Economy, Work and Education

Critical Connections

Catherine Casey

“With her empirical critique of the neo-liberal dogmas that dominate employment policies today, Catherine Casey has re-asserted the importance of social values not only for education but for work itself.”

– *James Wickham, Trinity College Dublin*

“It is a brave soul who invites us to see a pernicious side to the idea of a ‘knowledge-based economy’; so central has that idea become to both exponents of the neo-liberal hegemony and those who seek to humanize it. Catherine Casey is one such brave soul. She here documents in a highly scholarly way both the factual limitations to the idea and its less than benign implications for education, work and citizenship. Future enthusiasts for the knowledge-based economy will need to come to terms with her challenge.”

– *Colin Crouch, Professor of Governance and Public Management,
University of Warwick Business School, UK*

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For Philip Wexler

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Introduction

In recent decades a political economic discourse promoting liberal, highly competitive and principally knowledge-based economies has won a vast influence and launched institutional reform across much of the developed world. Business-led demands for ever-modernizing efficiencies, advanced technological applications, production growth and competitive advantage in a globalizing economy have stimulated intense emphasis on continual innovation in product and process, flexibility of production organization and demand for liberalization of market regulation. These transformation pressures, as economists view these events, generate increased complexity, risk and uncertainty. They attract much debate in social and economic arenas. Amid the diversity of views, there is agreement that the implications of these socio-economic dynamics for national economies, welfare states, civic communities and persons are immense. An academic interest in institutional varieties of capitalism finds useful, informative divergence among national responses. But, it must be said, a convergence toward adoption of neo-liberal governance models to facilitate dynamic competitiveness and expansive marketization is readily evident, certainly across the European welfare state countries. The neo-liberalization of capitalism has yielded a wildly uneven distribution of the advantages and costs that have ensued.

The governance regime of liberalized markets and rationalization of other social institutions to facilitate market economic dispersion shows little sign of alteration at the present time, even as the 2008 financial crisis brought the near collapse of global liberal capitalism. These patterns raise many serious concerns especially as institutional pathways may set future policy dependencies and limit or delay other options. Most immediately affected by these continuing transformation pressures are the spheres of work and of education.

Economic and political demands promote a “learning society” to accompany the knowledge-based economy. The key to successful competitiveness and expansion of the knowledge-based economy, it is widely believed, lies in accelerated educational expansion and skills development. Education, which has been undergoing a massive expansion occurring at a varying pace through the twentieth century, is now charged directly with servicing a privileged economic agenda of normalizing across the population the attainment of

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higher-level skills for application in labour market participation. This wide-spread policy development, which is especially salient in higher education, accords particular values to the qualities of human life – of learning and working – that have long been the bearers of more diverse and plural qualities in cultural life.

A generation ago, many thought that expanding the provision of education, especially higher education, to a much wider populace would lead to substantively more than economic expansion. It would lead to a vitalized and sophisticated democracy, a culture of participation and power distribution and rich human cultural development among many more people in society. Yet it now appears that education's social, cultural and personal good, like that of work, is being powerfully subordinated to the interests of economy. Learning for employment skills acquisition has come to assume a role beyond its due portion in a culturally rich human life. It appears now elevated as the primary composite task of the good citizen, the learner-worker of the learning economy/society. In this respect, as in others, economic policy has come to exert an inordinately influential role in social and cultural life.

The sphere of work has, for much longer than education, been subject to forces of economic rationalization. For many people, work is regarded virtually exclusively as an economic activity substantively devoid of other rationalities except as decorative remnants. Education, however, persists in being much more difficult to subjugate and control. Nonetheless, there is now intensifying and systematic pressure upon education to yield to economic rationalization and governance. Higher education appears in the vanguard of that programme of transformation. The increasing dominance of economic rationalities in shaping education, as well as work, raises serious questions not only for education, but also for the ways in which democratic societies may act to govern economic institutions and market activity in society.

