



Rooney, S. G. (2018). [Review of the book *Precarious Workers Brigade (2017) Training for Exploitation? Politicising Employability & Reclaiming Education*, by the Precarious Workers Brigade]. *Journal of Learning and Teaching in Higher Education*, 1(1), 110-114.

BOOK REVIEW

Precarious Workers Brigade (2017) Training for Exploitation? Politicising Employability & Reclaiming Education

Published by the Journal of Aesthetics and Protest

(96 Pages)

£10.00 or available as free download from

<http://joaap.org/press/trainingforexploitation.htm>

Stephen G. Rooney¹

¹steve.rooney@leicester.ac.uk, Leicester Learning Institute, University of Leicester.

Keywords: Teaching practice, employability, critical pedagogy, social justice

Review

The Precarious Workers Brigade's (PWB) *Training for Exploitation? Politicising Employability & Reclaiming Education* is a rare thing indeed: a collection of practical educational resources designed to enable students to engage critically with what has become one of the most dominant agendas in contemporary higher education (HE). Which is not to say that critique of the employability agenda is itself rare. On the contrary, there is a wealth of scholarship questioning many of the assumptions underpinning, and claims made on behalf of, this agenda. Before turning to the PWB's work, then, and in order to set it within a broader context of existing critique, it is worth outlining briefly the issues this scholarship raises.

Some authors contest, on conceptual and empirical grounds, the veracity of popular representations of the so-called "knowledge economy" and the kinds of work it typically affords, as well as the somewhat simplistic assumptions often underpinning claims of increased labour-market demand for "graduate-level skills" (e.g. Naidoo, 2010; Brown, Lauder, & Ashton, 2011; Tholen, 2014). Others point to how current preoccupations with students' "possession" of supposedly "transferable" skills, attributes, personal qualities etc. (often expressed in bizarre, periodically adjusted, top-ten lists) fail to provide a theoretically coherent or empirically supportable basis for explaining and understanding transitions between education and different forms of waged work (e.g. Hager and Hodgkinson, 2009; Clark & Zukas, 2012; Holmes, 2013; Finn, 2016). A further common line of critique concerns employability as an ideology and subjectifying discourse. It argues that the employability agenda works chiefly to reproduce certain hegemonic, neoliberal values and practices, reducing student learning to an "investment" in competitive human capital, and compelling students to fashion subjectivities according to the demands of contemporary capitalism. In doing so, so the argument goes, the employability agenda also helps to obscure behind references to socially neutral "skills and attributes", the important roles that class, gender, race etc. play when it comes to labour-market entry and career progression – a process which, in turn, shifts onto individuals the responsibility for the outcomes of continuing structural inequalities. Last but not least, these critics argue, employability discourse serves to legitimise and normalise contemporary realities of insecurity and exploitation via appeals to the supposed virtues of personal "flexibility", "adaptability", "resilience" etc. (e.g. Moore, 2010; McArthur, 2011; Allen et al., 2013; Chertkovskaya, Watt, Tramer, & Spoelstra, 2013; Gerard, 2014; Frayne, 2015; Heaney, 2015; Noonan & Coral, 2015).

Vital and instructive though this extensive and growing body of critical scholarship is, however, few have so far sought to turn critique to more practical and educationally transformative ends. Enter *Training for Exploitation?* with its impressive range of activities designed to bring into the open the socio-politics of employability, and the ways this socio-politics relates to students' own current and future working lives. (Before turning to the activities themselves, it is worth also noting that the book's brief introduction offers an accessible and digestible summary of many of the critiques outlined above and, as such, serves as a valuable educational resource in its own right.) Influenced by a range of critical pedagogical and action research theories and practices (brief summaries of which are provided in the introduction), the theme binding together the materials is, as the title suggests, exploitation. The exercises – which utilise a welcome combination of visual and text-based stimuli – invite students to

“

...few have so far sought to turn critique to more practical and educationally transformative ends. Enter *Training for Exploitation?* with its impressive range of activities designed to bring into the open the socio-politics of employability, and the ways this socio-politics relates to students' own current and future working lives.

