whilst the following discussion draws largely on the English experience it has a wider purchase, addressing **globalisation**, **capitalism** in its various forms, social democracy, neoliberalism, as well as the purpose of vocational pedagogy. Consequently it engages with **European Union** concerns with the development of knowledge based economies (EU 2002 & 2010). In European policy space and especially in countries such as Germany, VET addresses questions of **citizenship** and **democratic participation** (Coffield and Williamson 2011; Winch 2012), whereas in England it has a narrower remit more tightly rooted in **neoliberalism**, with an instrumental focus on the immediacy of waged labour. In the latter case this is out of step with the presumed demands of KBEs for the development of the innovative and creative capacity of labour.

The starting point for this chapter derives from two related sources: the Compass Education Group’s<sup>(2)</sup> (2015) *Big Education: Learning for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, and Spours’ (2014) *Education, the Economy and the State in ‘New Times’*. Spours, who was involved in writing both documents, drew on notions derived from the ‘New Times’ debate of the late 1980s and 90s, linking it to the current conjuncture and particularly to discussions about Labour party policy. The ‘New Times’ project suggested that post-Fordism represented an epochal change and that older Fordist conceptualisations of social, economic and political processes were less than helpful. This project was closely associated with *Marxism Today* and in particular its special issue on ‘New Times’ published in October 1988. The notion of ‘New Times’ can be linked to the decline of industrial capitalism in the West and the increasing significance attached to post-Fordism. Drawing upon this analysis, Spours argued that “New Times is a ‘subordinate progressive trend’ within ‘regressive neo-liberalism’ to be shaped and built” (2014:4). That is to say, within ‘New Times’ there are two potentially contradictory futures, both of which derive from the new technological, organisational and social environment facing society. On the one hand, this may facilitate the development of a social formation that is more egalitarian and democratic, in which people will increasingly have the opportunity to collaborate, co-operate, share, experiment, learn, fail and try again together. In these new networks, power and decision-making can be the property of us all. And on these emerging

flat planes where everyone's voice counts, everyone can be heard and anyone can know anything anywhere, the key skills of the future will be relational, emotional and empathetic (Compass 2015, 12).

Simultaneously (?), on the other hand, this new environment may be appropriated by 'big business' to serve its interests and become wedded to a neo-liberal state that validates cultures of individualism and competitiveness. Importantly, and, as with the earlier argument, at the same time, 'New Times' is thought to hold progressive possibilities that extend beyond the confines of Fordism and a restrictive neo-liberalism.

In the following I revisit some of the earlier arguments surrounding the 'New Times' debate and Post-Fordism as this has an affinity with and is applicable to current discussions about innovation, creativity and the increased importance attached to KBEs. There are a set of arguments that examine KBEs, suggesting these contain radical if not transformative possibilities. This derives from two of the features of post-Fordism. Firstly, the importance attached to creativity and, secondly, the contribution of workers to the success of the organisation. The nature of the firm as well as the manner in which surplus value is created has undergone a number of significant changes. Various notions are drawn upon to illustrate these that have not only affected individual firms but also the wider economy. Thus we encounter a number of conceptualisations such as mass customisation, co-configuration, social production, co-opetition, produsers, 'playbor', Pro-Ams, P2P (peer-to peer), open source and so on. All of these terms, in their different ways, suggest that erstwhile dichotomies have broken down, that is to say the division between consumer and producers has become blurred, with consumers also contributing to production. Immaterial labour that draws upon the intellectual capacity of those in and out of waged labour has become significant in facilitating innovation and the generation of surplus value.

