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MYTHS OF OUR TIME

By Professor James Avis

“Education plays a key role in the perpetuation of the capital relation; this is the skeleton in capitalist education’s dank basement. It is just one of the many reasons why, in contemporary capitalist society, education assumes a grotesque and perverted form. It links the chains that bind our souls to capital.” -- Allman, et al, 2003, p149-150

“[The Prime Minister] has put fairness at the heart of his agenda... This is not just a moral imperative but an economic one too. Britain in 2008 is very different to 1997 and will be more so by 2020. We have seen rapid and radical changes in the global economy. To succeed in this new economic climate Britain must be one of the world’s highest skilled economies. We must ensure all in our workforce are ready for the jobs of the future.”
-- Ministerial foreword, Cabinet Office Strategy Unit, 2008, p3

AT A TIME OF RECESSION AND ECONOMIC CRISIS THE education system has increasingly been called upon by the state to develop the skills and knowledge required by capital. Further Education (FE) is deemed to play an important role in this process through developing human capital and the reservoir of skill available to the social formation. By doing so, FE is thought to support a social justice agenda by contributing towards social inclusion and consequently, societal cohesion. This article comments upon a number of issues facing FE, vocationalisation, performativity and questions of social justice. In order to do so it is necessary to locate it within its

socio-economic context.

There are a plethora of terms used to describe FE - the FE system, FE sector, post compulsory education and training, and the learning and skills sector. These terms reflect the ambiguities of the sector as well as its increasingly fluid and blurred boundaries (Allen and Ainley, 2007). Historically, FE has nestled between the end of compulsory schooling and advanced (degree) level study. It has been orientated towards the provision of non-advanced vocational/technical and general education as well as adult education. Kenneth Baker (1989), a former Conservative Secretary of State for Education referred to it as the

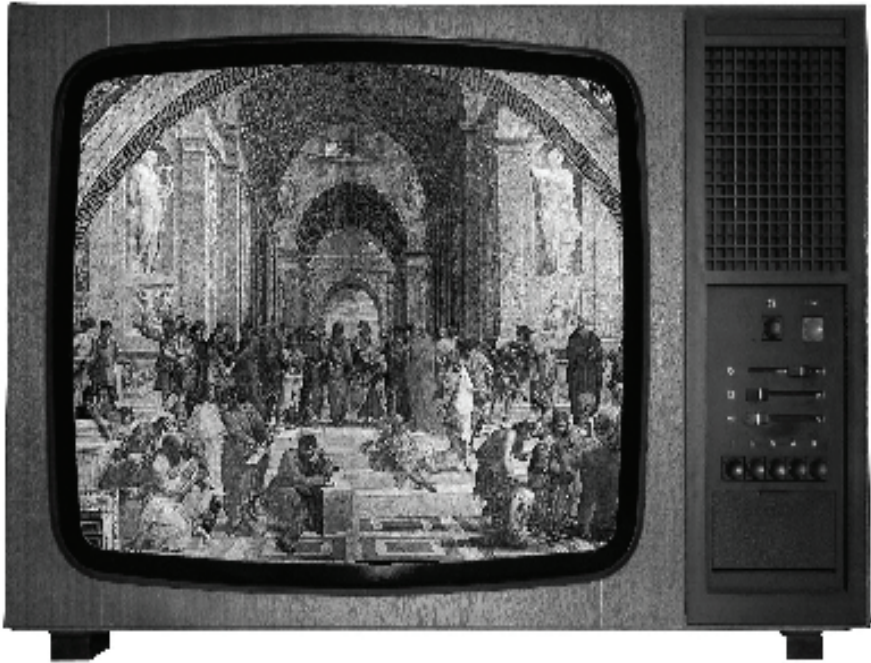
‘Cinderella’ service. However, it is important to acknowledge that English FE has never been an easily definable sector, being marked by diversity, shifting boundaries and delivered not just in colleges of further education but by a variety of organisations including private training providers. Currently, provision can range from basic skills, vocational diplomas for 14-16 year olds, to degree level work. Colleges are marked by their particular histories as well as by the local and regional contexts in which they operate.