In response to these concerns, many social critics are searching anew for viable prospects for a renewal of education's cultural dimensions and role in personal and social life. That search at the present time seems as fearsomely daunting as it is urgent. Nonetheless, in continuing the groundwork task of criticism necessary to that search, accompanying questions gain renewed force. Just as the university's corporate assimilation must be challenged, are there vital dimensions of work that are – or ought to be – irreducible to the economically rational? What are the prospects for a revitalization of these dimensions even as work appears to be an exhaustively rationalized sphere? Has the particular neo-liberal economic turn, which many put forward as the “new economy” of twenty-first century capitalism, triumphed over cultural spheres that were formally insubordinate to the imperatives of markets and business interests in the shaping and ends of human life? What are the prospects for collective, social, action in shaping these ultimate matters? These questions concerning the conditions and prospects for work and education critically connected to economy orient the searching discussions in this book.

The book takes up a twofold principal task. The first is to critically inquire into the current neo-liberal restoration of the privileging of elite interests in

economic action, to trace its outcomes and effects, and to probe its salient contradictions in relation to education and work. A profoundly influential iteration of the neo-liberal turn has been the promotion of a knowledge-based economy which has been imagined as both the irrefutable successor to Keynesian managed capitalism and as normatively attractive to people in society. That discursive construct and its effects are the first main focus of attention. The second task is to offer some reflections in response to the problems and dilemmas the economic incursion now presents to socially interested citizens. This exploration considers sources of cultural innovations that may offer renewed scope for a revitalized social regulation of economy and a more imaginative horizon for both work and education. The route to this renovation is the intractably fraught yet necessary discrimination of the cultural tasks of education, and of work, from the rationalities of economy, technique and productivism. Its project is a regeneration and re-imagination of collective, public discourse on education, work and economy. It is the social refusal to render solely unto economy what cannot belong there.

A SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACH

The intricate complexities of the social and economic currents of recent decades may readily lead us to conclude that these forces are more than ever escaping our grasp, both in terms of our efforts to scientifically analyze them and in their political governance. Sociological analysis has been greatly affected by a protracted disciplinary crisis that has led to searching reflections and new thinking on sociology's role and contribution to contemporary social understandings. In the Anglophone world, much sociological work has turned to cultural analysis and philosophical excursions in an apparent retreat from social and economic analysis, even as economic practices were very much to the fore in classical sociological traditions. In the meantime, economists and corporate business leaders and their particular forms of analysis and demand have risen to gain greater social and cultural influence in the spaces of a virtually de-politicized public square.

The academic debates on contemporary social currents are very often dispersed across disciplines which are too frequently bound to those disciplinary norms and internecine squabbles. Disciplinary inabilities to pursue comprehensive social analysis have led to methodological and interpretive inadequacies that further hinder shared endeavours. Sophisticated, yet limited, mathematical models too often serve as default compensation for the lack of broader communicative and multi-dimensional inquiry. An obsession with quantification now blights the social sciences. C. Wright Mills' (1959) once-famous call of the "sociological imagination" founders in a productivism of micro and non-cumulative studies of idiosyncratically isolated or fleetingly fashionable phenomena, and a positivism of general linear analysis. These academic and research behaviours are perhaps now to be expected in the current climate in

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research and educational institutions in which heightened production pressures evident in the business world more intensely affect research and scholarly practices. Those pressures now actively hinder our scholarly and scientific efforts to develop advanced knowledge and understanding, and to contribute studied reflections to the much wider social tasks of criticism, imagination, proposition and intervention.

Observers have noted signs of a weakening of other cultural institutions, not only those of the academy, that help protect society from the market, and from the bureaucratic state. The role of mid-twentieth century democratic institutions that were hard-won in the years after World War II in the regulation of economic practices has manifestly weakened. Civil society institutions have rich potential for revitalization. But at present, in conditions of heightened private economic interest, weakened society and fragmented critical social science, developments in some sectors of social life – importantly business, technological and market practices – escape social institutional regulation in the interests of the many. Their imperatives, consequently, exert a distorted and powerful influence over many other sectors and dimensions of social life. The restored power in recent decades of elite economic and political interests in shaping the social and cultural climate in much of the Western world attests to this tendency. The confidence of social analysts that critical concerns about the consequences, especially those of increased inequalities, hierarchies, conflict and injustice, will be effectively addressed has faltered. Social analysts find themselves, just like the rest of the public, too often as policy-takers grumbling among themselves on the sidelines of an economically dominated social sphere.