It has become something of a commonplace for those on the left to argue that the concern with competitiveness is predicated upon a number of ideological distortions. This is the 'worst of times' marked by a 'regressive neo-liberalism' that Spours (2014) and the Compass Group (2015) describe. Key amongst the ideological distortions embedded within neo-liberalism are the presumption of up-skilling, the increased salience of knowledge work, that is to say valued-added waged labour, and the promise of a steadily increasing standard of living and well-being, all premised on the development of a globally competitive economy. The state's concern with competitiveness is located within neo-liberalism, with its tendency towards individualisation, the precariousness of waged labour, and, for the majority of workers, a secular decline in wages and allied benefits (Anyon, 2005; Blacker, 2013; Brown, Lauder and Ashton, 2011; Dorling, 2014; Jin, *et al.*, 2011; Marsh, 2011).

## **Post-Fordism**

A note of caution. I am using the term Post-Fordism to describe a particular current of thought present in the 1990s that pointed towards the transformation of waged work, specifically in England, but also in western economies. This understanding of Post-Fordist imagery can be contrasted with analyses that view it as a particular stage of capitalist development. The focus here is on Post-Fordism as an Ideology, and the contrast that can be made between it and Fordism with respect to the economy, competition, the production process and labour. Brown and Lauder's (1992, Table 1.1 p4) illustrate a particular model of

the shift from Fordism to Post-Fordism. Fordist production processes sit alongside **Keynesian Welfarism** and feature protected national markets, mass production of standardised products, bureaucratic organisational structures with competition based on economies of scale that seek to maximise capacity and reduce cost. This is contrasted with Post-Fordism which mobilises a rather different logic and sits comfortably with KBEs. In this instance, competition is global, based on innovation and the development of **flexible production systems** that respond rapidly to market changes, and organisational structures that are flatter and marked by distributed leadership.

This description of Post-Fordism offers a number of familiar themes that continue to resonate some twenty years on, that is to say notions of flexible production, flatter and responsive organisational structures, with the need for continual innovation to secure competitive advantage. These ideas are reflected in Spours' (2014) work and his description of 'New Times'.

### **New Times – technological, economic and social**

- New Times is a global phenomenon comprising:
  - Technological and digital revolution
  - Flexible production (Post-Fordism)
  - Lateral communication – social networking; blogging
  - New forms of organisation – flatter companies
  - The social economy
- New Times is a 'subordinate progressive trend' within 'regressive neo-liberalism' to be shaped and built (Spours 2014:4)

For Spours, these developments have arisen out of the growth of digital technologies that have been facilitated by the increasing salience of social and interactive networks. In a not dissimilar fashion, Araya cites four features of digital capitalism (2013:27).

### **Four Features of Digital Capitalism**

1. The diffusion of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and consequent transformations in Fordist Production.
2. The growing significance of a global market and globally fragmented production systems.
3. The increased importance of highly educated workers or human capital within continuous cycles of creative innovation.
4. The rise of alternative centers of production and consumption outside advanced industrialized countries. (Araya 2013:27)

Araya's description aligns with KBEs and their emphases on innovation, creativity and the development of human capital - the increased importance attached to immaterial/intellectual labour. This again reflects the shift from Fordism to Post-Fordism and its impact on the labour process (Brown and Lauder 1992, Table 1.1 p4). This is reflected in the shift from the detailed division of labour towards one marked by the growth of flexible specialisation and multi-skilling. Consequently, workers engage in high skilled, high trust labour which requires

regular on-the-job training with a premium being attached to the 'knowledgeable' worker. The predictability that was a feature of Fordist labour markets has been superseded by turbulence set within conditions of economic and technological uncertainty.

In the 1980s and 90s a number of writers felt that these Post-Fordist changes presaged progressive possibilities (Brown and Lauder, 1992). This potential derived from the importance placed upon the 'knowledgeable worker' who was required to mobilise skills and discretion in the workplace. Keep and James capture the ideological tenor of such arguments when they write:

[a] 'knowledge-driven economy' that would usher in an era of unbridled creativity where a workforce of knowledge workers, would command 'authorship' over their own work routines and activities, would be created (Keep and James 2012:211).

