

# Orthodoxy and the will to autonomy

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'Neoliberalism sees competition as the defining characteristic of human relations. It redefines citizens as consumers, whose democratic choices are best exercised by buying and selling, a process that rewards merit and punishes inefficiency. It maintains that 'the market' delivers benefits that could never be achieved by planning.' (Monbiot, 2016)

**B**y the very nature of things, I see myself at the heart of the topic of this article. I am an example, if not a solitary one, of the 'perfect' neoliberal worker. I am a contractually employed part-time teacher in further and adult education. What precisely does this description mean?

Contractual: the teaching I do is based upon short-term arrangements of employment between myself and multiple agencies, both public and private. Such contracts vary in content and implication. Though they are regulated by both British and European Union legislation, it is often the case that such safeguards are reinterpreted in the process of employment. This indicates the manner in which the term 'employment' has been redefined over my lifetime.

Employment: strictly speaking, employment is simply 'A contract in which one person, the employee, agrees to perform work for another, the employer' (Duhaime, 2016), but this seems rather simplistic in the light of changes over the past quarter century. A more recent definition sees employment as '... a professional engagement

or otherwise under a contract for services . . . any trade, business, profession, office or vocation . . . any relationship whereby one person personally does work or performs services for another . . .' (United Kingdom Employment Agencies Act 1973 (-13), the Social Security Contributions and Benefits Act 1992 (?122), the Trade Union and Labour Relations (Consolidation) Act 1992 (-218). The term 'any relationship', though seemingly trivial, in fact reflects a profound change in the way in which employment's character has been altered within the teaching profession. A classic example is the use of employment agencies to contract between FE colleges and teachers/tutors. In simple terms, if a teacher wishes to work for a college, they are constrained to join an employment agency as a condition of employment, and in the process find themselves compelled to become *de facto* self-employed. This situation came into being from 1993 onwards, after the incorporation of colleges and their removal from local education authority (LEA) control.

## Liberation

Whilst celebrated at the time by many colleges as a liberation from political control, such liberalism also empowered college management to interpret the employment of their staff as their financial needs saw fit. In the process, the cultural relationship between staff (predominantly part-time) and management changed in ways that

have echoes to the present day. In many respects, the term part-time has also changed in subtle ways.

Part-Time: 'There is no official definition of a part-time worker, other than that a part-time worker works fewer hours than a full-time worker. A full-time worker usually works at least 35 hours a week in the UK' (Unison, 2016). Unison's explanation comments on both the ambiguity of what being a part-time worker is, and also the extent to which the term can be interpreted. In practice, this has led to a wide range of working arrangements in the post-compulsory sector, ranging from renewable contractual employment (which is almost-full-time-but-not-quite), through to zero-hours contracts, where the actual existence of a post or job (other than in conceptual terms) is difficult to discern.

The definition of part-time has been further confused by the introduction of alternative terminology (such as casual worker, or hourly-paid teacher), and the unchallenged assumption that either part-time workers want to achieve permanent full-time employment, or, if this is not the case, they then must be happy with the nature of their work opportunities. The picture that is painted is further distorted by the conflation of part-time teaching with other professional level work. This is illustrated by Timewise's 2013 report 'The Part-Time Paradox', which stated that 30 per cent of part-time workers '... enjoy working fewer hours and my-part-time-salary-is-all-I-need roles.' (Timewise, 2013), and categorising a professional part-time salary as around £40,000 FTE. If this full-time equivalent is accurate, then it implies a part-time rate of pay at around £21.00 per hour. Yet personal experience shows that hourly rates vary considerably from region to region, employer to employer, and role to role. Currently these range from £10.00 to £25.00 per hour. There is no agreed global rate. Rates have been subject to neoliberal market forces since FE college incorporation took place in 1993.