Yet, nonetheless, the sociological project has a classical history and a classical task that remain no less valid today. There is no question that it is an immense challenge to seek to analyze current political and economic forces in social and cultural spheres today. Recognition of immeasurable social complexity is perhaps key among our sociological learnings after the postmodern crisis. The classical sociological vantage point, with its characteristic concern for society (which is not to be confused with the nation or state), is the formal vantage point of this study. That vantage point is further informed by a mid-twentieth century tradition of critical social theory that poses interrogation of social practices and exposure of ideological interests in forms of social organization. The fundamental argument for society that has permeated modern sociology recognizes a realm of human needs and aspirations that cannot be satisfied in the sphere of community, or in the practices of economy. The classical argument for society, evocatively expressed by Max Weber in the early twentieth century, favours recognition of a relationship of liberal autonomy in which tolerance between institutions guarantees freedom of spheres of activities from capitalist rationalities in the organization of human affairs, and enables those institutions to act in dynamic concertation to affect the regulation of economy and society.

A further word on the context of the current study is important. This study is not particularly concerned with the nation-state, although this category

remains important in the governance of political entities and in the lives of so many of its citizens. The nation-state remains common in sociological, political and economic studies, especially those of a comparative nature, but a good sociological case can be made for consciously relegating methodological nationalism to other investigative purposes. Classical sociological interest lies in societies and these may not coincide with politically defined nation-states. Societies may be found in cities and regions that exist within national boundaries, but substantially cross them as well. Societies characterized by similar economic and industrial structures and institutions are empirically recognizable even as many aspects of culture, including linguistic, may vary considerably. This is especially the case with the category “European model welfare state society”, a concept I adopt following the European scholars Crouch (1999), Esping-Andersen (2002) and Keating *et al.* (2003). Such a notion of the “European model welfare state society” can usefully be employed in full recognition of national and regional varieties within that generalized model. Other nation-states with some features in common with Europe and often consistently figuring highly on many OECD measures – such as Japan, Korea, Singapore – are not directly included in the discussions that follow. However, other countries – Australia, New Zealand, and, to some extent, Canada – feature welfare state economic and political models readily recognizable as those of the European social model. They are therefore implicated in the general category conception of the European model welfare state. However, the European Union, principally because of its excellent and prominent policy-making institutions and its highly visible pronouncement of its pursuit of the knowledge-based economy, serves as the collective benchmark and discursive focus in the discussions below.

EDUCATION AND WORK

Many specialist scholars have written excellent works in the fields of education and work. Many sociologists too have explored the complex developments of economy, technology, culture and society in recent decades. I attempt in this project to draw some of these discussions together, to contribute to a closer scholarly dialogue between interested thinkers who too often must labour and converse apart. That cross-disciplinary endeavour carries its inevitable pitfalls but it also offers the vantage point afforded from traversing the old boundaries and retrieving core concerns shared by many scholars and researchers. Among those shared concerns are the accelerated expansion of liberal marketized relations and an abrogation of social responsibilities. Under the neo-liberal regime, work and education are connected more closely than ever. Economic rationalities propose their systemic integration and harmonization. Much has been written about the problems of the neo-liberal economic and political turn of recent decades. Many hope that in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis that tide has ebbed and a more sober awareness of the need for social and political

responsibility of governments and social institutions in governing economic activity may now be emerging. But one must be cautious in optimism while prodigious in hope. There is pressing evidence that the consequences of economic and political liberalization have exerted an institutionalization of certain cultural changes and affected popular assumptions in broad support of or compliance with a liberalized culture and diminished social sphere. A remarkable acceptance of the dominance of big business interests, of shareholders' and employers' priorities, of managerial power, and weakened collective action, appears in much socio-political life in Western countries.

