



Resource Review

Name of reviewer:	Steve Hanson
Job title and department:	Lecturer, Cultural Studies
Institution:	Hereford College of Arts

Name of reviewed item:	Higher Education and Social Justice
Authors:	Andy Furlong and Fred Cartmel
Publisher / distributor details (see note below):	Open University
Publication / release date:	2009
ISBN number:	978-0-33-522362-9
Price:	£24.99

Review:

This book covers a large territory. It isn't arts-specific at all, but authors Furlong and Cartmel have provided a fantastic resource for education as a whole, irrespective of niche. The subject of higher education and social justice tends to remain a politician's sound-bite, or a niggling suspicion at the edge of pedagogical awareness: We know that we get certain 'types' of student, we know that not all of them go on to be cutting-edge practitioners. We know that some of them will sail into galleries and command shows with supreme confidence, or into design agencies and draw down large salaries, yet, for a range of reasons, always more complicated than we would perhaps like to imagine, others will be unable to follow them. Unfortunately, life is fast, and this 'awareness' tends to remain a thin, niggling suspicion, or something literally unspeakable in our post-political correctness west, unless underpinned by the kind of thorough research presented here. The politician's sound-bite is still fixed in the utopian, contingent mode of 'we are going to...' often drawing on an imaginary 'what we have lost is...'. Furlong and Cartmel show us what the territory of higher education in this country actually looks like, and then provide a radical set of suggestions, which refuse to please, hedge, or bluster.

That they make their argument in class terms at all is incredibly refreshing. My relief that such an obvious set of categories is present highlights the era of fudge and spin we have just been through, one that has just spectacularly haemorrhaged (as if you needed a reminder). The 'return to class' isn't new, but a broader, relatively recent phenomenon, arriving via sociologists such as Beverley Skeggs, among others.

The authors argue that, despite the neoliberal widening of access to higher education, class divisions remain entrenched. In fact, the working classes may even be worse off. Loans, and more importantly their repayments, are a big factor. But

older cultural barriers remain, to access, to moving on after education. Bourdieu knew well that 'culture' is a form of currency in post-industrial labour markets, that the securing of that gallery show or design agency position are dependent on 'culture' - as a verb - but that this 'doing' of culture is often very subtly, invisibly, walled-off from certain groups and people. A downward spiral for those outside, upward for those within. Of course, this binary explanation is highly reductive, and doesn't account for Foucault's always 'open and bloody' model of social movement. But Furlong and Cartmel provide data that tempers the Foucauldian risk: that power is seen to be everywhere and therefore nowhere.

Their research is couched in a sensibly recent context, increased access to higher education, something that is undeniable, a Mount Everest of a rise from 1960 to 2006. Female entry slightly outstrips the male, but the authors argue that although reforms have widened access, they haven't gone nearly far enough. The ethnic minority access picture is a complicated one, but some horrific statistics leer out of the fog, this quote from Allen and Ainley in particular:

'London Metropolitan University has more black and minority ethnic students than the top twenty "Russell Group" of elite universities put together' (p.20).

Two pages later, the class statistics by institution read as follows:

Middle class – Oxford, Cambridge, Bristol, Durham, Edinburgh, St Andrews, Exeter, York, Nottingham and Warwick.

Working class – Harper Adams, UHI Millennium, Wolverhampton, Bradford, Sunderland, Middlesex, Ulster, Teeside, Greenwich and Glyndwr.

The names roll out from the statistics like a geographical poem of class and place. Equally damning are the drop-out rates by institution. We move from the stability of Oxford, to whole swathes of young people falling off the educational world in Bolton.

This is a brave book. Furlong and Cartmel are unequivocal; the language of education has been replaced by the language of the market, for the worse. After the epic collapse of new right theologies, belief in 'self-correcting' markets - and therefore the societies attached to them - after the so-called 'end of history' (Fukuyama) and the so-called 'end of work' (Gorz) neoliberalism cannot be considered the only game in town anymore. Clearly, many old problems were not magically evaporated in the 1990s, as certain politicians led us to believe.

Education is notorious for being a decade behind the cutting-edge of capitalism, partly understandable, as capitalism is always the prime mover. Yet if capitalism is slowly working towards a sustainable version of itself (and that by no means sustainable enough) education should surely be doing the same and addressing the sort of shameful statistics this book is littered with at the same time. These sentiments are very much backed-up and given gravitas by the book's conclusion. I'm not naïve enough to suggest that some sort of revolution is on the horizon, nor are the authors, even though they suggest radical changes, including open access and far-reaching curriculum re-structures. They also make more mainstream arguments, for instance in favour of a fairly stratified graduate tax, seeing that our current funding policies and packages ferment inequality.

My already-highlighted complaint, for our purposes only, is the lack of arts-specific data. This is an unfair gripe though, as it isn't part of the book's remit. However, it would be good to see a version of this text which accounts for 'culture' more broadly, something which arts education often brings to communities and is difficult to quantify. This is somewhat lacking here in relation to all higher education subjects, as

the focus is on 'tangible' outcomes, such as salaries versus debt, etc. To be fair, Furlong and Cartmel discuss the line between weighing the practical outcomes of higher education and over-reaching systems of 'sorting' and 'weeding' (p.116) as well as other cultural HE elements, but the subject isn't fully explored. To place these narratives back on the radar would be appreciated, but they are perhaps the remit of future, specifically arts-oriented research, the book's ease of use and brevity is a plus.

Ultimately, this is a solidly backed-up, powerful argument. I do not exaggerate when I say that everyone involved in higher education - politicians, funding bodies, principals, deans, programme managers, lecturers, student support workers, librarians, technicians, store-room staff and cleaners - should read this book from cover to cover and arm themselves with the facts relating to the reality they have probably long suspected exists.

A final whinge though, is the price tag. £24.99 for a relatively slim volume isn't going to be coughed up by many people working in higher education who are on lower wages. This obvious detail - that specialist publications sell less and are therefore more expensive to produce - gives a glimpse, a reflection, but also a way in to some of the central issues the book itself covers, issues which need inverting, turning on their heads, completely and forever.