We can see these themes reflected in current discussions which emphasise the importance of lateral communication, social networking, blogging as well as the social economy which Spours (2014) has discussed. These changes have been facilitated by "the diffusion of information and communication technologies and the consequent transformations in Fordist production" (Araya 2013: 27). In addition, such workplace practices are thought to be located in organisations having flatter and more flexible structures.

Conceptualisations of **portfolio working** (Handy 1990) and distributed leadership (Harris, 2008) capture some of these ideas, as do the more radical notions of **collective intelligence** (Lacey, 1988) and **connectivity** (Young, 1993, 1998). It was these latter currents that were thought to carry progressive possibilities presaging the transformation of work relations. So, for example, Brown and Lauder (1992) cite Lacey's work approvingly.

Skills and talents are concerned with solving problems within already existing paradigms and systems of knowledge. Intelligence has to do with understanding the relationship between complex systems and making judgements about when it is appropriate to work within existing paradigms and when it is appropriate to create new courses of action or avenues of thought.... **Collective intelligence** [is] defined as a measure of our ability to face up to problems that confront us collectively and to develop collective solutions. [**my emphasis**] (Lacey, 1988, p93-94)

The point is that the transition from Fordist to Post-Fordist work relations was thought to open-up such possibilities. The development of collective intelligence anticipated more egalitarian and democratic relations in much the same way as is the case with current versions of 'New Times':

"the best of times' – in which people will increasingly have the opportunity to collaborate, co-operate, share, experiment, learn, fail and try again together. In these new networks, power and decision-making can be the property of us all. And on these emerging flat planes where everyone's voice counts, everyone can be heard and anyone can know anything anywhere, the key skills of the future will be relational, emotional and empathetic" (Compass, 2015, p12).

Notions of transition and progressive possibilities were also a feature of Young's work in the 1990s. Here the notion of connectivity not only served an economic but also an educational purpose that heralded the possibility of enhanced democratisation. The point is that there appear to be a range of arguments that seek to wrest progressive possibilities from the 'New

Times' debate in both its early and later manifestations. Young wrote:

“Connective specialisation is concerned with the links between combinations of knowledge and skills in the curriculum and wider democratic and social goals. At the individual level it refers to the need for an understanding of the social, cultural, political and economic implications of any knowledge or skill in its context, and how, through such a concept of education, an individual can learn both specific skills and knowledge and the capacity to take initiatives, whatever their specific occupation or position... As a definition of educational purpose it aims to transcend the traditional dichotomy of the 'educated person' and the 'competent employee' which define the purpose of the two tracks of the divided curriculum” (Young, 1993, p 218).

Interestingly, this argument draws together notions of the educated person and the competent employee in much the same way as in the current version of this debate. Both versions imply that there are at least two variants of capitalism, one marked by the perversities of neo-liberalism and the other, a more human, developmental and progressive form offering the possibility of non-alienating labour where our species being can be expressed. The preceding has a bearing upon the way in which we could think about vocational pedagogy and its educative as well as progressive possibilities. This is particularly the case if the historical movement is towards Post-Fordist work relations or, in Compass Education Group's terms, “the best of times”.

However, during the 1990s it became apparent that the optimism surrounding these constructions of Post-Fordism were and continue to be illusionary. **Flexibilisation**, adaptability and insecurity have become features of working life with such processes being linked to individualisation, responsabilisation, precariousness and **neo-Fordism**. In 1996 Brown and Lauder pointed out:

“Neo-Fordism can be characterised in terms of creating greater market flexibility through a reduction in social overheads and the power of trade unions, the privatisation of public utilities and the welfare state, as well as a celebration of competitive individualism” (Brown and Lauder, 1992: 5).

