

General education in an artificially learning society

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Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*, London: Profile 2019, £25.00, 599pp

Jamie Susskind, *Future Politics, Living Together in a World Transformed by Tech*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2018, £20.00, 516pp

The 16 year-old Swedish school student, Greta Thunberg, raises for her generation the issue ignored by both these hefty books: why learn when there is 'no future'? To this existential question is added another: why learn when supposedly 'intelligent' machines can do it for you?

40 years ago the punks faced 'no future' with the collapse of youth labour markets but structural youth unemployment was subsequently mopped up by youth training moving on to FE that then merged with HE and today's phoney apprenticeships. In a certified society that recognises only the literary examination of more or less expensively acquired cultural capital, increasing numbers are relegated to insecure para-professional jobs merging into a new reserve army of precarious labour constituting perhaps 40 per cent of employees in part-time and unskilled jobs. They are being pushed into penury by the austerity planned to be consolidated by Brexit with thousands homeless and millions insecurely housed as four million children grow up in poverty.

Ignoring this structural downward social mobility, proposals for a National Education Service offer mainly warm words suffused with what Martin Allen in his education-economy-society blog calls 'teacherism'. As well as endorsing a persisting parting of the ways at 16+ for academic or supposedly 'technical' qualifications, this is the political and professional consensus that teachers in front of maximum class sizes of 30 delivering the National Curriculum in competing schools under local authority control but policed by Ofsted ensure equal opportunities to be unequal in the all-consuming pursuit of illusory upward 'social mobility'.

Traditional professional knowledge itemised into information by relentlessly crunching algorithms contributes to this downward social displacement.

Similarly, the computers Zuboff in 1988 called *Smart Machines* degraded skilled manual work into competent performance even if temporarily expanding office employment. Then too, the potential of human-centred applications of new technology that Mike Cooley had demonstrated in the Lucas Aerospace *Plan for Socially Useful Production* (see Jane Lethbridge's review in *PSE* 95) was ignored by global financial speculation that was more immediately profitable than productive investment.

Zuboff warns of a consequent new age of enslavement by the AI that garners surplus data from consumers to predict and control our every move. While suggesting sensible curbs and restrictions upon the silicon corporations, her appeal is to human individuality to save itself from this digital new iron cage. However, her psychological reductionism does not recognise the pulverising into massified individuals of a class structure gone pear-shaped.

By contrast, Susskind accepts massification as problematic in seeking to build a new consensus for a *Future Politics*. He rejects state ownership of the new media as a solution but is sympathetic to a co-operative model 'whereby consumers or workers collectively own or govern the digital systems that generate wealth' (p330). Whether co-ops would be enough is doubtful but his book offers a compendium of possibilities, logically arrayed following the author's training as a lawyer but presented in accessible style. Thus, Susskind sees in proposals for what he calls Digital Democracy the threat that 'our very perceptions are open to control, sometimes by the very institutions we would seek to hold to account' (p207). 'The solution, I hope, will be a new and more robust form of democracy . . . combining the most promising elements of Deliberative Democracy, Direct Democracy, Wiki Democracy, Data Democracy and AI Democracy' (p348). However, Susskind does not mention gender and other differences in the level of engagement with digital technology. These biases will have to be overcome if 'Digital Democracy' is to be inclusive rather than restrictive.

He recognises the threat of Technological Unemployment (chapter 17), including indirect displacement of labour, for example if advances in one

field of medicine (such as nanotechnology) make the work of certain surgeons redundant (p300). Overall, he states technological advance has boosted the number of low- and high-education jobs while middle-education tasks have declined (p299). Adding, 'an educated and agile workforce will fare better in the initial stages of technological unemployment . . . but if there aren't enough jobs for humans to do, *no matter how skilled or well-trained they are*, then the overall importance of human capital will decline' despite a few superstar innovators (p316). The worst solution of a Universal Basic Income paid to all students as a subsidy for their compulsory participation in an attempt to provide universal higher education misunderstands the nature of tertiary level learning, confusing it with the general education that should be provided by comprehensive secondary schooling founded upon good primary education.

Unlike his father and younger brother, whose 2015 book on *The Future of the Professions* was reviewed in *PSE* for its implications for tertiary education, Jamie Susskind says only that his Digital Republicanism requires all 'citizens to cultivate the civic virtues that will be needed to hold the state and tech firms to account: technical understanding where possible, but also vigilance, prudence, curiosity, persistence, assertiveness and public-spiritedness' (p207). 'We must be able to understand and shape the powers that govern our lives' (p347) because 'Growth in the state's power' - for example through coercive applications of the 5g 'internet of things' that is being touted as inevitable - 'will demand a corresponding growth in people's capacity to hold it to account' (p349). This is part of the new general knowledge for which a new national curriculum would prepare all students leaving school at 16 or 18.

Beyond that, construction of the tertiary level of a National Education Service must mean more than merely rebadging all existing educational institutions. It should offer a lifelong entitlement to continuing adult and community, further and higher education and training, free at the point of entry without incurring the recuperation of the exorbitant fees currently demanded. It can be anticipated that not everyone graduating from schools will immediately take up their entitlement to further education, training, research or (re)creation, even at local sixth forms, colleges and universities since the current incentive to 'go to university or die' will be ameliorated by Labour's proposed doubling of the national minimum youth wage and would be removed by the employment opportunities of an industrial strategy implementing a green new deal.

For, in the social mobilisation unparalleled in peacetime required to convert a capitalist to a green economy, many more secondary school leavers, together with older people who missed out, will take the opportunities for the specialised learning that the

tertiary level of the NES will afford throughout their lives in and out of employment as and when they require it. Then, as David Ridley suggested in his latest pamphlet (1), 'By promoting co-operation, democratised universities could play a part in spreading co-operative solutions within communities' to provide 'the basis for far-reaching and bottom-up processes of local and regional economic regeneration'. Again, co-operatives may not be enough but in this context of a learning infrastructure embracing schools and colleges, universities as 'anchor institutions' could develop the skills and expertise potentiated by human-centred applications of new technologies - including Artificial Intelligence.

1. David Ridley (2019) *Markets, Monopolies and Municipal Ownership, The Political Economy of Higher Education in Thirteen Theses and Thirteen Short Pieces*. Coventry.

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