

# Review: James Avis and Mike Cooley

Patrick Ainley\*

James Avis (2016) *Social Justice, Transformation and Knowledge: Policy, workplace learning and skills*, London: Routledge. 165 pages. £17.99 pbk. ISBN 978-1-138-81314-4

Mike Cooley (2016) *Architect or Bee? The Human Price of Technology* with an Introduction by Frances O'Grady, Nottingham: Spokesman. 194 pages. £10.99. ISBN 9-78051-24893

## Social justice in an unjust society

James Avis is not very keen on social justice. As he says, it is evidently not the same thing as a just society and yet, linked to the new orthodoxy in education research of a 'multidimensional approach' to class analysis, it appeals to education researchers. There are several professors of it in various university Centres for Education and Social Justice. As described previously in *PSE*, their approach misappropriates the work of the French sociologist of education, Pierre Bourdieu. It aims to increase some pupils' / students' chances of upward social mobility by compensating for their lack of economic capital through boosting what Bourdieu calls their cultural capital, if not diversifying their social capital.

This makes education research useful to governments whose ostensible policy is to provide all children with equal opportunities to become unequal by competitively raising academic standards to somehow boost the national economy. But in the austerity of the new millennium, even the limited upward social mobility of the post-war decades is no longer possible. Save for exceptional

individuals, it has reversed into general downward social mobility. Nevertheless, all parties save the Greens subscribe to this policy of orthodoxy adding, moreover, that they are dedicated (once again) to 'parity of esteem' between revamped vocational routes and traditional academic ones.

Such are the long lead times in most book publication that James Avis concedes that when he was writing a year ago, he – like everyone else – anticipated a Labour government but saw it dedicated to dividing 14+ year-olds into two pathways to produce equal numbers of students and trainees. In fact, 'two nation Toryism' has trumped this with its target of three million 'apprentices' to be financed by a levy on large companies. Some education researchers are proffering their services by advocating 'expansive apprenticeships' that combine restrictively narrow training with rich learning environments. As Avis points out, this does not accord with the realities of most 'workplace learning' as employers automate, down-size and outsource. Most employers do not therefore want apprenticeships and if they do need them, they run them themselves – hence their outcry at the levy!

Education research is ingenious however in pandering to government requirements and James's book details the various theories advanced by academics to square the circle of developing 'skills' training in constricted circumstances. His account will therefore be useful to *PSE* readers who may come across such evangelists for 'real world learning', or who are expected to conform to the latest 'professional standards for those teaching in the education and training sector'; while seeming radical in the first instance or sensible in the second, these both 'take for granted the way in

which waged labour is currently configured' (p. 121). So in most cases, such proposals amount to what James calls 'comfort radicalism' – at best presenting examples of what can sometimes be possible but which cannot be generalised without 'articulating with a broader anti-capitalist politics', as he puts it in conclusion (p. 136).

This is his criterion for distinguishing what has been called elsewhere 'democratic professionalism', linked with anti-capitalist movements nationally and globally to 'develop a revolutionary reformism committed to the transformation of the social relations of capitalism – the ongoing struggle to create a fairer society in which we can freely express our species being', as he concludes (p. 136). But what is our species being? Compared to bees at least, as Mike Cooley quotes Marx's *Capital*, 'What distinguishes the worst of architects from the best of bees is . . . architects construct in their imaginations that which they will ultimately erect in reality'.

Perhaps here lies an essential contrast between these two books. For how do we distinguish between 'revolutionary reformism' (ie that poses 'transitional demands' impossible for the system to meet without changing its nature) and 'comfort radicalism' that appears revolutionary but actually merely accommodates people to existing conditions? There is an incipient despair at ever achieving anything in this view, save of introducing correct doctrine, developed by revolutionary intellectuals through scientific study, into the masses from the outside. This 'necessarily arrives at dividing society into two parts, one of which is superior to the other . . . and forgets that . . . the educator must be educated' as Marx put it in the third of his *Theses on Feuerbach*. Mike Cooley's is a different starting point, one that brings him very close to the dialogic pedagogy Colin Waugh describes in William Morris's adult education (see this issue, pp.21-24).

### Towards a human-centred education

Mike traces an historical tendency in Western culture to reduce reasoning to calculation so that 'the start of artificial intelligence probably began around 450 BC' (p. 55) with Plato's assertion that any knowledge that cannot be stated in explicit mathematical form is not worthy of the name. Cooks and poets (plus women, children and slaves – as generally regarded by their masters) who proceed by intuition and taste were therefore ignorant – speaking animals at best. Despite successive revolts by the Epicureans, by cathedral-builders, Renaissance artists and others, disdain for manual

labour was amplified by monastic contemplation and eventually brought down to earth in Descartes's calculating homunculus.

Nevertheless, 'The industrial worker, despite a class-ridden educational system which systematically seeks to reduce his or her expectations to an absolute minimum, and despite the continual bludgeoning by the mass media, still retains a degree of dignity and ingenuity which employers find alarming' (p. 35). But now, in the second industrial revolution, 'we are beginning to repeat in the field of intellectual work most of the mistakes already made in the field of skilled manual work at an earlier historical stage when it was subjected to the use of high-capital equipment' (p. 9).

One feature staying the same is the change in the organic composition of capital as the knowledge and skill of workers by hand and brain is absorbed into machinery that becomes less labour- and more capital-intensive, thereby also becoming more expensive, despite the reduction in unit costs. This has led a moribund capitalism to prefer financial speculation to productive investment, subjecting society to the banks. Global deregulation has released the 'tremendous technological inferno' (p. 26) into which we are now plunging at exponential speed.