Neo-Fordism reflects what the Compass Education Group refer to as the ‘worst of times’. Brown, Lauder and Ashton's (2011) more recent work on the US is much less sanguine than their earlier writing, with its argument equally applicable to other western economies. In contradistinction to Post-Fordist imagery, they argue that the income of workers has become increasingly vulnerable. They point towards the collapse of the post-war opportunity structure in which the possibility of upward mobility was significant together with a continually improving standard of living – the expectation that children would be better off than their parents (Allen and Ainley, 2014). For Brown *et al.* (2011), knowledge workers encounter digital Taylorism which has been facilitated by the development of information and communication technologies. **Digital Taylorism** refers to the way in which new digital technologies enable formerly skilled knowledge work to be standardised. This argument resonates with Marx (1976) and Braverman (1974) who suggest that capitalism contains a logic towards the deskilling of labour and its immiseration. Alongside these processes, Brown *et al.* point towards the possibility of a high skill low wage nexus for worker in the West. They argue that amongst knowledge workers there is a polarisation between those experiencing digital Taylorism and a small élite who are deemed to possess the skills, creativity and talent that enable transnational companies to out-perform their competitors.

These workers receive a wage premium which can be seen as a feature of Brown *et al.*'s (2008) global 'war for talent'.

The reason for re-visiting these earlier discussions (and see Avis, 2010; 2013a; 2013b; 2016 dates?) is that they are as relevant today as they were in the 1980s and 90s. However, I would like to make two additional observations. The first concerns Spours' claim that "New Times is a 'subordinate progressive trend' within 'regressive neo-liberalism' to be shaped and built" (2014: 4). This could be seen as a call for action, a site of struggle but it is also set within a contradictory location. After all, capital is not all of a piece, and Post-Fordist imagery alongside 'New Times', whilst offering certain benefits, is nevertheless set on a capitalist terrain. Post-Fordism addresses the concerns of a particular fraction of capital that coexists alongside other forms. At best, 'New Times' and Post-Fordism could be framed within a social democratic politics that is limited by its failure to develop a robust anti-capitalist project. It is important to recall that in a context of digital Taylorism the hype surrounding KBE's demand for creative and innovative labour is deeply misleading. This hype can be seen as a fiction perpetuated by intellectuals who have aligned themselves with a modernised and progressive capitalism (Hutton, 2010; Sainsbury, 2013) that sets itself against neo-liberalism and, though allegedly more humane, is equally concerned with the extraction of surplus value.

The second and related point is that for some writers Post-Fordism and beyond represents changes in the mode of production, that is to say, the decline of industrial capitalism in the West and concomitant changes in the way capitalist organisations are understood. Thus we encounter conceptualisations of mass customisation, co-configuration, social production, producers, and a number of similar terms, all of which emphasise the integration of consumers into the production process. These notions can be seen in Engeström's (2010) discussion of the historical modes of production in which social production anticipates the incipient socialisation of the means of production. In this he draws on the work of Marx as well as that of Victor and Boynton (1998). Whilst the shifts described will be uneven, there is nevertheless a trajectory in the direction of social production which goes beyond firm-based models of production. In this context, Engeström refers to Benkler's (2006) work on P2P (peer-to-peer), open source and social production and in these instances surplus value is generated by those external to the capitalist organisation and who provide free labour. This latter theme is addressed in a rather different and less sanguine understanding of current conditions in cognitive capitalism and Italian Workerism.

### **Cognitive Capitalism**

Gorz (2010), with others, suggests that industrial capitalism represents a particular stage of capitalist development and has been transcended by cognitive or immaterial capitalism (Boutang 2011). Here surplus value is appropriate in a qualitatively different manner to the preceding stage. Marazzi, echoing the Compass group's (2014: 12) rather more benign description of relational, emotional and empathetic skills, suggests:

"one's entire life is put to work, when knowledges and cognitive competences of the workforce (the *general intellect* that Marx spoke about in his *Grundrisse*) assume the role played by machines in the Fordist period, incarnated in the living productive bodies of cooperation, in which language, effects, emotions and relational and communication capacities all contributed to the creation of value" (2011: 113).