”

collaboratively investigate, reflect on, and challenge various forms of work-based exploitation as well as the ways in which mainstream employability discourse can work to obscure and/or legitimise these.

Whilst acknowledging the importance to students of securing employment and developing their own careers, the book's "authors" (part of the PWB's ethos is to eschew individual claims to authorship) make no secret of their counter-hegemonic, activism-oriented, intentions in producing it. Activities range from short discussion exercises around key issues, to longer enquiry-based projects in which students investigate topics in greater depth. The former include activities in which students analyse internship/volunteering adverts in order to discuss, for example, how the language of "enthusiasm" and "flexibility" can act as benign-sounding euphemisms for various forms of exploitation (pp. 38-39). Another of the shorter exercises invites students to script a photo-story featuring images of different, more-or-less powerful, participants in common workplace scenarios (pp. 41-43). Larger-scale activities include setting up People's Tribunals to research the practices of a particular industry or sector and the experiences of workers in these. This exercise is supported by links to concrete examples of previous tribunals, including one conducted by staff and students at a UK HE institution (pp. 56-57). Throughout, there are also numerous resources designed explicitly to support and enable practical political action in response various forms of exploitation. One potential limitation of all this is that the imagined cohorts are creative arts students. However, given that the broader themes explored in the exercises apply across a range of disciplines and professions, the activities themselves should be readily adaptable beyond the particular contexts set out in the book. In most cases, I could easily imagine situations in which the exercises could be re-formulated for the contexts I teach in.

Of course, the book's persistently and unapologetically politicised and critical stance on employability may well invite the complaint that it fails to offer a "balanced view" – a complaint we might counter by asking: when are similar calls for balance ever levelled at those numerous texts which take as given the employability agenda's moral and intellectual legitimacy, and concern themselves simply with how to ensure one remains as "attractive to employers" as possible? This is not to deny the practical utility of such texts; they often provide much useful and valuable advice. It is merely to point out that choosing to work largely within the logic of the dominant discourse of employability is no less political, and no more "balanced", an exercise than choosing to work against it. As numerous critical pedagogues have long pointed out, and will no doubt feel compelled to keep pointing out, there is no such thing as a politically neutral educational practice (for a comprehensive overview of this tradition see Darder, Baltonado, & Torres, 2009). A less easily dismissed omission, however, is the absence of any explicit references to how some within the field of careers guidance and education have themselves, and for some time now, engaged in a serious and thoughtful critique of how their work risks being mobilised in order to serve a reductive and neoliberal agenda, and how advisers and educators might begin to work to challenge this (see, for example, Irving and Malik, 2005; Sultana, 2014; Hooley, 2015). This minor quibble aside, *Training for Exploitation?* provides a timely set of materials for those with an appetite for action-oriented critique. It should also help provoke critical reflection among those for whom more mainstream formulations of the employability agenda have become axiomatic. Many of those currently charged with implementing the employability agenda "on the ground" (careers professionals, academics, educational and learning developers et. al.) will, I am sure, find the book and its contents a welcome ally in the efforts they already make to foster more critical and nuanced approaches to employability.

If HE is indeed to be the space for critical thought and action we claim we want it to be, this must surely include interrogating more honestly and openly an agenda that so dominates current policy and practice. This is necessary not least if our much rehearsed commitments to social justice are to carry genuine meaning, and move beyond potentially dubious alignments with the largely empty

promises of “social mobility” (Brown, 2013; Reay, 2013; Savage, 2015). Training for Exploitation? offers a provocative, practically-focussed, necessarily incomplete, but nonetheless invaluable, resource in helping us to provide such a space.

