
VET, post-secondary education - a new settlement?

James Avis

Introduction

The starting point for this article is with Rob Peutrell's (2021) discussion of the final report from the independent commission on the College of the Future (*PSE 102*), in which he alluded to an emerging consensus. This consensus included elements of the Labour left through to the 'ed-wall Tory right', who all call for more interventionist and corporatist economic and social policies. What I would like to do in this article is to take up this notion of an emerging consensus, but rather than using these terms draw on the related conceptualisation of settlement. This latter term carries with it a notion that settlements derive from the balance of power between capital and labour. Consequently, we can analyse the social democratic settlement that developed in the years following the second world war and its 'replacement' by one informed by New Right Thatcherite neo-liberalism. There are two points to be made. Firstly, settlements have to be constantly re-made, re-secured and won to attain popular acceptance. Secondly, they may fail to win full assent and may not be liked but nevertheless can secure themselves acceptance if they can shape a common sense whereby it is thought there is no alternative to current arrangements.

A new settlement

For some years now it has become increasingly apparent that neo-liberalism and its mantra of markets, competition and commodification has imploded, not least as a result of the activities of bankers, rentiers and finance capitalists as well as by senior executives who pay themselves large bonuses whilst their organisations fail. The rhetoric surrounding neo-liberalism is increasingly seen and experienced as hollow and deeply inequitable. The 'crisis' of neo-liberalism can be set alongside and related to those of race social care, waged employment and the climate emergency (see Ainley,

2021; Avis 2021a, b; Lethbridge, 2021). Increasingly labour markets as well as the distribution of income and wealth have become polarised with the historic relation between productivity and income being decoupled. In addition what previously could have been described as the secure middle/working class has been hollowed out of the labour market, having become increasingly insecure, facing redundancy and periods of unemployment (Ainley, 2021). These developments have been exacerbated by Covid-19. It is within this socio-economic and political context that we can make sense of the 'progressive' ideologues or apologists of capital calling for a new social contract, one that is restorative and that seeks to secure the secular interests of capital. Wolf (2019, online) comments invidiously on the current unstable, inequitable, sluggish form of capitalism which can be compared to his call for its supersession by a dynamic capitalist economy that would benefit all members of society. Schwab (2020), founder and executive chairman of the World Economic Forum, seeks the restoration of trust in capitalism in what he refers to as a 'great reset'. A few years earlier Carney (2014) and Lagarde (2014) had argued for an inclusive capitalism. Elements of a new social contract or settlement can be discerned in these interventions that seek a socially just, fairer and greener global economy that provides meaningful, safe and decent work. This would be set alongside human centred economic growth and is attentive to the so-called left behind. There are at least two points to be made. Firstly, these elements can be used as a resource in struggle - yet can only take us so far. Recent history has illustrated the adaptive capacities of capitalism. The social democratic settlement secured the long term interest of capital whilst at the same time sections of the working class gained concessions. Thatcherism illustrated that when the balance of power between labour and capital shifted in favour of the latter these concessions were clawed back. Secondly, there is also the question as to whether the interventions of these apologists are solely ideological in as much as they offer an imaginary

resolution of the contradictions of capitalism. Whilst they may offer some material respite from the oppressions of capitalism in the long term they remain wedded to the accumulation of capital.

VET

In the current conjuncture there is the spectre of widespread worklessness allied with the absence of decent jobs (Blacker, 2013, 1; Brown et al, 2020). Whilst it is important to acknowledge that these processes are sites of struggle, it is necessary to recognise that the logic of capitalism is toward the expulsion of waged labour so as to maximise the accumulation of capital (Harvey, 2014).

Esmond and Atkins (2020) alert us to what they describe as a curve of inequality in VET/post-secondary education where there is a polarisation between those who are prepared, at best, for intermittent waged employment and whose education seeks to habituate them to this situation and a technical elite whose prospects are somewhat better. Whilst this technical elite is offered a more expansive but nevertheless limited VET this is a far cry from Ainley's call for new forms of learning and the development of generic intelligence. There is an articulation between Ainley's aspirations and engagement with really useful knowledge and labour that may arise external to the wage relation and be predicated on collective and democratic processes that contribute to individual and societal well-being. This serves to raise questions about the way in which we think about VET and the new conditions in which it is located, that of worklessness and intermittent employment for the many. VET has historically been tightly associated with waged labour and frequently the diktat of employers (see the current skills White Paper). If we take seriously discussions of the generic intellect and its collective development we need to think about the manner in which VET could be developed to engage with really useful knowledge and labour.

Conclusion

In the current conjuncture the apologists of capital are seeking to construct a new settlement that can magically resolve the contradictions of capitalism and address the failings of neo-liberalism. Elements drawn from this settlement can be used in the struggle towards a socially just society - the concerns with decent work and human centred growth being just two cases in point. However, this can take us only so far and would need to be

wedded to a broader anti-capitalist project, one prefigured in the re-imagining or reconceptualisation of VET to enhance generic intelligence and contribute towards the development of really useful labour.

References

- Ainley, P. 2021. 'PSE: from general education to general intellect', *PSE* 102
- Avis, J. 2021a, *Vocational Education in the Fourth Industrial Revolution: Education and Employment in a Post-Work Age*, London: Palgrave
- Avis, J. 2021b, 'Beyond Neo-Liberalism a new Settlement - Three Crises and Post-Secondary Education', *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies* 19(1) [in press]
- Blacker, D. 2013 *The Falling Rate of Learning and the Neoliberal Endgame*. London: Zero Books
- Brown, P., Lauder, H. Cheung, S. Y. (2020) *The Death of Human Capital?* Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Carney, M. 2014, 'Inclusive Capitalism: Creating a Sense of the Systemic'. Speech at the Conference on Inclusive Capitalism, May 27. Accessed May 29, 2014, www.bankofengland.co.uk/publications/Documents/speeches/2014/speech731.pdf
- Esmond, B. & Atkins, L. 2020. 'VET realignment and the development of technical elites: Learning at work in England'. *International Journal for Research in Vocational Education and Training*, 7(2), 193-213. <https://doi.org/10.13152/IJRVE.7.2.4>
- Harvey, D. 2014 *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism*. London: Profile Books
- Lagarde, C. 2014. 'Economic Inclusion and Financial Integrity'. Address to the Conference on Inclusive Capitalism, London, May 27. Retrieved from www.imf.org/external/np/speeches/2014/052714.htm on 29 May 2014
- Lethbridge, J. 2021. 'The crisis in care', *PSE* 102
- Peutrell, R. 2021. 'Whose College of the Future?', *PSE* 102
- Schwab, K. 2020. World economic forum annual meeting 2020 <https://www.weforum.org/events/world-economic-forum-annual-meeting-2020/about>
- Wolf, M. 2019. 'Why rigged capitalism is damaging liberal democracy', *Financial Review* 19 September <https://www.afr.com/policy/economy/why-rigged-capitalism-is-damaging-liberal-democracy-20190919-p52su6>