For those who adopt this argument, the knowledge and competences of the workforce are developed collectively by living labour, external to capitalist relations. This potential has arisen as a consequence of Fordism and Welfarism with Vercellone (2008 requires referencing?) referring to “the constitution of a diffuse intellectuality generated by the development of mass education” (unnumbered). He also argues that the social struggles that secured “the spread of social income and welfare services” (unnumbered) resulted in conditions favourable to the development of knowledge based economies.

The significance of this argument is that it prioritises the development of knowledge and views this as a collective and implicitly democratic accomplishment that occurs outside the direct control of capital with surplus value being appropriated in a qualitatively different manner to that found within industrial capitalism. There are resonances here with feminist analyses of housework which examined the significance of unwaged labour for capitalist processes (Federici 2012; Fortunati 1995). This type of analysis also raises questions about vocational pedagogy. If, through labour that takes place external to the capitalist firm, we generate surplus value, this implies that ‘life’ itself is a vocational pedagogy. Whilst I do not want to exaggerate this, it has implications for the way in which we think about vocational education and pedagogy, especially in a context that stresses the need for adaptability and flexibility and where we are frequently ‘produser’ as well as part of the precariat.

### **Vocational Education/pedagogy**

Billett’s (2005) research on vocational learning sets much of this in the workplace. By acknowledging this as a site of learning we are able to dignify forms of labour that have been overlooked and often seen as demeaning. By recognising and credentialising this type of learning, a **social justice** agenda is addressed. Fuller and Unwin (2003), on a slightly different tack, explore work place learning cultures for their pedagogic possibilities, arguing that these may be more or less restrictive or expansive. The former effectively mirrors Fordist and the latter Post-Fordist work relations (see Evans *et al.* 2006, fig 3.2 p61). There are several points to make about **restrictive and expansive learning cultures and environments**. The restrictive is set within a managerialist, performative and Taylorist/Fordist context and readily opens itself up to critique. This sits with critiques of performativity and audit culture that suggest these preclude the creative engagement of workers. In a sense, the restrictive is construed as anti-educative and subject to the critique of Fordist and Taylorist work relations - it is easy enough to rail against an impoverished Fordism. Expansive learning cultures are concerned with the development of variable labour power and represent a type of vocational pedagogy that is firmly set on a capitalist terrain. Such a stance is not so far from the view expressed by the **Commission on Adult Vocational Teaching and Learning** who suggest:

“The best vocational teaching and learning combines theoretical knowledge from the underpinning disciplines (for example, maths, psychology, human sciences, economics) with the occupational knowledge of practice (for example, how to cut hair, build circuit boards, administer medicines). To do this, teachers, trainers and learners have to recontextualise theoretical and occupational knowledge to suit specific situations. Both types of knowledge are highly dynamic. So individuals need to carry on learning through being exposed to new forms of knowledge and practice in order to make real the **line of sight to work.**” (CAVTL 2013, 15)

Paradoxically CAVTL's position whilst appearing progressive reflects a somewhat restrictive model of VET as it is preoccupied with a clear **line of sight to work**. Such an orientation can very easily lead to a narrow focus on the needs of employers and, to the extent that creativity and innovation is encouraged and valued, this is on the basis that it contributes to successful work place practices. Critique is to be encouraged, provided it rests within this terrain and is 'business facing'. This understanding of? vocational education/pedagogy simply refers to learning for work, developing the skills required to labour effectively. However, this is a peculiarly Anglo-Saxon conceptualisation of vocational education and pedagogy, Clarke and Winch (2007) suggest that it is thought of quite differently in other social formations. Whilst in the Anglo-Saxon world it is viewed as preparation for working life, a process of a rather technical and practical nature, in other societies it can also encompass civic and academic education. It is often viewed as being as much concerned with personal development as it is with the needs of employers. In addition, it has been linked with identity formation as well as nation building. It is important to acknowledge that these additional features may be undercut by neo-liberalism. Vocational education and its pedagogy is inevitably marked by history and the society in which it is located, being shaped by the struggle between capital and labour – the balance of power and the concessions that have been won or lost. Progressive forms of VET may reflect the compromises made between capital and labour but they may also be rhetorical and deeply ideological and justify situations where “one's entire life is put to work” (Marazzi 2011: 113).