### Shifting

In effect then, part-timers are subject to a shifting tide of working conditions, coupled with an increasing predominance of casualised employment: 'The incidence of part-time working in 2012-13 is similar to previous years: 58% of contracts in 2012-13 were part-time compared to 57% in the previous year. The incidence of part-time working is higher in the ACL [Adult Community Learning] sector (80%), and lower in

the WBL [Work-based Learning] sector (14%)' (ETF, 2013). In addition, part-timers are more likely to be female: 'The gender split of teaching staff between contract types is consistent with 2011-12: the proportion of females is 65.3% among part-time contracts (66.2% in 2011-12), and 48% among full-time contracts (stable compared to 2011-12)' (ibid).

The power of employees to negotiate rates is determined by their collective assertiveness, their organised status, and their sense of unity, all of which have declined since incorporation took place. But with part-time trade union membership low (39 per cent as opposed to 59 per cent for full-time staff [ONS, 2015]), the chances of collective bargaining being powerfully in defence of part-time income are uncertain to say the least. Part-timing also holds a stigma: '41 per cent say it's because they feel there is a negative stereotype surrounding the words part time' (Timewise, 2013), possibly based on the conception that one doesn't take one's work seriously ('A quarter (24 per cent) worry about being unfairly labelled uncommitted' (ibid).)

### Orthodoxy

The background to teachers coming into the FE / Adult Ed. (AE) system also impacts on our sense of orthodoxy or willingness to comply with existing employment practices and cultural norms. As Francis states in Lawson and Spours (2011), 'Second wave feminism mounted a devastating critique of the education system, identifying the multiple ways in which it perpetuated gender distinction and inequality. These included the curriculum, which reflected masculinist agendas and preoccupations, and which appeared to conceive a male recipient . . . as 'naturally brilliant but lazy' and girls as diligent plodders; channeling of girls and boys down different career routes . . .', implying not only different career routes but different forms of employment overall (and differing rates of pay). Major efforts were put into correcting this disparity through projects such as New Opportunities for Women (NOW) and the Women's Education initiative. As a new tutor to adult education in 1986, I clearly remember both NOW and the Women's Ed's separatist approach, with classes specifically for women only, leading to a major empowerment of female teachers and lecturers. This gave women teachers a voice within a curriculum that was intrinsically their own domain, and in many organisations (the Workers' Educational Association in particular) this gave a

very powerful influence on policy, curriculum and practice (and, marginally, pay rates).

Since then, however, third-wave feminist expression has led to the de-emphasis of women as a homogeneous group with specific social, economic and political needs, and to a focus on individual cultural identity. Be this good or bad in terms of women globally (it could be argued that second wave feminism ignored the issues surrounding women in developing non-white nations), it certainly ended the Women's Education focus. Hence, a generation has since grown into being with less interest in the collective nature of female experience, and with a less forceful voice. Pressure has grown on women to be seen as individually successful (for example, to hold down both domestic and employed roles, be self-sufficient etc). This is interpreted as women being competitive units. Competition is seen as rewarding the best, leading to improved pay - and in FE/AE, pay now amounts to access to part-time hours. One gains an underlying picture of an unspoken neo-liberalism infecting educational culture, in which the discipline of the sector is equivalent to conformity. Anyone stepping out of line does not get teaching hours. Employment legislation, based on neo-liberal market concepts, cannot defend against the impact of such a culture.

Neo-liberalism itself brings with it a self-confirming paradox. If liberty is the vital characteristic of a free society, then individual liberty is paramount. Any contradiction of this proposition is seen as anti-democratic. The right of the individual to negotiate the terms of their own life is seen as an obvious aspect of a free society. Therefore, negotiating one's own terms with one's employer seems a natural corollary. Within education, and especially further and adult education, the contractual culture of part-timing is an aspect of this freedom. And yet the power this hands over to management leads inevitably to a conformist workforce, afraid to question authority and often unaware that there could be another way of being. Why would one wish to question the fundamental concept of today's society (individualism)?