A key tenet of the state’s ‘competitiveness settlement’ is the notion that through the development of human capital, society’s skills base will be enhanced leading to the development of a world class economy that will ensure economic success (Avis, 2009). Educational strategies orientated towards this goal not only offer economic, but also societal well-being. The argument is that in order to pursue this economic goal it is necessary to mobilise the talents of all. It is thus important that disadvantaged and marginalised groups are able to avail themselves of educational opportunities. By doing so, they contribute towards the economic vibrancy of society whilst simultaneously addressing New Labour’s social inclusion and cohesion agenda - a win-win situation for all. However, there are a number of difficulties with such arguments. There is a presumption that the logic of up-skilling is, or will, become

ubiquitous throughout the social formation. The notion of skill is fraught with ambiguities which include ‘hard’ skills emphasising technical performance, ‘soft’ skills including problem solving and the ability to work within a group, as well as its aestheticisation, embodied in the sexualisation of workers in fashionable bars and shops. Notwithstanding this, there are two points to be made about skill and the English economy. Firstly, there is a polarisation of skill with the majority of jobs requiring limited levels of skill, set against a much smaller high skills sector (Brown, et al, (2001).

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Secondly, Brown et al, (2010) anticipate the development of a high skill, low wage nexus, a process which is aligned with globalisation as well as with digital Taylorism. Thus digital technologies can be used to standardise formerly skilled occupations, leading to a further polarisation within high waged employment and the development therein of a growing low waged sector. The point is that the pursuit of competitiveness will not necessarily deliver a high skilled, high waged economy characterised by steadily increasing standards of living. Such a strategy as a route to social justice is



seriously compromised.

Nevertheless, economism informs the state's responses to education. This can be seen in the vocationalisation of education and the manner in which this is wedded to the pursuit of competitiveness. Education is to become business, with FE and Higher Education seen as having a pivotal economic role. In the case of FE this is set at the regional and local level, as is the case with some recruiting universities. However, the danger is that such a strategy results in an impoverished conception of education which, cleansed of its criticality, becomes merely a form of capitalist education. Such an education seeks to construct

in its charges forms of subjectivity that align with the needs of capital. In addition, locally orientated FE, by attempting to serve the labour requirements of local employers, may inadvertently reproduce regionally based patterns of class inequality.

Whilst the state seeks to wed education to the needs of capital, this is lived equivocally by those who work and study in the sector. As with the state sector as a whole, further education is characterised by the prevalence of targets and performance indicators. This emphasis upon performativity rests contradictorily with a concern to professionalise FE teachers and a rhetoric that stresses creativity and

its importance within the knowledge economy. For many teachers, the constraints surrounding practice will be at odds with state constructions of creativity and the knowledge economy. Teachers' lived experience of working in the sector is rather more concerned with the intensification of labour and meeting targets than with creativity. There are however, two points to be made that can be set against the apparent determinism of my earlier account. Firstly, to paraphrase Marx: we make history, but not in conditions of our own choosing. Thus the current conditions encountered become the terrain on which we struggle. Secondly, the preceding analysis is somewhat bleak, but despite constraints there will be some space for agency, not least because of the contradictions surrounding education policy and its enactment and mediation at institutional levels. The ubiquitousness of targets will clearly impact on classroom practices, but there will nevertheless be space for some sort of critical engagement by students and teachers. In addition, the rhetoric of social inclusion can be used to assess state policy and can be played back on itself, becoming a resource in the pursuit of social justice.

Although state responses to the current economic crisis and the role it fosters upon, Further Education is represented as a happy coincidence between the needs of industry and social justice, this association is ul-

timately flawed and serves deeply conservative ends. This nexus, through its contradictions, does however call forth a political economy of education, and in this way prefigures a politics that is committed to the pursuit of social justice.

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