There are numerous models of vocational education and pedagogy that encompass notions of competence, socially situated workplace processes, as well as various conceptualisations of expansive learning as found in Engeström (2010), and Fuller and Unwin's work (2003; Evans *et al.*, 2006). Notwithstanding their differences they all prioritise **waged labour**, even in the case of those that go beyond notions of expansive learning and allied cultures towards democratic participation and citizenship that are wedded to consensual or pluralistic models of society. In these cases, the antagonism between labour and capital are thought to be manageable. This position can also be found in accounts that discuss academic disciplinary knowledge and argue this is central to a social justice agenda. In this case, writers such as Wheelahan (2010) suggest that access to such knowledge is an element of distributed justice with this arising in several ways. Vocational education and pedagogy need to provide learners with the facility to evaluate and judge the claims made by academic disciplines. This potential will enable learners to critique disciplinary claims albeit in a rudimentary fashion. In addition, **disciplinary knowledge** provides access to what Young (1998, 2008)) describes as '**powerful knowledge**' in that it offers 'epistemic gains' that are not readily accessible in other forms of knowledge. However, such a position needs to be supplemented with what Johnson has described as “really useful knowledge”:

“A knowledge of everyday circumstances, including a knowledge of why you were poor, why you were politically oppressed and why through the force of social circumstance, you were the kind of person you were, your character misshapen by a cruel competitive world.” (Education Group 1981, 37)

Although this goes beyond the claimed objectivity and validation of disciplinary knowledge by its community of scholars, it does seek to wrest a progressive politics from this and thereby engages in a politics of hope. In other words, the epistemic gains that derive from disciplinary knowledge can only take us so far and need to be mobilised politically in order to

serve a social justice agenda.

## **Towards a conclusion**

The 'New Times' anticipated by Post-Fordism, together with calls for expansive forms of vocational education and pedagogy, hold progressive possibilities. However, the preceding argument suggests that this connection can be overstated. This can be seen in the work of those writers who argue that the 'New Times' offer the potential to transcend the perversities of neo-liberalism. Whilst this is undoubtedly the case, it is also important to recognise that this argument is constrained by the capitalist relations in which it is located. Capitalism is not all of a piece and whilst 'New Times' emphasises the significance of knowledge work and immaterial labour, these are as deeply embedded in capital/labour relations as are other forms of work that coexist with these. Research associated with cognitive capitalism illustrates the way in which living labour contributes to the generation of surplus value. This in turn implies that our cultural and social lives that occur external to the capitalist organisation can be conceived of as a type of vocational pedagogy.

A more general discussion of vocational education and pedagogy raises questions about its expansive potential. Much of this debate is closely tied to the workplace and unsurprisingly is concerned with the development of variable labour power, in effect a conservative politics. This arises in spite of its commitment to social justice, but yet, as with 'New Times', there resides a progressive possibility. This derives from its engagement with the epistemic gains proffered by academic disciplines accompanied by a concern with really useful knowledge. This is a politics of hope that draws upon lived experience and that mobilises disciplinary knowledge as a resource in the struggle for social justice in an attempt to move beyond capitalism.

## **Notes**

1. This chapter draws on arguments and develops those first presented in Avis, 2010, 2013a, b, 2016.
2. Compass originated as a pressure group that sought to influence policies of the UK Labour Party. It is committed to the development of a 'Good' society in which equality, sustainability and democracy become a living reality. Compass now believes that no single issue, organisation or political party can attain its goals and that therefore it needs to work and build alliances with a variety of groups. Spours convened the Compass Education Group (2015), writing much of its report.

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