This was foreseen by Mike even in 1979 when he and his wife, Shirley, self-published the first edition of this book; subsequently expanded and republished by Hogarth Press with an introduction by Anthony Barnett in 1987. Having also been translated into several other languages, it is now reissued with an introduction by TUC General Secretary, Frances O'Grady. However, Mike and Shirley could not then have 'looked into the seeds of time' to foresee 'the battering down of all Chinese walls' (by the Chinese themselves!) - to mix metaphors and quotations in the allusive and poetic, yet always direct and conversational, style in which Mike writes a book that describes itself as 'a mosaic of sketches and views, experiences and analysis' (p. 7), mixing academic papers with speeches in Trafalgar Square.

Mike publishes poetry now – among other things, doubtless! - but he began as an engineering apprentice, going on to become a Professor of Engineering in Germany, winning the Alternative Nobel Prize for his work on human-centred computer systems and pioneering their practical applications, particularly for disabled people, as Director of Technology at the Greater London Enterprise Board before the GLC was closed down by Thatcher. Previously, Cooley chaired the Lucas Aerospace Combine Shop Stewards' Committee which created the Lucas Workers' Plan for Socially Useful

Production in 1976 after the company threatened 4,000 skilled craft and professional workers with redundancy. As Frances O'Grady writes, this 'remains an inspiration to today's trade unionists . . . However, Lucas remained hostile'. It embodies, she adds, 'Mike's core belief that it is the skilled labour of working people that drives technological, scientific and industrial progress'.

Perhaps this is the key principle on which James Avis is seeking to build what might be called 'a Socially Useful Education'. Like the Lucas Plan Mike details over two chapters, it asserts that 'we must always put people before machines' (p. 1), subordinating the logical capacities of the computer to the tacit knowledge 'acquired through doing or 'attending to things'', a definition he derives from Michael Polanyi. This philosophy of science outboxes both relativism and pragmatism to undermine our 'overweening faith in science and technological change' (p. 8) by refounding it upon *Personal Knowledge*.

For Mike, this is 'common sense': 'What I mean is a sense of what is to be done and how it is to be done, held in common by those who will have had some form of apprenticeship and practical experience in the area' (pp. 10-11). This is shared by 'ordinary people' but 'I have never met an ordinary person' (p. 169). All are capable of extraordinary feats of ingenuity, even in such apparently mundane activities as crossing a road, let alone in our complex sociality. Teachers struggle to awaken the recognition of such capacities in those they teach outwith the training that is imposed upon them – an endlessly proliferating listing of required behaviours seemingly designed to fill time and preclude thought.

Unfortunately, often pupils' / students' confidence has been so undermined that they too are dedicated to staying on task and resent any deviation from what they may have been paid to learn. And teachers can even cultivate proficiency in meeting those goals in the way that Mike quotes Albert Speer exploiting the technician's often blind devotion to his task so that 'these people were without any scruples about their activities' (p. 176). Nevertheless, teachers are as adept as any other occupation at finding ways around the situations in which they find themselves. Their combined efforts to do so represent a new democratic professionalism and what has been called a new trades unionism, exemplified by the doctors' struggle against a contract that they are well aware has only been imposed as part of the deliberate dismantling of the NHS.

Teachers and lecturers too, despite the reductive and competence-based training unwilling academics

are also unhappily enjoined to inflict upon them, find endless ways to subvert and undermine the targets they are set up to miss. Sometimes accelerating through tedious lesson plans and repeated exam prep, they 'skip to the good bit' with more engaging activities that put the target-driven training in perspective. Like doctors, teachers know what is in the best interests of their patients / students. Unlike doctors, they lack the collective organisation and have been robbed of the expertise that enables them to assert their case with confidence.

Moreover, many have been drawn into 'training' that, as Mike says, 'often hides a cruel deception' (p. 67), not only because of its redundancy but because education has been reduced to training in the extended tertiary education that has replaced employment for a reconstituted reserve army, placed 'in reserve' for longer and longer periods of indebtedness. 'Training', as Mike says (p. 67) 'produces narrow, over-dedicated capabilities which are generally machine, system or programme specific'. His special ire is however reserved for 'that new band of "training advisers", "training coordinators", "training outreach workers" and "training planners" who seem to believe that there is some separate activity called "training" which transcends all other forms of professional knowledge'. Some "'quality training schemes" . . . are particularly hideous in this regard' (p. 68).

He should see what goes on in too many schools, colleges and universities nowadays! They raise the question of what would instead be an appropriate general educational entitlement for a democratic and sustainable society. This would necessitate recognising 'as a fundamental law of production', as Marx says in *Capital*, 'variation of work, consequently fitness of the labourers for various work, consequently the greatest possible development of their varied aptitudes'. Such a 'general intelligence' is not going to drop from the sky – or rather the internet! Nor should it preclude the development of skills and knowledge in specialised expertise of all sorts.

In fact, *PSE's* predecessor, *General Educator*, did at one time outline an integrated learning service bringing together schools, colleges and universities in what have been called 'regional learning infrastructures'. As 'charity schools' are removed from LEAs and FE students are 'decanted' into HE become Tertiary Education, we need to flesh out these sketches for a National Education Service.

\*Patrick Ainley is author of *Betraying a Generation: How education is failing young people*. Bristol: Policy Press 2016.