References

- Brown, P. (2013). Education, opportunity and the prospects for social mobility, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 34(5-6), 678-700. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2013.816036>
- Brown, P., Lauder, H., & Ashton, D. (2011). *The Global Auction: The Broken Promises of Education, Jobs and Income*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1744-8603-7-29>
- Chertkovskaya, E., Watt, P., Tramer, S., & Spoelstra, S. (2013). Giving notice to employability, *ephemera: theory & politics in organization*. 13(4), 701-716. [GS SEARCH](#)
- Clark, M., & Zukas, M. (2013). A Bourdieusian approach to understanding employability: becoming a ‘fish in water.’ *Journal of Vocational Education & Training*, 65(2), 208-219. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13636820.2013.782887>
- Darder, A., Baltonado, M.P., & Torres, R.D. (2009). Critical Pedagogy: An Introduction. In A. Darder, M. P. Baltonado & R.D. Torres (Eds.), *The Critical Pedagogy Reader* (2nd ed., pp. 1-20). Abingdon, England: Routledge. [GS SEARCH](#)
- Finn, K. (2016). Relational transitions, emotional decisions: new directions for theorising graduate employment. *Journal of Education and Work*, 30(4), 1-13. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13639080.2016.1239348>
- Frayne, D. (2015). *The Refusal of Work: The Theory and Practice of Resistance to Work*. London, England: Zed Books. [GS SEARCH](#)
- Gerrard, J. (2014). All that is solid melts into work: self-work, the ‘learning ethic’ and the work ethic. *The Sociological Review*, 62(4), 862-979. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-954X.12208>
- Hager, P., & Hodkinson, P. (2009). Moving beyond the metaphor of transfer of learning. *British Educational Research Journal*, 35(4), 619-638. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01411920802642371>
- Holmes, L. (2013). Competing perspectives on graduate employability: possession, position or process? *Studies in Higher Education*, 38(4), 538-554. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2011.587140>
- Hooley, T. (2015). *Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery: self-actualisation, social justice and the politics of career guidance*. Derby, England: International Centre for Guidance Studies, University of Derby. Retrieved from: <http://hdl.handle.net/10545/579895>
- Heaney, C. (2015). What is the University Today? *Journal of Critical Education Policy Studies*, 13(2), 287-314. Retrieved from: <http://www.jceps.com/archives/2649>
- Irving, B.A., & Malik, B. (Eds.) (2005). *Critical Reflections on Career Education and Guidance*. Abingdon, England: Routledge Falmer. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203356951>

- McArthur, J. (2011). Reconsidering the social and economic purposes of higher education. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 30(6), 737-749.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2010.539596>
- Moore, P. (2010). *The International Political Economy of Work and Employability*. Hampshire, England: Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230294431>
- Naidoo, R. (2010). Global Learning in a NeoLiberal Age: Implications for Development. In E. Unterhalter and V. Carpentier (Eds.), *Global Inequalities and Higher Education* (66-90). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-230-36507-0_3
- Noonan, J., & Coral, M. (2015). The Tyranny of Work: Employability and the Neoliberal Assault on Education. *Alternate Routes: A Journal of Critical Social Research*, 26, 51-73. Retrieved from: <http://www.alternateroutes.ca/index.php/ar/article/viewFile/22312/18157>
- Reay, D. (2013). Social mobility, a panacea for austere times: tales of emperors, frogs, and tadpoles. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 34(5-6), 660-677.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2013.816035>
- Savage, M. (2015). *Social Class in the 21st Century*. London, England: Penguin Books. [GS SEARCH](#)
- Sultana, R. G. (2014). Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will? Troubling the relationship between career guidance and social justice. *International Journal for Educational and Vocational Guidance*, 14(1), 5-19. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10775-013-9262-y>
- Tholen, G. (2014). *The Changing Nature of the Graduate Labour Market: Media, Policy and Political Discourses in the UK*. Hampshire, England: Palgrave Macmillan.
<https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137479075>