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SOCIAL JUSTICE, TRANSFORMATION AND KNOWLEDGE: POLICY, WORKPLACE LEARNING AND SKILLS.

James Avis, Routledge, London, England, 2016, 166 pages.

Why did I choose to review this book when I encountered it? Simply put, it was the title that appealed to me. The link between social justice and workplace learning as a primary concern struck me as unusual and impressive. As well, I was intrigued by Avis' interest in learning policy, an area that commands much less attention in Canada, where I am located, than it does in the UK and elsewhere in Europe.

Although he frames his analysis within a U.K., European, and global context, Avis sticks largely to examining the UK during the five-year period of 2010 to 2015, at least in the early chapters. Beginning in Chapter 2 with the policy discourses of the Cameron-Clegg Coalition government, Avis notes the domination of neoliberalism and the impact of the 2008 recession, when government responses adopted a supply-side analysis and promoted vocational education to resolve skill shortages and build national competitiveness. In Chapter 3, Avis establishes how, rather than rejecting the Coalition's premises, the opposition One Nation Labour (ONL) put forward variations on the central theme of "the need for a rebalancing and reinvigorating of the 'productive' economy" (p. 39). Points of continuity are evident in acceptance of (neoliberal) capitalism as the only possible economic structure and rhetoric that, in Gramscian terms, builds and reiterates an ideologically based common sense about the need for austerity, vocationalism, and localism in educational policy and their connection to what is represented as individual choice. At the same time, points of "rupture" between the Coalition and ONL stances are apparent in ONL's attempts to retain a social democratic framework. ONL hung its hat on the promotion of a kinder capitalism, rather than the replacement of capitalism as a system for socioeconomic relations.

Several points in Chapters 2 and 3 are helpful in understanding discourses beyond the UK. First, Avis asserts that neoliberalism has been able to thrive not because it is supported, rather because "we are unable to envision a 'realistic' alternative" (p. 11). Second, there is an understanding that "crisis occurs [or is discerned] when hegemonic interpretations of the social order become contested" (p. 15). Avis is realistic in observing trends of the "domestication" (p. 16) of counter-hegemonic movements. Hegemony's power lies in its ability to absorb and neutralize ideological differences; as Avis writes, "it is a moot point as to whether ONL was seeking to move beyond neo-liberalism or merely refashioning it with a social democratic veneer suited to austere times" (p. 45), because the party's capitulation that capitalism was necessary hamstrung its ability to oppose the Coalition and, later, the ruling Conservative party.

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In Chapter 4, Avis shifts to scholarly literature on work-based learning. He moves through conceptually and empirically oriented literature on socially situated learning and knowledge, with frequent nods to Marx and subsequent critical theorists. He also discusses postmodern ideas which, juxtaposed with critical theory, enable him to articulate tensions between the promise of a post-Fordist workplace promoting expansive, collaborative, creative learning, and remnants of Fordism. Drawing on writing by Brown and Lauder, and Beck, Avis notes the characteristics of neo-Fordism: labour market flexibility, which relies on the diminution of labour unions, privatization, and individuation.

Introducing concepts of intersectionality and social justice in Chapter 5, Avis acknowledges multiple facets of identity; however, class remains at the centre here. The argument that socioeconomic structures are “relational,” “that is, they are reproduced and reconstituted as a result of social practices [which] ... are dynamic, being constantly reshaped and re-formed” (p. 93), is compelling and crucial. Through that argument, Avis illuminates how, despite rhetoric praising the importance of vocational education and work, neoliberal capitalism continues to distinguish between and privilege “mental” over “manual” work. In Bourdieu’s terms, that reality adds “positional advantages” for people who possess some credential over those who do not, highlighting the social advantage attached to further education. Avis’ comment about the decline of meaningful work and the rise of not just precarious work but work that “merely represents ‘busyness’ ... [which distracts] us from seriously interrogating the nature of waged work” (p. 95) is sobering.

Chapter 6 continues to detail how work-based education has been affected by neoliberalism, in practice as well as in policy. Attachment of market principles, evident in new regulatory frameworks, extends a pretense of local engagement while establishing a culture of surveillance, limiting non-lucrative programme options, and producing an array of contradictory directives to, for example, collaborate and compete, or exercise personal judgement and work to uniform assessment standards. As Avis goes on to discuss in Chapter 7, these issues surface beyond policy, in curriculum and pedagogy.

What does Avis see as steps forward? Greater attention to political economy in general is needed, as is “a ‘really’ expansive understanding of VET” (p. 136), which includes broad learning and knowledge. Strategies such as “guaranteed social income” (p. 135) might free up people’s time and energy so that their work could be more than boring, unfulfilling jobs. A “revolutionary reformism” (p. 136), which “operates within an apparently reformist politics but ... has as its aim the transformation of society” is, Avis concludes, “helpful” (p. 136) and could tie vocational education to social movements.

Of course, there are limitations to any book. As I was reading, I wished that Avis had remembered that some readers might not share his deep knowledge of U.K. policy (e.g., New Labour/Blue Labour) and terminology (e.g., Brown’s “performocracy”), and ensured that terms and policy responses were explained as they were introduced. Analytically, greater consideration of relations other than class would have deepened the use of intersectionality. On a minor technical note, tighter editing would have improved the manuscript’s appearance.

In the end, I found this an extensive compilation of information about, and an impressive critical analysis of, recent work-based educational policy and practice. The book makes an important addition to the library of adult education and sociology of education scholars and graduate students who share Avis’ interest in both vocational education and social justice.