The search for reasonably optimistic avenues for socially and culturally interested development in work, education and economy under current conditions is an enduring one. This study is a critical interrogation of contemporary neo-liberal economy and its unprecedented, ungoverned reach into so many spheres of life, especially education and work. The vantage point is a concern for persons who work, who seek education and learning and social participation, and whose life aspirations irrepressibly surpass those of economic activity.

OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

[Chapter 1](#) outlines the broad contours of the economic and social conditions now shaping the worlds of work and education. The scope of the discussions throughout lies in the decades close to the turn of the twenty-first century. The chapter reflects on sociological discussion of what many have regarded as the technological revolution, the sweep of neo-classical economics and the weakening of many socio-cultural institutions. It addresses the rise of a conception of knowledge that exclusively privileges technological and scientific forms of reason and competence. It considers forms of expert governance that have appeared in correspondence with these developments. [Chapter 2](#) critically discusses historical factors in the collapse of the Keynesian model of managed capitalism and the turn of neo-liberalism. It explores the pursuit of innovation and the political and economic assumptions of accelerated competitiveness and liberalization as crucial and principal factors in the advanced economies.

[Chapter 3](#) examines economic and political forces that shape the dominant patterns of work and production. Production is conceptualized to include diverse tangible and intangible goods and services in contemporary advanced economies. Discussion develops a meta-level analysis of general trends and patterns in production relations that are observable across industry sectors and national economies. The approach identifies three key motifs: intensified rationalization, competitiveness, and resurgent firm power. The combination of these forces has generated a course of hegemonic political and economic rationalizations and firm interests in the practices of work and production. [Chapter 4](#) explores the effect of an intensified economic incursion into the education sphere which has been facilitated under the public policy notion of

the “knowledge-based economy” and the “learning society”. It discusses the modern expansion of higher education and the current models of the learning society, the demand for higher-level skills and production of techno-scientific research knowledge. The chapter argues that vertical alignment of education with economy is achieved through demanding the reform of education, especially of higher education, toward the “scientific episteme”.

Chapter 5 focuses attention on the level of the firm’s organizational behaviour. Prevailing economic discourse on the knowledge-based economy projects that high productivity sectors requiring high levels of skills will successfully displace low productivity sectors that require low levels of skills and accrue low wages. Any gaps in this path are considered to be due to time-lags, structural inertia and other hindrances to perfect dispersion. The chapter examines empirical evidence from labour economics and organizational studies which reveals the persistence of deep contradictory tendencies in the knowledge-based economy path. It reveals that rational organizational action uses hierarchies and skill sorting systems that contribute to segmented and bifurcated labour markets. These apparent contradictions raise many concerns about the real extent of the knowledge-based economy and the promised generalized improvement in jobs and prosperity for everyone.

Chapter 6 addresses the overarching concerns of liberal marketization and scientific rationalization that critically connect education and work. Paradoxes of higher-skilled economies include degradation of quality of work, the loss of social and cultural capital and weakened participation and protection of workers. The privileged pursuit of higher-skilled jobs effects a disparagement of ordinary work – work that remains of moderate skill application and productivity – and which remains socially necessary in contemporary economies. Education faces dilemmas in regard to the rationale and quality of higher education and lifelong learning. The university’s adaptation to the knowledge-based economy risks attenuation of classically valued conceptions of the university’s role in the pursuit of higher knowledge forms beyond the instrumental and the material. **Chapter 7** explores potential currents of response in regard to the prevailing corporate orders of society. It explores a reinvigorated philosophical interest in notions of social citizenship, in civic rights and responsibilities as well as of trust and solidarity in shared fate. The chapter argues for an innovative concept of citizenship, which includes sensibilities beyond modern humanism, and looks to a reformed role for universities in social citizenship education. Are there prospects for a revitalized university to foster “sites of citizenship” to assist people to gain renewed powers to act to protect society and non-market relations from the market? Can these endeavours forge new social capabilities beyond the economic, in the worlds of work and education?

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