

The new form of general education?

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Jane Lethbridge, *Democratic Professionalism in Public Services*, Bristol: Policy Press 2019. 978-1447342106, 172 pp., £19.99

Founded in 1988 as *General Educator*, journal of the General Education Section of NATFHE (National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education), *Post-16 Educator* has conducted a long defence of general education and those who taught it, mainly in FE colleges to apprentice and other craft students. Now *PSE* finds itself defending general education against its degradation to competence training also in higher education institutions that have become part of a new sector of tertiary learning.

Just as the knowledge and skills of craft training in apprenticeships and further education were turned by automation and outsourcing into fungible competences, dismantling the cultures that sustained trades organisation in the industrial workplace, so now professional knowledge and skill is being similarly disaggregated by Artificial so-called Intelligence. This degrades traditionally secure career professions into insecure para-professional occupations that higher-become-further education increasingly trains for.

It is this crisis for the managerial and professional 'middle class' and their previously 'higher' education that is addressed by Jane Lethbridge's advocacy of *Democratic Professionalism* as both the new form of general education and the best means to defend public services threatened with the imposition of permanent austerity.

Following her extensive involvement in community health campaigns against cuts in the NHS budget

and more widely to sustain and extend the public right to health services, Jane's short and readable book in the easily accessible Policy Press imprint addresses all those providing public services within and outwith the NHS. These range from care-workers to nurses and doctors, as well as teachers at all levels of learning from infant to post-graduate schools, together with town-planners and all sorts of other public servants in and out of national and local government. These new and old professions and para-professions struggle to sustain themselves against perpetual austerity.

Working for the Public Services International Research Unit that has survived and flourished within the Business Faculty of a new university is itself an example of such professional work under pressure from financialisation. It has given Jane a privileged position from which to contribute research to the public sector union campaigns nationally and internationally that illuminate her book. Tertiary level learning is also the prime site for the formation of the various expertises that constitute professional roles and identities. Their denigration reflects 'a lack of democracy in the way in which expertise is created and shared' and so 'this book seeks to highlight the role of professionals in the future democratic design and delivery of public services' (p55).

It does so by providing a set of ideas which aim to contribute to the creation of democratic public services that value providers and users so that they support and complement each other rather than setting them in competition against each other to supposedly raise standards while actually commodifying provision. 'The term democratic professionalism challenges the assumption

underlying public sector reform that public service users can be redefined as customers.' (p9)

The development of democratic professionalism is therefore seen as a reaction to privatisation and austerity but one which is not defensive of previously privileged professions. Rather, 'it is a process of challenging the traditional notion of a profession and the exercise of professional power' (p29). Necessarily, this challenges also a state changing its form from welfare state compromise towards a contracting state in which responsibility for delivery is contracted out to individually audited agents whilst power contracts to managers who set often arbitrary targets that are then remorselessly pursued through surveillance and inspection facilitated by new information technology.

Jane draws on feminist aspects of the work of political philosopher Hannah Arendt to reflect on taking collective action in the public realm where women now form the majority of public service professionals. This counter-movement can create a sense of solidarity between those involved which may form the core of these women's actions and those of Black and other minority groups within the public sector. Arendt's emphasis on labour as opposed to work applies in many public services involving care where labour is typically devalued as laborious and low-paid. She contrasts this with 'natality' in which, as Jane presents it, 'the political realm rises directly out of acting together through the sharing of words and deeds' (p49).

Duality

Proposals for a National Care Service, in relation to Local Authorities and/or the NHS, also bring care into a policy context. Rather like the duality between mental and manual labour, or explicit and tacit knowledge, work in medicine, higher education, teaching and social work is typically valued more highly and construed as masculine. Education for the former and training for the latter therefore need to be brought together since there is in any case no education without training but too often and increasingly training without education.

This is especially the case in the development of craft and/or professional expertise through practical experience combined with theoretical study. This process should be opened by a public pedagogy that counters the derision of experts by acknowledging the contributions of patients and other public service users. Jane gives examples in mental health through family therapy but also local councils working with community groups on carbon reduction as Architects for Social Housing combine with tenants to confront the housing crisis. Similarly

Street Doctors join Radical Nurses in extending the professional remit of medical professionals in relation to their patients while Care Workers seek to gain the education and training to establish recognised career paths.

However, tertiary education is the prime case - despite its commodification still free from the dictates of any national curriculum. At Lincoln University, for example, the Social Science Centre set an example of involving students and citizens undertaking research alongside their teachers, just as in London the Silent University works with asylum seekers and others to gain recognition for their often unacknowledged expertise. Goldsmiths University staff and students collaborated on a prospectus that seeks to ground its radical credentials, while elsewhere a manifesto for social work lays claim to their profession as one worth fighting for.

The book is rich in such practical examples and theoretical suggestions, not least of which is the relation of professional associations to trades unions. Historically these two were always opposed, as in management admonitions to the latter that it would be 'unprofessional' to go on strike. With a new and growing public sector unionism often involving the new professionalism that is the focus of this book, their relations need to be rethought.

In conclusion, Jane faces the reduced role of the state in the provision of public services forcing individuals back onto their own resources and into growing destitution. This hollowing out of the state through automation, outsourcing, privatisation, restructuring and continuing austerity would/? will be intensified by its consolidation in a 'hard Brexit'.

This leads to an appreciation of how democratic professionalism can ameliorate if not control the many rapid changes in production and society encountered by professionals and those who use their public services. As the state divests itself of responsibility for the public sphere, direct action will be required by democratic professionals together with citizens to reclaim and redefine public provision. This book provides examples of such positive reactions and makes a significant contribution to theorise and contextualise them politically.