### Enthusiastic

My own experience of part-timers within FE/AE (especially during my years as General Secretary of the Association of Part-Time Tutors) illustrated this in the enthusiastic efforts many of my colleagues made to adjust themselves and their ideas on educational process to a workplace

regime that was outside of their influence as supposed professionals. The very nature of the national standards in FE/AE teaching emphasises individualism. Teachers are 'dual professionals' who '... are both subject and/or vocational specialists and experts in teaching and learning. They are committed to maintaining and developing their expertise in both aspects of their role to ensure the best outcomes for their learners' (ETF, 2014). There is no explicit requirement in the standards for institutions to foster or develop teacher quality. Instead, individual tutors are required to achieve the approved quality standards from their own resources. This is very rarely questioned. Indeed, the organisation tasked with creating these standards (the Education and Training Foundation) actively recruited part-timers as part of the development process. Monbiot states it plainly: '... so pervasive has neoliberalism become that we seldom even recognise it as an ideology. We appear to accept the proposition that this utopian, millennialist faith describes a neutral force; a kind of biological law, like Darwin's theory of evolution. But the philosophy arose as a conscious attempt to reshape human life and shift the locus of power' (Monbiot, 2016). That the new locus of power has included normalisation of part-time culture in FE/AE should come as no surprise.

But the problematic issue for adult and further education as a whole is not simply a matter of coercive conformism or problems with workforce morale. It is a matter of an overarching orthodoxy in teaching and learning which has filtered into our work on the back of neo-liberal strategy. Individualism leads to individuals being to blame when things go wrong. This has strengthened the hand of punitive cultures.

A characteristic example is internal monitoring of teaching performance (ie regular class observations, usually by line managers, usually referred to as OTL - Observation of Teaching and Learning). This practice is virtually ubiquitous throughout the sector. It is very often based on the same inspection criteria and grading used by Ofsted, and can potentially lead to disciplinary action (including job loss) for those who do not achieve the required grade. Whereas Ofsted has never required institutions to mirror their practices, the punitive OTL process is still enthusiastically promoted. One can logically assume, then, that OTL practice has little to do with pressure on management, and more to do with a culture of extending assured orthodoxy in teaching, an assurance that this is convenient for institutions and hard to gainsay. As a

consequence, part-time teachers can often be afraid to innovate, afraid to be seen as working from a non-standard viewpoint, and more likely to simply agree with requirements made on them. It is paradoxical that this culture is entirely inimical to individual professionalism - the very concept it is intended to promote. Monbiot again characterises this pervasive dead hand: 'Another paradox of neoliberalism is that universal competition relies upon universal quantification and comparison. The result is that workers, job-seekers and public services of every kind are subject to a pettifogging, stifling regime of assessment and monitoring, designed to identify the winners and punish the losers' (Monbiot, 2016).

Yet the solution to these problems is in the very consideration that the neo-liberal project asserts: the concept of individualistic autonomy. Ironically, this is only possible via a reassertion of authentic collective decisionmaking, a concept from an earlier age, yet evolved through new concepts of learning.

The will to autonomy is rooted in the support of cultural activity. According to the Laveian concept of learning, this is to be found in the interactions between persons, rather than in the individual mind (Lave, 1991). As long as learning (and hence teaching) is rooted in a fallacious dualistic concept of mental contents, then the neo-liberal ideal of the individualised learner will always predominate in FE/AE culture.

### Assertion

A change in our philosophical understanding of learning, and its assertion through operational change, will not simply allow but demand new forms of collectivity. If learning and teaching (and the employment cultures that support it) are to be true to their ideals of 'reflective and enquiring practitioners who think critically about their own educational assumptions, values and practice in the context of a changing contemporary and educational world . . .' (ETF, 2014), then there is a need to create communities of practice in which cooperation, rather than competition, is the leading ideal. From this there is a need for changed employment practices, couched in values that support effective teaching and learning. Only in rooting out the current assumptions, and displaying the contradictions inherent in neo-liberalism, can we fight the cultures that disempower teachers (part-time or otherwise).

Our combat of overweening orthodoxy is based in our clarity of what teaching and learning is.

Currently we dare not speak out for fear of seeming unorthodox. But it is in the critique of current orthodoxies that our liberation lies.

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